The Road So Far (This Time Around)
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/13492527.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
Supernatural

Relationship:
Castiel/Dean Winchester

Characters:
Dean Winchester, Sam Winchester, Bobby Singer, Castiel (Supernatural)

Additional Tags:
Time Travel, Timeline AU, Back to the beginning, Dark themes (but no more than the show has), Minor gore (but no more than the show has), Alternate Timeline (but with just about everything the show has), Destiel - Freeform, slowburn, we're talking glacial, One reader described it as Jane Austen slow, long story, We're Not Kidding, Seventy chapters and we're not even halfway, Author is verbose AF, Come join the party

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Collections:
The Destiel Fan Survey Favs Collection, Series that I want to read once they are complete, SPN: Entire Seasons Rewritten

Stats:
Published: 2018-01-27 Updated: 2026-01-19 Words: 1,039,779 Chapters: 155/?

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

by 8_Years_of_Silence

Summary

He woke with a jolt, sitting in the Impala on some backroad with Sammy sleeping shotgun. Like always. Only no, not always. They had a bunker now. They had a home. Maybe Dean had finally lost it. That, or Cas pulled one hell of a Hail Mary, because his little brother looked about ten years younger and his phone was saying it was 2005. TIMELINE AU

TRSF Discord Server: https://discord.gg/d2rQXQWph5
TRSF Tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/8yearsofsilence

Notes

Story Warnings: Solid T/PG-13 rating for quite a bit of Dean-esque swearing and verbal blasphemy that bleeds into the narrative whenever he's cranky. Mild gore (nothing more than the show has), overall dark themes (nothing more than the show has), absolute AU from pretty much the first chapter onward (but still with almost everything the show has). Welcome to the party!

SLASH Warning: Squint to see Destiel in the first half (subtext!) with just about the slowest burn towards relationship-status in the second. Relationships in this story will aim to stay true to all characters (no OOC here, I solemnly swear) and you can expect several twists in this category. However, romance is always a subplot for me; I'm an action/adventure gal first and foremost.

TAGS warning : I am adding this warning as I am rather tired of being on the receiving end of nasty notes or accusations of 'wasting people's time'. So, please take note that this story, currently a WIP, is at 700,000+ words and has exactly FIFTEEN TAGS, five of which serve absolutely no purpose other than comic relief. From that information, you ought to reason that this story is, almost literally, untagged. None of the events that follow come with a heads up. I put trigger warnings at the beginning of each chapter, but otherwise that is it and that is the way it will remain. This story has MANY UNEXPECTED TWISTS, like a multi-book series. Some that you may not like, which varies vastly from person to person (such is life, which you will know if you've ever

read a book, watched a movie, or seen a tv show, all of which come without tags). This is all the warning you get - if you need tags in order to enjoy a story, turn back now or start skimming reviews. The biggest twist is at chapter 44, have at it if you must in order to enjoy this story. But don't read for 44 chapters, fall in love with my writing (yet not leave a single piece of feedback, encouragement, or praise for me), and then waste both our time writing a novel about how, despite loving it for 300,000 words, I've 'wasted your weekend', 'bait and switched' you or 'betrayed' you because I took *my* story somewhere *you* didn't want it to go. Fuck off right now, this is not the story for you. And this is the only warning for that you're gonna get.

Chapter 1: Prologue

Chapter Notes

Welcome! Thank you for checking out my story. *The Road So Far (This Time Around)* is a large scale story still in progress. It is a Timeline AU starting from season one and covering up to season 5. Each season will be roughly thirty chapters, posted once a week on Sundays (every other week whenever I fall behind), with a month long break between seasons. Additionally, this story has a companion piece of deleted scenes, which are one shots that were cut for time or flow or omitted due to story decisions. Please check it out if you'd like a little behind the scenes reading!

Chapter Warnings: Swearing, verbal blasphemy, character death, and the end of the world.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Prologue

2016

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Yes, there are two paths you can go by.

But in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on.

And it makes me wonder

- Led Zeppelin -

He hurt everywhere. It wasn't the physical wounds: the couple of cracked ribs, the cuts and bruises – that one pretty deep gash across his lower back bleeding all over the scratchy grass. Truth was he'd gotten off easy and he knew it. Because it was Amara, and she couldn't hurt him any more than he could hurt her. Not really.

No, those weren't the real aches. The true pain was deeper than torn skin or muscle or bone. It was in his soul, whatever was left of it after all the years. His very being hurt.

Sam was dead. He was sure of it. The kid hadn't moved in far too long, and the amount of blood gathering under him was damning. His back was to him, lying on his side with his head awkwardly angled to form a dam against the growing puddle of red. Maybe it was better that way. Dean didn't think he could survive seeing Sam's lifeless eyes one more time in his life.

Cas was as good as dead too, if he was even in there anymore. Dean had realized too late that they went into this suicide mission without any proof that their friend was alive. Just went on the word of the freaking *devil* and a God he expected less from than the King of Hell. He hadn't heard from Cas in….well, too long. Damn it, he should have at least made Lucifer let him surface before all of this went down. Let them say their goodbyes or whatever. Let him ask Cas *why*. Why had he said yes to the Devil.

Now the angel (angels, plural? God, he hoped plural) was writhing on his side, quaking in a pain Dean couldn't see. Shaking fingers were pressed against his shredded stomach in an attempt to staunch the tidal flow of blood and organs and light that was pure Grace. It was a losing battle and they both knew it.

Another tally on the scoreboard of friends and family dead and gone (at least they'd take the son of a bitch devil down with them this time).

Then there was Amara. She was losing too; he could feel it. And he goddamn hated himself for it, but it was part of the ache. She was going to die. God was going to kill her this time, because she would never let him seal her away again. The pain that thought caused was nothing physical.

Damn it, he had gone into this knowing she had to die. They'd gone to the cemetery (and why was it always a friggin' cemetery?) knowing full well they were gonna take her down or die trying. And here they were. And it hurt. It hurt in so many ways.

"Dean."

He blinked, dragging his eyes away from the Darkness. It was harder than he wanted to admit.

Cas was staring at him, all blue eyes, ashen skin, and dripping blood. Dean blinked again. He shifted, trying to move for the first time since he had hit the ground hard enough to crack those ribs. That was Cas staring at him. He couldn't say how he knew – didn't care anyway.

That desperate, sad, guilty, longing gaze was *his* Cas. Not even Lucifer could fake those eyes.

The apology swimming in them fucking hurt. He wanted to tell him it was okay (it really wasn't), but he was so damn tired. Cloth shifted over grass as the angel dragged himself forward. He left behind blood and organs and grace. Dean wanted to tell him to stop.

What was the point?

The progress was painstaking. The angel inched towards him in a pathetic one-armed army crawl, his other hand holding his stomach together as he grabbed at soil and grass and *pulled*. Dean knew it had to be excruciating. His best friend was only killing himself faster. That should mean something: make him feel something. But everything was numb.

When Castiel got close enough, Dean reached out and closed his hand around the angel's wrist. Blue eyes locked onto his.

"Time," he rasped out, body shaking. "There's still t-time, Dean."

Dean didn't know what he meant. The words were gritted, heavy and laced with the end of the world. He was pretty sure Cas was wrong: they didn't have any time left. The angel sure didn't. Those eyes, which Dean once swore could look into his very soul (and, yeah, *angel,* so they probably could), were now losing the light that fed them. That glow was a weak, dribbled trail seeping into the earth. Shit, Dean didn't even know if it was Cas or Lucifer fertilizing the planet.

He should have cared more about that than he did. He should have felt….something.

Dean swallowed, even as he sensed Amara rallying her strength for one more – *one last* – strike. Part of him, even now, yearned to save her. Part of him was pissed. His brother was dead. His best friend was bleeding out in front of him. His soul was aching for a woman hell-bent on destroying the damn universe. The rest of him was just tired.

"Dean."

Cas was moving again, this time with purpose. He was leaving more of himself behind in his urgency. Dean wanted to tell him to stop or there'd be nothing left. The words stuck in his throat when he met the angel's gaze. It was still Cas in there (and he had *not* panicked at the

sudden thought that it might not be). Those eyes were still laced with all the hurt and wrong that Cas had been for…well, years, now.

Except now there was something else. There was a determination – a *fierceness* – that Dean hadn't seen since the apocalypse. Through gritted teeth, Cas crawled on his torn belly. His grip inched up Dean's arm with every pained move until fingers finally, *finally*, drug into the edges of a scar that had never faded.

Something – and Dean didn't even know how to describe it other than *bright* – flared throughout his entire being and he seized with it. It flooded everything that he was to the brim and every inch of his body tensed at its suddenness. It didn't hurt, not really. It was just so *much*.

He felt more than heard the fighting pause. Amara's confusion and the silence of halted blades were distant things. Castiel's hand had found his mark and Dean's world narrowed to that hand on his arm, their profound bond, and those blue eyes.

"Cas?"

It sounded like a prayer and a blasphemy. A whisper and a scream, breathless and sharp, all in one go. Had he even said it all, or was he just imagining it? Dean was just as empty, just as numb, as he had been a second ago, and yet now he was also fucking overflowing, too.

What was left of him, what hadn't disappeared in this blaring white supernova forming in his chest, was already backpedaling. No way was he spending his final moments having a goddamn mental chick-flick moment with an Angel of the Lord. A one-sided chick-flick, even. No friggin' way.

When the overwhelming warmth flared into a fire, Dean found he no longer cared if his manliness had gone full rainbow sparkles and glitter because *what the hell, Cas!*

The angel's eyes were lit by a determination only the Righteous Man had ever known, and it was the only thing he could see anymore. They glowed with the pale blue of Castiel's life force: all of it that he had left. His skin was lit by an undercurrent of white. Light spilled from around clenched teeth. There was a plan there; Dean could see it in those eyes before he lost them to the brightness.

A Hail Mary, the last act of a fucked up play, and Dean knew right then that he wasn't gonna like the ending.

"Good luck, Dean."

Fingers pressed to his forehead, smearing blood and gore and grace. They left a gaping torso unattended, open to spill liquid light onto the grave below. Dean wanted to cry out, to tell him to stop, to ask why, what he was thinking, what he was doing-

Someone – a woman – screamed. Heat flooded him and it was too much and then he was screaming too. The grip on his arm was fucking *piercing* and *Jesus Christ*, Cas must be trying to claw his way into his entire being through one god damn handprint. The world spun and warped, and his stomach was somewhere near his throat and possibly inside out and *holy shit, he was going to die.*

And then there was only darkness.

Chapter 2: Season 1: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I was a little disappointed with the Season 11 finale, so I decided to change a few things. I might have gone a tad overboard...

This is a very large scale story I'm tackling, so bear with me. Original estimation put it at 120 chapters, covering seasons 1-5, but we're currently not finished with Season 2 yet and sitting pretty at 80 chapters. (As you get to know me, you will hear, only ever so often, that I am verbose as f***) So, now I'm thinking it'll be well over 200 chapters by the time I wrap this thing up.

It is (obviously) not fully written, and I am a slow writer. I post once a week on Sundays, as long as I have enough chapters stockpiled to do so. Posting switches to every other week only when I fall behind and need time to play catch-up. It is my goal to never make you wait longer than two weeks, except for a month break between seasons (roughly every 30 chapters, except if your name is Season 2, and then you're a 60 chapter little biiiiiiitch, and who knows what the other Seasons are gonna turn into. Oi boy. Where were we?)

Reviews: I am the kind of the people-pleasing, self-doubting author who thrives on commentary. A simple dropped line to tell me you're out there or that you enjoyed a particular thing in a chapter goes a long way for my muse. I really appreciate anyone willing to leave a comment now and again, so please review when something I write strikes your fancy.

Beta: Last author note! This story is un-beta'd. I attempt several read-throughs at various levels of production, but I know there are still typos and grammatical errors. They are all mine, and I apologize for any disruption to the story they incur. Feel free to point them out to me and I'll address them asap.

Chapter Warnings: A lot of Dean swearing through the narration ahead.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Reality returned to him with all the force of an eighteen-wheeler. He sat bolt-upright with a sharp exhale, a tearing in his throat, and a pounding heart. He heaved and gasped for air as though he'd just finished running a marathon, yet his muscles were not strained. His lungs were not pushed past capacity. His veins were empty of the adrenaline that usually accompanied an impromptu sprint in his chosen career.

"Dean!"

Where was he? What happened? He was definitely amped for a fight, but no fight presented itself. Caught up with the pounding of his heart, he frantically scanned his surroundings. There was nothing but the quiet interior of the impala and the empty backroad beyond the windshield. So what had woken him?

"Dean!"

He whipped his head to the right (and damn, *whiplash*) to focus on his younger brother, who was looking at him with wide, worried eyes. Of course it was Sammy, sitting in the passenger seat of the Impala, probably woken up with half a heart attack from whatever nightmare Dean had been having while they camped out on the side of the road in Podunk-fucking-nowhere.

Like always.

Dean's breath hitched at the thought because *no*, not like always, not in a really long time. Because now they had the bunker and their own freaking bedrooms with actual *beds*, and they had a home and a dungeon and a war room.

And Sam was looking at him like he was crazy and, hell, maybe he was because his brother was wearing the face of a fucking *twelve year old.*

Okay, maybe not a twelve year old, but still a kid. Like a twenty-something, college-aged, douchebag, chess-club nerdery, going-to-law-school, kid face. And *holy shit*, wait a second, hold up, what the hell had Cas done to him?

Shit, *Cas!*

He spun around the best he could in the Impala, looking around them and then craning his neck to check the back seat. As if the angel could be hanging out in the backseat waiting to pop up with jazz hands and a cheesy 'Surprise!'

Dean really didn't have time to examine his sanity right now, so he chose to ignore the odd visual. He'd blame it on the blood loss. Which he was no longer suffering from, apparently. He patted himself down, checking for the hurts he knew he'd been feeling not five minutes ago. Nothing.

With sudden realization crashing down hard, he reached up and grabbed the rear view mirror to adjust it until he was staring at himself. He froze at the wide-eyed person looking back at him. *Fuck*, had he ever actually looked that young? He couldn't help it – he ran a hand down his face in amazement, pulled at the tight skin lacking wrinkles and scars. Hell, he was practically a kid himself.

He was damn gorgeous, that's what he was.

"Dean!"

Sammy was still calling his name, although it sounded like panic was giving way to exasperation. Dean turned to him, eyes wide and hand still pinching at his mouth and cheek.

"…Huh?"

Sam made bitchface #7 ("*Really, Dean? Really?"*) and stared at him expectantly. When he didn't move, his brother blew out a breath of frustrated air. "You done checking yourself out?"

Dean snatched his hand away and his cheek snapped back into place with a wet little pop. He had *not* been checking himself out. It wasn't every day you lost like ten years, is all. Speaking of years, he glanced around again. He really needed to figure out where he was (most importantly, *when*), but his eyes kept drifting back to Sam.

He looked so damn young. So...light. It was freaky.

Logically, Dean knew what this was. He'd had enough experience with angelic DeLoreans to know this was real. But even with four trips under his belt, he couldn't get his head quite around this one.

He'd never been zapped back into a younger version of himself, for starters. The other times had been well before he'd even had a body to

get zapped into. To suddenly have years of aches and pains vanish – from old scars and mended bones to plain old aging crap like arthritis. It was all gone, replaced with a vigor and freshness he hadn't felt in so long that he'd forgotten what being young was even like.

And he was steadfastly *not* thinking about the yawning hole in his chest, ever present since he'd been yanked out of hell. Always there, always aching. Or, at least, it had been, until about five minutes ago. For the first time in more than half a decade (and it was really *so much fucking more* than six years; it was decades upon decades of torturing souls on the rack and the apocalypse and purgatory and the mark and the Darkness), Dean now felt whole. There was a warmth in his chest that was trying to fill his entire body and he couldn't remember if that was *normal.* It had been so long since normal was even on the table.

Was this what it was like to time travel back to a point when you still existed? Did you overwrite your past self? Shit, was he overwriting things now? Dean stopped at the thought. He took in and let out a slow, measured breath. Was he changing the future? Everything they'd been through? *Could he*?

"There's still time, Dean."

Shit. Shit! Had he meant there was time to fix things? Or was he talking about actual Time, like the proper fucking noun? As in, we can use Time as a desperate last ditch Hail Mary and fix *everything.* Cas wouldn't have sent him back if it wasn't a possibility.

"Cas," he muttered in a single breath. There was no way. No way the angel had- that he could- Dean looked over at his younger brother (and damn, if that wasn't the most accurate description ever). Sammy was still staring at him, still torn between annoyance and panic. Dean knew that expression, even on a younger model. Panic was winning.

Join the fucking club, he thought. Because it couldn't be. It couldn't. Cas couldn't have sent him back to change….*everything.* He knew Sammy – he *knew* him – like he knew himself. Hell, better probably. This was pre-apocalypse Sam. This, this was pre- Dean's death. He knew the difference, could see it in the lack of guilt and self-loathing and just *weight* in his brother's shoulders: in his gaze.

This….Dean glanced around again. This might even be- But no, it probably wasn't. He spotted a phone sitting on the dash and went for it. He needed to know the date and he needed to know it right fucking now.

"Who's Cass?"

He ignored his brother, not even hearing the question – the several he'd been asking. Instead he fumbled for the device (*Jesus Christ, is that a fucking flip phone? You've got to be kidding me*) and pried it open. The initial date wasn't helpful, just the month and day. Apparently it was November 1st, which was absolutely terrifying because it definitely hadn't been November fifteen minutes ago. And even though he knew, he *knew*, what was going on, each piece of proof was still jarring; worse, it didn't rule out what he was dangerously starting to suspect.

It took him a minute to navigate the older technology, but when he finally did, he forgot how to breathe. November 1st, 2005.

Fucking hell. Mother of all mother-fucking, time-jumping, dick ex-angels. Cas sent him back to….to before everything. *Everything*.

Two thousand and fucking five!

He stared at Sam, who was definitely panicking now, trying to get something (anything) out of his brother. Not that Dean heard any of it. Cas had sent him back to before the apocalypse. Before Hell and his deal. Before….Dean swallowed, looking away from his damn young younger brother who had never looked more innocent.

Before Jess died.

He reached forward and turned the keys in the ignition. Baby lit up like a purring dream and even a time-jumping, panic-inducing, apocalypse-averting epiphany couldn't stop his grin. He wasn't the only hot, young thing on this backroad tonight. She was in drive and flipping a U-turn before he could really think about it. He didn't need to think about it.

"Dean, what the hell?" Sam scrambled for his seatbelt while bracing himself on the dash as his body pressed into the door. He looked all kinds of ready to wrestle the wheel away from his questionably-unstable brother. A year or two from now and he wouldn't hesitate.

At this point, though, Dean wasn't even sure the kid had a license (and okay, Sam had learned how to drive when he was nine, but that was so not the point). The little salad-eating giant was gripping the door handle as Dean hit the gas a little harder than strictly necessary. Except he had just been sent hurtling ten years into the past, so 'necessary' could suck it for all he cared. Sammy seemed to disagree, if

the white knuckle grip was anything to go by.

God, he was so young (*and wimpy! Bitch.*)

With gritted teeth, as if he could hear Dean's internal monologue, he ground out, "Where are we going?"

"Back to Stanford." Because that was an easy one. They were going to get far away from whatever hunt he'd dragged his brother back into. Sam was going back to school where Dean would make sure Jess stayed alive and his moose of a brother stayed educated and the two got married and had babies or something. All apple-pie-normal.

Maybe a dog instead of babies. Sam liked dogs. Although Dean would make a kick-ass Uncle if it came to it.

His answer had momentarily shut Sammy up. At least until he pulled bitchface #1 ("*What? That doesn't make any sense, Dean. Don't be an idiot.")*.

"What? That doesn't make any- Dean, what about Dad?"

Dean managed not to jerk the steering wheel or all-out slam the breaks to a grinding halt as his brother's words registered. Instead, he let out the slowest breath he possibly could while still breathing. Shit. *Shit. Shit. Shit*. Dad was still alive. Dad was still *alive*. It was 2005: before the crash and the hospital and Azazel (*Yellow Eyes. We called him Yellow Eyes*) and John's deal and *shit.* His knuckles tighten on the wheel. Dad was alive.

"I'll…uh," he had to take a moment to clear his throat around the giant fucking lump of *Dad is still alive*. "I'll find him. Alone," he added hastily, chancing a glance at his brother. "You're going back to school."

Soon as he killed the demon hanging out in Sam's friend (*Brad? Think it was Brad*). Kill the demon, save Jess, save Sam. No hunting, no demon blood, no dying. No Devil wearing him to the prom and all the crap after that. Piece of pie.

…Except he didn't currently have anything to kill a demon. Craptastic. No demon-killing knife (no Ruby to give it to them yet – and hopefully not ever, if he had anything to say about it), no Colt (shit, when did those vampires kill Elkins? Had it been 2005? Or 2006? What month? Crap, crappity, crap crap. Maybe they should make a detour to Colorado…) And no angel blades (…no Cas, either, despite sending up another half dozen silent prayers.)

Damn it, how had they even made it through the apocalypse the first time around?

An exorcism would have to be good enough. Maybe he could send the ass-hat back to Azazel with a message. Maybe one for Lilith, too. And shit, *Lilith*. Damn it, this was already making his head hurt. It had all been so long ago – so many crises and bad decisions and ends of the world ago.

"What about the thing killing people in Jericho? The EVP on dad's voicemail?"

Huh?

Jericho. Well, at least he knew where they were now. It sounded familiar. Dean wracked his brain. What had they been hunting when he picked Sam up from school? He vaguely remembered a motel room covered in victims, all male, all killed traveling a backroad. A creepy chick in a white dress and Ring-worthy black hair. Right! Cars, bridges, unfaithful men, and a suicide victim who'd killed her kids.

"The woman in white?" Dean gave a nonchalant wave of his hand, proud of himself for remembering. He could so totally pull this Time thing off. No problem. "I'll take care of her when I come back for Dad."

Sam sputtered. "The woman in- It's a woman in white?"

Okay. Apparently they hadn't known what it was yet. Smooth. Real smooth.

"Dean, how did you-" Sam made a face, part worry, part panic, and part…constipation? Dean wasn't sure what that last one was about. His brother's voice was oddly quiet, though, when he asked, "How did you know that?"

"Uh," the older hunter bobbed his head back and forth looking for something that sounded halfway plausible. "Figured it out? You know, all male victims, died along a road. Probably pulled over to pick up a beautiful, stranded woman. Came to me while I was, uh, sleeping."

Sam was still staring with Constipation Face (maybe that should be added to the list of Bitchfaces. Lucky #11?). So the older Winchester did what he always did best and ignored it, focusing on the road. He was going to have to start stockpiling some better excuses if he was going to slip up this freakin' much.

"Dean," Sammy started slowly, words measured with just barely withheld concern and frustration. "Turn the car back around. We need to find dad."

He thought for all of three seconds before going for gold in the Stupid Things Future Dean has Told Past Sam. "Dad's not in Jericho."

"What? Wh- Then where is he?"

Dean shook his head. "Don't know." He barely managed to hold back the *'don't care*'. "But he's not there."

"Dean-"

"Oh come on, Sammy!" He looked over at his brother finally, because this wasn't the Sam he knew, the Sam that had reconciled with Dad. Not yet. This was the kid who wasn't supposed to care about John Winchester – who wanted out of the life. Who ran away to get it. And Dean was trying to honor that this time around, because Sam had been right all along. The further away from Dad they got, the better. And yeah, it hurt like hell to say it, knowing the man was still alive. Knowing he could still be saved.

Maybe if Dean could just find him, warn him about Azazel and all his plans. If he could change Sam's fate this time around, if he could stop the apocalypse, maybe he could save Dad, too.

Hell, who was he kidding?

John Winchester had never been save-able. Dean had too much experience this time around to make the same mistakes. He couldn't save them both, and Sam was more important. The further away from John Winchester and his crusade they got, the better. He wasn't going to let them – let *Sam*– walk the same bloody road again. Not when he could stop it.

He tightened his grip on the wheel. "Dad's not in some backwater town hunting a woman in white. Or a wendigo, or a ghost, or any other case he can't be bothered with that he'll stick on us just to keep us busy. This is another one of his fucked up missions – send us off hunting while he's busy with Az- with- with the thing that killed mom."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. He was saying too much, and he hadn't meant to say any of it and shit, shit, *shit.* He just wanted to get Sam back to school, where he would be *safe.* Then he could focus on

the rest of it.

Damn it, Cas, you couldn't have sent me back one more freaking day? Twenty four more freaking hours and we could have avoided all of this!

Twenty four hours earlier and he would have never pulled Sammy back in. Sam would never have known dad was missing.

His brother was back to staring. Dean twisted his hands around the steering wheel and blew out a measured breath. He was going to have to explain at least some of this. He probably wasn't acting very 'Dean circa 2005'.

"Look, I should have known better, okay? Shouldn't have dragged you into it. I'll find Dad on my own. You wanted out, well you've got it. We'll go back to Stanford, and you're gonna go to that law-school thing. You'll become a fancy lawyer and marry that girl and live happily-friggin-ever-after. Apple pie life, right?"

Okay, so his voice may have cracked at the end there and this was definitely not any better than the last bunch of shit he *hadn't meant to say*.

Note to self. When stockpile of excuses runs out, it's time to ***shut up****.*

Seriously, Cas. Twenty-four fucking hours! Was that so much to ask?

"Stop the car."

Dean heaved a sigh. Damn it, now *Samantha* was going to go all chick-flick, I-worry-about-you and blah blah blah on him. And he really, really didn't think he could handle that on top of everything else. "Sammy-"

"Dean, stop the damn car!"

He did. He pulled the Impala onto the shoulder and put her in park. It was silent as Sam tried to work out the right words to say. His pinched face told Dean it wasn't an easy battle.

The older hunter tried not to watch his brother (also a losing battle), because it was freaky – so freaky – but it was also so damn good to see Sam without all the pain and the sorrow and the fucking *tiredness* that had been there since…Well, since he'd gone to get him from Stanford. Since Jess.

"Dean," Sammy got his vocal cords working again and he put on his '*this is serious'* face. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Sammy."

"Sam."

Dean almost snorted. Right. He'd forgotten all about that. 'Sammy' was a twelve year old kid, if he recalled (oh, if his brother only new the irony. He freaking *was* a kid!) So he nodded and said, "Sam." And it wasn't the least bit sarcastic *at all*. Really, it wasn't.

His brother's eyes narrowed. "You're obviously not okay."

Dean rolled his own, giving his brother a pointed look. "You just told me not to! I'm doing what you said!"

"Yeah, and since when do you listen to me, huh?"

"Since-" Shit, nope, couldn't say that, that hadn't happened yet. "Since-" No, couldn't say that either. Dean huffed in annoyance. He'd forgotten how stubborn and immature and stupid his little brother could be (he really hadn't). "Damn it, Sam, can we just get back on the road?"

"No. Not until you tell me what is going on with you!" Sam waved his hands around as he spoke and Dean allowed himself to be distracted by them rather than focus on his brother's concern and annoyance and, oh right, actual spot-on point.

Because no way was he going to come out with, *'Well, Sammy, I just time traveled back a decade from the brink of the actual end of the world (not those other times, nah, those weren't even close compared to this one), so, yeah, I'm a little different. Astute observation there, Sherlock. But no biggie! I'm just gonna save you and your girlfriend and the whole world and we're all going to be apple pie.'*

But Sam was still talking and Dean really needed to get his head in the game. "You were hell bent on finding dad three hours ago."

"Yeah, well, Dad's an asshole." He said it before he could think about it. *So much for head in the game.*

It's the second time that night that Dean rendered his brother speechless. He ran a hand over his eyes. This wasn't going to be as easy as he fooled himself into thinking. And why should it be?

Nothing ever was. He had too much weight himself, too much baggage, to ever pretend that he didn't know what he did. To be what he had once been.

Time for Plan B. Too bad he didn't actually have one (not that he'd had a Plan A, either).

"Look, Sammy- *Sam*. Dad's not here. And no, I don't know where he is." Which was actually true. He didn't have a clue because they never had figured it out.

"But it doesn't matter," he continued, forcing his brain to focus and *think like me ten years ago*. "He's never going to stop hunting the thing that killed mom. And obviously, he doesn't want our help doing that."

Sam fell silent, watching his older brother with an unreadable expression. Dean didn't hold his gaze for long. They needed to get back on the road.

"Dean, there's still a woman in white back in Jericho, if that's what's killing those people."

The hunter nods. "I'll take care of it. Soon as I drop you off, I'll come back and gank the bitch." His memory on it was a little hazy, but he was pretty sure the trick had been getting her back into her old house. He could do that solo and not even break a sweat.

"Saving people, hunting things," he added suddenly, the words coming to him from a long ago memory. Dean turned to look at his brother head on. "That's my gig – and I'm good with that. But that's not your life, Sammy. It doesn't have to be and I, uh," he shook his head. No chick-flick moments. "I shouldn't have asked you to come."

Sam was already shaking his head full of ridiculously long hair and giving him those sympathetic puppy dog eyes. "You needed help, Dean. And I want to help. Let's find Dad."

He shook his head. "Not necessary, Sammy. *Sam*."

His brother let out a huff of air. "At least let me help with the woman in white."

"Nope. I got this."

Sam sat back in his seat in defeat. He was still eyeing Dean

worryingly, but it looked like he was out of things to say. So Dean pulled back on the road and headed for Stanford, his mind running through plans to save Jess.

-o-o-o-

They were halfway to Stanford (back the way they had come just yesterday, though it'd been significantly longer in Dean's case) when Sam decided he wasn't out of things to say, after all.

"Who's Cass?"

This time the car did swerve dangerously as Dean's knee-jerk reaction sent them careening onto the dirt shoulder of the I-49. He corrected quickly and expertly (with a mental apology to his Baby for the rough treatment) but Sam's knuckles were once more white on the dashboard and Dean's heart was pounding a mile a minute.

He rubbed absently at the hammering in his chest and decided that even if he could answer honestly, he didn't want to talk about it. About the blood fertilizing the graveyard, the outpouring of grace seeping into the earth, or the apology in blue eyes that belonged to his friend for the first time in weeks. The back of his brother's head, unmoving and soaking up a pool of red. The finality of that last '*Good luck, Dean*.'

Things that would never happen again, so they didn't matter. They didn't exist anymore.

Instead, he willed his heart to calm and responded casually, "He's no one."

Not casually enough, however, for Sam to miss the choice of pronoun, identifying him as *someone*. Eventually, he stopped staring at his brother, stopped waiting for him to say more, and stared out the windshield instead.

Dean knew that Sam was far from letting it go and was only biding his time. He hoped of all the many things his brother could latch onto in this situation, of all the slip-ups he could dig his mental claws into and refuse to give up, Cas would be one he let slide.

-o-o-o-

It was nearly five am when they pulled up outside of Sam's apartment. It was still dark, the sun not due to rise for another two hours, and

Sam was yawning as he pulled his gargantuan frame out of the passenger side. Slumped shoulders and a hung head marked the giant's form as he headed for the front door, digging into his pocket for the key.

Dean darted up beside him as soon as he realized where his brother was headed. "Uh, hey, why don't you get your bag from the trunk? I'll get the door."

Sam scrunched his face up in his classic *'I'm tired and you're not making any sense*' expression (bitchface #8). "Dude, if Jess wakes up to you tripping around the house in the dark, she'll *freak*."

He slid the key into the lock and turned it. Dean tensed beside him, desperately trying to think up a way to keep Sam out of the house long enough for him to clear it. Truth was, he didn't know exactly *when* Brad (Brody? Brian? Shit.) had stalked out Jess. From the little he'd gleamed of the conversation he was too busy being locked in the bathroom to hear, the demon could have held her for longer than just the night they returned.

How had the douchebag even known when they were coming back first time around? He'd killed her on the anniversary of their mom's death. But would he have done that even if they hadn't returned in time, or if they'd come back early? How long had he been waiting for them to return - had he had Jess tied up all weekend? Did he have her tied up in there now? Dean couldn't remember anything from the police report – it wasn't like she'd been missing for the two or so days they'd been gone. Had the demon been watching for their return, instead?

Surreptitiously, the hunter scanned the rest of the neighborhood. They were surrounded by other apartments, probably occupied by sleeping students. The windows were dark: most had curtains drawn or shades pulled. The ones that didn't were ominous, gaping mouths of impenetrable black that stared at them, surrounded them, hiding any number of eyes. Dean glared at them each in turn, daring one to have a demon begging for his throat to be cut.

He shifted restlessly and focused back on his brother as the lock shifted, the door slid open, and Sam disappeared in to the darkness beyond. If he noticed how close his brother was sticking as they walked through the house practically in tandem, Sam didn't say anything. Dean checked each room, hand wrapped around the hilt of the gun tucked in the back of his jeans. It wouldn't do much against a

demon, but it was better than being weaponless.

The Sasquatch stopped abruptly, causing a near nose-dive of older brother into younger. Dean pulled back at the last second, feeling the brush of Sam's shirt against the tip of his face. He glared at the man, but was immediately on guard.

"What is it?"

Sam gave him a funny look. "My bedroom, Dean. You going to follow me in there, too?"

Dean scoffed, making a face of his own. He backed off, acting insulted just long enough for his brother to shake his head and disappear into the dark room. The door shut behind him with a click and Dean tried to ignore his twitch of nerves.

The demon probably wasn't in the bedroom. His gut wasn't screaming at him, no inherent danger he could sense. But that wasn't solid proof, and Jess had died in the bedroom.

The door made a soft scraping nose over the carpet as he pushed it open. The room beyond was pretty dark, but he could make out the silhouette of a single occupant in the bed, lit by a line of yellow light coming from beneath a door to the left. Bathroom.

The light flickered off and the door opened a second later. Dean slid back outside, turning around to survey the rest of the apartment.

Okay, probably no demon, then. He didn't smell sulfur (although with a demon as undercover as Brad/Brian/Brett, he probably wouldn't). Good. That was…good. That meant he had time to plan. He headed back out to the car, throwing open the trunk to grab Sam's bag. The kid's laptop was in there. He'd have to make good use of that once Sasquatch passed out.

He quickly popped the hidden panel and snagged a couple of weapons, a container of salt, and two canteens of water that would be turned holy five minutes after Sam conked out. He was on guard duty tonight, even if his brother wouldn't know it.

Dean went back into the house to find Sam standing in the middle of the living room, having turned on a small table lamp next to the sofa. He tossed him the go-bag, wrapping the strap of his own weapon-filled duffle over his shoulder to hide the obvious shape of the sawed-off inside.

"So, er," Sam mumbled as he distractedly set his bag down on the chair next to him, looking every bit the twenty-two year old kid he was. "I was hoping- that is… um, you probably shouldn't drive more tonight without some sleep, Dean."

The older hunter raised his eyebrows. Part of him wanted to smirk – oh, part of him wanted to laugh. Poor Sammy, beating around the bush trying to figure out how to suggest he stay the night without actually saying it. 2005 Dean would have been insulted – would have insisted he was *fine* to keep on driving. Would have done so just to prove it, too.

"Do you have a place to crash?"

Dean grinned, slinging the bag off his shoulder to land carelessly on the sofa. "What? Your couch too good for me?"

Sam blinked in surprise, jaw dropping a bit and this time Dean let out a chuckle. Poor kid. The younger Winchester was already back-pedaling, claiming it was fine, and he could stay as long as he wanted, and maybe they could get breakfast or something the next morning (Sam code for 'don't you dare leave without saying goodbye, Dean!')

He was smiling – all dopey, happy, *innocent* Sammy – when he said he'd love for Dean to meet Jess. Properly, this time.

The smirk slid off Dean's face as he remembered that this wasn't a family reunion; he had people to save, a *job to do*. And he wouldn't be sticking around afterwards. He was going to have to keep his distance from Sammy, too, if he wanted to keep him out this time. No Uncle Dean in this future, either.

A memory flashed through his mind of a Sam who barely tolerated him, who barely *knew* him, sitting across the table at a family dinner with his pretty wife by his side. A forgotten dream tainted with the bitter aftertaste of a Djinn.

Dean didn't trust his mouth to form words through the giant lump in his throat. So he nodded and smiled and hoped it didn't look as fake as it felt. Judging by Sam's laugh and quick assurance *('It won't be that bad, Dean. You'll love her,'*) he hadn't been very successful.

He waited until the kid was out – trying not to hear the mumbled words of reassurance to a half-asleep Jess and waiting for the light to go out – before he pulled the shotgun out of his duffle. He purified both of the canteens with a rosary and a mumbled prayer. After a

quick lightbulb moment, he did so again with several glasses he stole and filled from the kitchen sink, placing them strategically throughout the house.

He slipped an anti-possession amulet on the second he realized his chest was missing the very reassuring ink of his tattoo. He thought about sneaking into the bedroom and getting one around Sam and Jess, but figured there was no way he'd pull that off (or talk his way out when Sam caught him). So he settled on painting devils traps on the undersides of what rugs he could find, putting one directly outside the bedroom door.

With the windows strategically re-salted (as unnoticeably as possible) and a few symbols added to the pre-existing carvings in the doorframes (that-a-boy, Sammy), Dean settled onto the couch with the laptop, a sawed-off, and a canteen.

He spent the next several hours researching everything he could on Sam's demonic best friend, stubbornly *not* thinking about a lonely future without his brother by his side.

Chapter 3: Season 1: Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dean's still swearing, Sam's making extra bitchfaces, and Brody is a douchebag with perfect hair

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 2

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

It was well after the sun came up that Sam stumbled out of his bedroom to find his brother chilling on the sofa with his laptop open, typing away. He was wearing a fresh shirt and had made himself right at home, apparently. Which was…odd, Sam thought. Pretty domestic for his very nomadic older brother.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Dean answered his questioning glance at the laptop offhandedly and hardly apologetic.

“Dude, you better not be watching porn.”

His older brother smirked and winked at him. Sam made a disgusted noise but was grinning as he ventured into the kitchen for some orange juice. He’d forgotten what being around his brother was like. He didn’t realize how much he had missed him these last four years.

“Hey, uh, so,” Dean cleared his throat from the living room, which meant he had done something Sam wasn’t gonna like. “This guy kept trying to message you like an hour ago.”

Sam ducked his head back into the living room. “Guy?”

If Dean hadn’t been so focused on lying convincingly, he might have cracked a pretty good joke on that one. Sam was so easy; ten years hadn’t changed that. As it was, he just nodded and pointed to the computer in his lap. “Brad or something?”

“Brady?”

“Yeah!” Dean said with maybe a little too much enthusiasm. Because trying to find that asshole through the school website had been a *bitch* without knowing his actual name. “Uh, I mean yeah. So I answered.”

Sam automatically groaned.

“Hey, in my defense,” he raised his hands, “you’re the one who left your laptop out.”

“It wasn’t out, it was in my bag,” the giant answered without missing a beat, pointing to the go-bag still sitting on the chair and looking more than a bit rummaged through. “And it’s password protected, Dean.”

The older hunger gave his most winning smile. He may not know computers, but he knew Sammy.

“Ugh, whatever.” His moose of a brother rolled his eyes and retreated back into the kitchen. “How badly did you traumatize him?”

Dean balked. “I did not *traumatize* him. Guy called me out pretty quickly, actually.”

Which had all been part of Dean’s plan. Well, the part about messaging the guy hadn’t exactly been one of the steps, but the rest totally was. He’d still been trying to figure out the asshat’s name when a chat popped up in the bottom right corner of the screen from one, *SexyStanfordDr1084*.

Ass. Hole.

Not one to pass up the opportunity (and feeling pretty certain it was Brady on the other line, considering his first line was *‘You back in town, bro?’* Bro? Really? It was 2005, for fuck’s sake), Dean had set about making a poor imitation of Sam. Brady had called him on it pretty quickly, and he’d revealed himself as Sammy’s older brother, in town visiting and concerned for his widdle brother’s virtue while all alone in the big scary world of frats and co-eds.

The demonic scumbag had eaten it up, no doubt chomping at the bit (and foaming at the mouth) for an opportunity to get close to Dean Winchester. Even pre-seals, he was pretty sure the troops down south were talking about the war to come. Especially the guy tasked as his brother’s keeper. Azazel would have given him the basics, at least.

“Of course he did,” Sam was saying in response to Brady’s so called ‘intelligence’ at noticing it wasn’t the high IQ future-lawyer Winchester he’d been talking to. Yeah. Real genius, that one. “He’s pre-med, Dean. He’s not an idiot.”

It took all of the older Winchester's willpower not to respond with something that would most likely get him into trouble.

"Bitch." Well, maybe just a little bit of trouble.

"Jerk."

Sam walked back in with a glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee. He set the latter on the low table in front of Dean, next to the abandoned laptop. "So?"

"So I'm meeting him for a beer."

Sam pulled Bitchface #4 (*"Stay out of my stuff, Dean!")*

"Dude."

"What?" Dean had the decency to at least *act* insulted. "I can't get to know your friends?"

Sam leveled a serious look at him, eyes narrowed and suspicion fully bared. "Is that what you're doing?"

Dean scoffed. "I'm just checking up on my baby brother. Making sure you haven't gotten yourself into trouble in the scary world of higher education."

Sam actually had gotten into trouble, sarcasm aside. Though with the plot those bastards downstairs were cooking up, it wasn't exactly Sammy's fault he hadn't caught on. Even the most seasoned hunter wouldn't have seen it coming. Dean certainly hadn't.

His brother, however, didn't know any of that and currently looked seconds away from an explosion. "Dean, none of my friends are-" he cast a glance to the bedroom door, where faint sounds of running water could be heard, "-monsters! They're just normal college kids living normal lives!"

The words made Dean's stomach twist. *If only.*

"Then there's nothing to bitch about," he said instead, putting on his best 'I'm older and that's that' face. "Just two dudes grabbing a beer."

"Fine," his brother snapped. "But Dean, I swear if you-"

"Relax, Samantha. It's just a beer and some friendly, *normal* conversation."

Sam still looked ready to punch him.

"So." He stood up with a grin. "We grabbing breakfast, or what?"

-o-o-o-

Sam hadn't been wrong. It was hard not to like Jess. She was beautiful, glowing with love for his brother, witty and smart, and had a biting tongue that gave back as good as she got. Dean liked her already, and they'd only just had breakfast.

Dean hadn't been wrong either. She was *way* out of Sam's league. It was ridiculously obvious how head over heels the kid was for her. Dean wasn't sure if he was closer to tearing up or throwing up.

Of course, since Winchesters did neither, he was perfectly fine.

Brunch that morning was possibly the most surreal experience of Dean's life, which was saying something. Seeing his brother happy, in love, and perfectly *normal* only sharpened his conviction to change what was coming. His brother deserved this. And it didn't take much to see Jess deserved life.

By the end of the meal, Dean had every confidence that he could do this, for them. He was going to change the future.

-o-o-o-

Sam tried to invite himself to the Dean-Meets-Brady shindig no less than three times. It got to the point where Dean finally told him to go get his own friend. Sam made the ultimate bitchface at that and Jess dragged him off to go lick his wounds in the safety of their very demon-proofed apartment.

When Brady showed up at the off-campus bar, Dean was already waiting for him against the trunk of the Impala. He hadn't (wouldn't? How did tenses even work when you were from the future?) changed much in five years, and Dean instantly recognized him with his douchebag hair and rows of perfect punch-worthy teeth.

The guy gave an award-winning smile (seriously, how much would it throw off his plan if he just socked the asshole in the mouth right now?) and stuck his hand out as he approached. Dean shook it with a grin of his own.

It was only too easy in the end. He'd forgotten how simple hunting

had been when the demons still underestimated the Winchester boys. Okay, they'd never really *stopped* underestimating them, but this was a whole other level of naïve.

He pulled out two beers from a cooler in the back seat, popped their tops, and handed one to Brady with a line about always having a few on hand for the road.

"Thought you wouldn't mind a freebie."

The demon grinned like an idiot (which he was) and clinked the neck of his bottle to Dean's. Then it was as simple as sitting back and waiting for the smoke and sizzling flesh, burned by a mouthful of holy watered-down beer. Getting him into the devil-trap-lined trunk was as easy as pop, shove, slam.

Now he was driving out of Palo Alto and towards the hills that lined the west side of the peninsula. There were a ton of state parks and preservations that way that would guarantee an empty stretch of woods where he could interrogate and exorcise the son-of-a-bitch without risk. He'd been able to scope it all out using Sammy's laptop that morning. He'd settled on the ridgeline when he realized he wouldn't have time to sneak out and prep a devil's trap even if he did find a good abandoned building for it. Sam had been pretty insistent they spend the day touring Stanford and the surrounding area.

He had ignored the twist in his gut all day as Sam proudly showed off his perfectly normal life while Dean walked beside him, planning how to kill his brother's best friend.

Popping the trunk revealed a red-faced, spitting Brady. The demon surged forward, arms outstretched for Dean's throat. The devils trap caught him before he ever got close and threw him back into the trunk.

"Sit tight, princess. It'll be your turn in just a second."

He was reaching into the trunk for the spray paint (carefully avoiding the still violent demon) when a set of headlights rounded the dirt road and lit up the wooded sanctuary he'd chosen for the exorcism.

Swearing, he slammed the trunk (feeling just a *little* satisfied when he heard the metal connect with the demon's skull on its way down) and turned, hiding the shotgun and holy water behind him in a single motion. The car coming down the path careened to a stop a good ten feet away from the Impala. Dean swore even louder when the door

swung open and Sam of all people climbed out, gun of his own aimed at Dean.

“Sammy, what the hell-”

“Let him go.” The gun was perfectly level and Dean made a face at it.

There was suddenly banging on the trunk, frantic and desperate. “Sam? Sam, help! Please, he’s crazy!”

“Shut it!” Dean barked over his shoulder. His shotgun remained on the trunk behind him, not that he’d ever pull it on his brother.

Sam tightened his hand around the grip of his handgun, heedless of being the only one aiming his weapon in this showdown. “Let him out,” he repeated and Dean could tell he was seriously considering shooting him.

Oh, come on! This guy could not be that good a friend.

“I don’t know what you are,” Sam continued, raising his arms and setting his face in determination and anger, “but let Brady go.”

“Sammy,” Dean groaned, throwing his arms out to the sides, “You don’t *tell* the monster you don’t know what it is! You might has well wave around a neon sign screaming ‘I don’t know how to kill you!’”

Sam frowned at him, but the gun didn’t waiver. His determination did, though: Dean could see it in his eyes. Sam wasn’t a hundred percent sure Dean wasn’t Dean. Even with his last comment, the kid was still sharp enough to know his brother wasn’t the same guy he had been two days ago.

“Open the trunk. Now.”

Dean leveled his brother with a sober, if slightly annoyed look. Reaching behind him, he turned the key and the trunk opened with a click. Brady pushed it the rest of the way open, sitting up with crocodile tears and a fantastic look of panic.

Fucking demons.

“S-Sam, please. Please, you’re brother’s crazy!”

There was blood pouring down the side of his face, courtesy of the underside of the trunk shutting on his stupidly perfect hair. Unfortunately, it added to the damsel in distress act he had going on.

His hands were raised in a half placating, half begging pose, pleading to the younger brother to save him as he blinked blood out of his wide, traumatized eyes.

"Please," Dean scoffed, rolling his eyes at the drama act. "Sammy, he's a demon."

Sam jerked in surprise. His eyes narrowed, looking quickly between his (possibly fake) brother and his (now possibly possessed) best friend. The gun stayed trained on Dean, but the intent to actually use it seemed further off now.

"A- a what?" the faker stuttered in shock, looking between the two hunters. "I'm not a- are you insane?"

Dean's eyes never left his brother as he dumped the canister of holy water over his shoulder.

Sam went a few dozen shades whiter as Brady screamed and hissed and smoked, clawing at his steaming face. He bared his teeth at Dean, hissing like a wild animal. Sam's gun arm waivered, lowering almost to his waist before retraining it on the writhing demon.

"Dean?" he asked, voice weak and unsettled, begging for answers to his life being turned completely upside down. Dean stepped away from the trunk, coming closer to his brother. He kept the shotgun down and broadcasted his movements clearly, in case Sam still had any doubt as to what he was.

"Sorry, man. I didn't want you to know."

Sam screwed up his face in a tight, squinted look of hurt that Dean knew well. It was the expression Sammy wore each and every time he felt betrayed by his brother. "What?"

The words were breathless, and Dean battled with his instinct to look away.

"Is this why you came here?" Sam asked. His gun remained trained on Brady, but the anger was directed at his brother now. "The hunt in Jericho – Dad missing? Was that all just some excuse to get me out of Stanford so you could kill my *possessed* best friend without having to tell me? What the hell, Dean!"

"That's not-" Dean cut off, shaking his head angrily. "Dad *is* missing, but that has nothing to do with this! I didn't know in advance, okay?

I just found out!"

Sam's anger drained away from him as he stared at his brother. He lowered the gun, knowing it wouldn't work for a demonic possession anyway. "How? How did you-"

Dean shrugged. "I gave him a beer laced with holy water. It's, uh, a trick I learned from dad. Wasn't expecting anything to come of it – I was just running all the normal tests."

Brady suddenly laughed, pulling their attention back to him. He was sitting, shoulders slumped, face red and splotchy from the water, ruse abandoned. "Bullshit. You were ready for me. I don't know how you knew, but you knew."

Dean narrowed his eyes at the demon. "Shut it."

Sam looked to his brother, full blown puppy dog eyes begging him to make the world make sense again. At least, that's what the big brother in Dean saw whenever Sammy stared at him like that.

"Later, Sammy."

Silence reigned in the clearing, as if the stupid crickets wanted to hear what happened next. Dean's finger twitched against the shotgun's trigger.

"It's Sam," the younger Winchester corrected calmly and Dean could see the change take over his brother. The way he tensed his forehead, smoothing away any wrinkles on his brow, screaming *'I know when you're lying to me.'* The set of his shoulders that vowed, *'We're not done talking about this*.' The tick in his jaw when he was pissed as hell, but firmly resolved.

His little brother had just fallen into hunter mode, something that hadn't happened the first time around until after Jess's death.

Somehow, it felt like failure to Dean: a sucker punch to the gut. He didn't know why – Jess was still alive, and he was still hell bent on keeping it that way. But it felt like he was already behind the curve, too far to catch up. Like Sammy had already set his mind to hunting, just like the first time after finding his girlfriend roasted on the ceiling.

Which was ridiculous, because none of it had happened yet – they were *stopping* it from happening – and all Sam had done was pull a

face. Nothing had changed. They'd still kill Brady, Jess would be safe and Sam could go back to apple pie.

So Dean nodded his head, conceded to 'Sam' over 'Sammy' and in doing so apparently agreed that they'd talk about it later. A promise he would deal with equally later.

Sam turned back to Brady, all business now. Whatever he'd needed to do to tuck away the shock and betrayal, he'd done it. "How long?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, are you talking to me now?" Brady asked, revealing a mouth full of bloody teeth as he smiled. "I hadn't realized the *Lifetime* moment had ended."

Sam didn't even blink. Brady sighed dramatically, "Come on, Sammy-boy. You already know the answer. Think *really* hard."

The younger hunter's jaw clenched, the veins popping with the harsh treatment. "Sophomore year, Thanksgiving break."

Brady broke out in the widest smile yet. "Ah, the booze, bitches, and drugs. Those were the good days. Remember how much time you spent trying to get me back on the right track?" The demon laughed, a gurgling sound that must have hurt like hell with his ruined throat. "You were such a *good* friend, Sam."

"Why?" he ground out, fist clenching, gun hand shaking. "That was two years ago! What the hell is your end game?"

Before Brady could answer, Sam stiffened and lost any color he'd regained. His breath when he finally released it shook. "Jess."

"Ding ding ding!"

Sam glanced at Dean briefly, his voice devastatingly quiet when he talked. "He introduced me to Jess. A-after….After sophomore year." His hands were shaking at his side. "Is….Is she? She's not. She can't be."

Brady's grin grew feral as he finished Sam's train of thought. "Of course she is-"

"She's not."

Both men looked at Dean, who'd answered so matter-of-factly you'd have thought they were talking about stock market stats. He glared at

the demon before nodding to his brother reassuringly. "I checked. She's human."

Which was a total lie, and now Dean was sort of wondering if he *should* check, but was pretty sure he didn't need to. First of all, she'd be stuck on a devil-trapped rug back in the apartment right now (which, while amusing to picture, would likely not have gone unnoticed by the two hunters currently staying with her). Second, there was no way Future-Brady would have let that opportunity for back-stabbing bragging pass. He would have rubbed it in Sam's face that he'd fallen for a demon (*again*). That she'd been one the whole time. That she'd never actually loved him.

No, he was just feeding off what Sam had given him.

The demon was watching Dean with narrowed, curious eyes. He met the stare head on. Sam was still reeling with relief that his girlfriend wasn't a lying denizen of Hell.

"Why would you introduce me to her?" he asked quietly at first, voice confused, before he rounded angrily on the demon. Sam wasn't stupid. On the contrary, Dean always thought he was a minor genius, especially when it came to Sherlocking the truth out of situations. He'd make a hell of a lawyer. "Why do any of this? What the hell are you playing at?"

Brady laughed, looking between the brothers. "So you don't know? You're our favorite, Sammy-boy. We've got big plans for you."

"Not anymore, you don't." Dean emptied the rest of the canteen over Brady's head and slammed the trunk shut amid the sound of sizzling skin and screaming. A sickening crack filled the air and the trunk bounced back open after failing to click shut. Brady was howling as he pulled four crooked, limp fingers against his chest.

"Dean!" Sam barked, taking a step towards them. "He's still in there! It's still Brady's body."

Oh. Right. Oops?

The hunter grimaced, shutting the trunk a tad more gently this time. In his defense, Future-Brady had been long dead by the time they ganked the son of a bitch (and even if he hadn't been, killing the man after almost a decade of possession was a freaking mercy). Besides, he hadn't *meant* to close the trunk on his fingers. But he wasn't going to lose any sleep over it, either.

Dean bent down, scooping up the can of spray paint he'd dropped at the start of all this. As he straightened, Sam blocked him with his arm outstretched to the side. The older hunter quirked an eyebrow in question.

His younger brother held out a sliver knife that looked way too familiar. Dean reached for his hip where he kept his blade, only to find it missing. Sammy was still holding it out to him, a challenging look in his eye. Dean glanced down at the kid's gun, thankfully pointed at the ground, but with a firm finger resting on the trigger.

"Shouldn't have called you rusty," he quipped with a grin as he grabbed the knife. He rolled up one sleeve and pressed the blade to his arm, drawing a faint red line that swelled with blood. The drops of water on his shirt and skin, collateral from Brady's squirming, sealed the deal on him not being a demon. That and the silver were probably enough reassurance for his brother.

Sam relaxed fractionally, grip loosening on the gun. "Dean, *what* is going on? And no more lies. He said you knew what he was – that you were ready for him. How? And what did he mean, *they've* got plans for me?"

Dean pressed the can of spray paint into his brother's chest to avoid answering any of those questions that he really didn't have answers to. Damn it, this was supposed to be simple. Kill Brady, save Jess, keep Sam out of it.

Why the hell did Sam have to follow him?

Because life's a bitch, that's why.

Of course it wouldn't just be easy. Why had he thought it would be? He was a Winchester. They didn't get *easy*.

"Look, we'll get answers, okay? But we still need to exorcise the son of a bitch, and we're not doing it in the friggin' Impala. So go paint a devils trap and let's get this done."

Sam looked ready to argue, but Dean leveled a serious stare. "Go. I'll explain later, alright?"

"Dean-" his brother's voice was a warning. He wouldn't take being put off again.

"I will, okay? Go!"

Sam gave a grim nod, but still didn't move. Dean watched him expectantly, finally raising his hands in a clear '*What now?*' gesture. His brother's brow furled in that way that said he didn't understand something, but didn't want to admit it. Which was kind of fair in this situation, considering there was a metric shit ton he didn't know and Dean was kind of turning his life on end.

Finally, Sam mumbled, "What's a devils trap?"

Son of a bitch. Seriously. How the hell had they lived long enough to make it to the end of the world?

Dean swiped the spray paint out of his brother's hand. He pointed at the ground with his free hand. "Stay."

He moved a good ten feet from the car to where the pine needles and loose dirt gave way to harder packed ground. Crouching, he began the large circle and five point star. Sam stayed by the trunk as instructed (and not pouting *at all* about it), but craned his neck to try and catch the lines his brother was painting over the ground.

By the time he finished, Sam was standing next to the outer edge, memorizing the ancient symbols with the same fire in his eyes he got when handed a new puzzle.

"Dude." Dean threw his hands out as he straightened and caught sight of his brother. He gestured emphatically at the abandoned car.

Sam just shrugged and Dean dropped his arms, glaring. His brother's eyes were already back on the trap. "Does this really work?"

"What do you think's keeping him in the trunk?"

The younger hunter's eyes doubled in size. "You *spray painted* the Impala?"

Dean pulled a bitchface of his own. Of course Sam would be incredulous this time. Little shit had been the one to blemish Baby's gorgeous finish first time around without so much as blinking. Nobody put Baby in a devil-trapped corner but Dean. "It's in the trunk, first of all. And second, it's an *addition*. It makes her even more badass."

Sam looked skeptical, shaking his head as they made their way back towards the car. "If it's painted on the trunk, how are we going to get him to that one?" he asked, nodding back the way they came. There

was at least a ten foot difference, and the placement of trees limited their ability to back the Impala up to it. He may not be very familiar with demonic possession, but he was fairly sure the thing in Brady wouldn't need half that distance to overpower them.

"Just wait." Dean grinned. One advantage to being from the future was he knew *all* the cool tricks. And this time he didn't have to own up to learning most of them from fucking Crowley.

Chapter 4: Season 1: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dean's still swearing. It's likely safe to say he'll be swearing for the rest of the foreseeable (and unforeseeable) future. Oh, and Jess is a pretty cool chick.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 3

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

With an unceremonious shove, Dean ripped the hood off of Brady as the demon stumbled into the devils trap. It wasn't so much a hood as it was an old white t-shirt he'd ripped up and tied back together. He'd drawn the devils trap with a sharpie while waiting at the bar. Yeah, yeah, it wasn't as nifty looking as the one Crowley had bagged him with, looking like a burlap sack he found in a re-enactment of *Children of the Corn*, but his version was improvised. Which made it even more badass, in his opinion.

Brady managed to stay on his feet, letting out a low chuckle with his back to the two brothers. He titled his head to the sky and laughed. "Oh Dean," he turned around with a smile, "you're a lot smarter than we thought. When did that happen?"

"Bite me."

Sammy was watching him again, switching between him and his former best friend. The look in his eye was suspicious, but not of what Dean might be. He'd proven himself human enough for the hunter. No, Sam was sure his brother knew more than he was saying, and he'd get it out of him one way or another.

Damn it, why couldn't he have just stayed out of it.

Because he's a Winchester.

Another memory surfaced, of a week spent in a suit and tie, starving on rabbit food smoothies and hunting a crazy ass ghost of a long dead boss with one, Sam Wesson.

'Hunting is in your blood. It's what you are.'

Friggin' Zachariah. And friggin' Time. Well screw them both. Sam wasn't going to be a hunter, if it killed Dean.

"You know, you're real lucky, Sammy." Brady was talking again, this time smiling gently – *kindly* – at the younger of the two. The demon turned to Dean, tilting his head mockingly. "Maybe luckier than even your brother realizes. He spared you quite the nasty shock."

"What are you talking about?" Sam turned to his brother. "Dean, what's he mean?"

The older Winchester considered shutting the demon up: exorcising him before he could no doubt taunt and stab at his brother over what he had been about to do. But Sam wouldn't just let this go. It was cruel to let his little brother hear the truth from a demon, but maybe it would be better coming from something he could take his anger out on.

"I'm talking about that fine piece of ass you have waiting for you back at home."

Sam straightened, shoulders going rigid. His hands fisted involuntarily, shaking with fear and anger equally.

Brady showed his pearly whites. "And how I was going to pin her to the ceiling and burn her to a crisp."

The younger hunter when white. Brady laughed.

"That's right, Sammy-Boy. Just like mommy dearest."

Sam opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He looked desperately to Dean, searching for the voice of reason that said none of this was real. One look at his older brother and his world came crashing down.

"This- This is-"

Brady tilted his head back and howled with laughter. "Surprise! I'm the monster that killed your whore mother!"

"No, he isn't," Dean said at the same time.

The silence in the clearing would have been damn near comical if it was any other situation. Two sets of wide eyes turned to Dean, asking for answers he wasn't going to give either of them.

Brady was the first to recover. His eyes were narrow slits as he stared down the man who all their sources had said was the hothead of the two. The one who would react the most to everything he was saying.

"You think I didn't pin the bitch to the ceiling, Dean? You think I didn't *gut* Mommy Winchester right above little Sammy's crib? I watched her *burn* and I'm gonna do the same thing to Jess-"

Dean took a menacing step forward, cocking the shotgun. His hand twitched to wrap around an angel blade and kill this son of a bitch.

"The thing that killed our mom had yellow eyes. You gonna pull out those pale babies? Or are you gonna shut the hell up, cuz I know you don't got shit to show."

Brady's mouth slowly shut, a glare settling over his features. His eyes remained human, and Dean took it for the win it was.

He was beyond ready to waste this son of a bitch before he could run his mouth any more, but he needed to let it play out. No way Sam would ever let it go if he didn't learn all he could now. The only chance Dean had of getting his brother to drop this whole thing was if he felt it was over. Closure and all that crap.

"You're right," Brady's voice brought Dean back around.

The man was shrugging his shoulders, but his eyes had a glint of new strategy in them. Guess he was of the brainy persuasion of demon rather than the brawn. Probably had to be at least halfway intelligent to land an espionage gig watching over the future vessel of Lucifer himself.

Dean tightened his grip on his gun.

"I'm not the one who put the hit out on your mommy. Or Jess. But I'm still the one who's gonna light her up."

He directed his last words at Sam, who looked like he was half a step away from throwing himself into the devils trap and beating Brady with his bare hands. Dean reached out and gripped his shoulder. Sam flinched, but didn't pull away.

Dean turned to the demon. "Maybe that was the plan, but not anymore. You're going right back to Hell."

The answering grin would have put Hannibal Lecter to shame.

“You think this ends with me, Dean-O? Oh, no. My boss isn’t going to stop. Go ahead, send me back. It won’t save her, and it won’t save you.” He turned his burning eyes to Sam. “My kind is never going to stop. Jess is going to burn. She’ll be dead by the end of the week and it’s going to be all your fault, Sammy!”

Dean grabbed his brother as he let out an animalistic roar and charged the circle. He threw him back, yelling to back off – that playing to his game wouldn’t do anything but give him the satisfaction. Not to mention possibly break the trap and set him free.

Sam stalked off, fuming. He paced back and forth by the impala, fighting to cool off and clearly losing if the menacing glares he sent their way every thirty seconds were any indication.

Dean looked back at Brady. The demon just stood, smirking like the fucking asshole he was. The hunter looked away, focusing his anger and frustration at an object he was less likely to pummel into the ground.

Son of a bitch. *Son of a bitch!*

He honestly hadn’t thought it. Kill Brady, save Jess. That had been the equation and this was his solution. Simple, two step problem. Only Azazel had ordered Jess killed to get Sam back into hunting. He wouldn’t stop until his ‘favorite’ had the motivation needed to follow a road of blood and death. Right now, Jess was still their best bet at getting Sam on the path to become a cold, revenge-filled hunter.

She would never be safe unless he took that road.

Why hadn’t he realized it? Why had he thought anything would be this damn simple? It was the voice in the back of his head that did it, that pushed him over the edge. It whispered, *‘Well, at least you won’t be alone anymore. Sammy’ll be right back by your side. Straight to the end of the world.*’

It was the last straw on his already precariously balanced emotional state.

Dean let out a primal scream and slammed the butt of his shotgun into the nearest tree. He did it again and again and again, but nothing got better.

“Dean! Dean, stop!” A giant’s hand gripped the barrel of the gun: another pressed against his chest. His brother’s face swam into view,

concerned and angry and still so fucking devastated.

Dean shoved away from him, giving up the shotgun to his brother's tense grip and raising his hands in a show of calm. "Okay," he muttered. "Okay."

He gave himself a second. Told himself to get it back under control. He could lose it later, right now they had a job to do. Dean straightened his jacket and stalked back towards the grinning son of a bitch. Sam followed.

"Get whatever you want out of him." He stopped at the edge of the circle, leveling the demon with his most intimidating glare. It was a look shaped in the depths of Hell. It made even demons take a step back. "We're sending this son of a bitch back where he came from."

Sam spared a second to watch his brother, a dark man he wasn't entirely sure he recognized, before focusing his attention solely on the thing sitting in his best friend's body.

Brady didn't say much. At least nothing of consequence. He spouted shit about having plans for Sammy, that he was their favorite, that Jess would never be safe again. He never shut up, actually, but he didn't say anything either.

Dean kept half an ear out for lies, setting them straight when he could without giving too much away. There were surprisingly few.

He doubted the low-level minion even knew the real play at this point. Nothing came up alluding to Lucifer or Lilith. Brady kept Azazel's name to himself, always calling him Boss, and anything else he knew of any importance was danced around with the dexterity of an experienced liar.

Dean knew he could have gotten it out of him. Even without Ruby's knife or an angel blade, he could have made the demon sing. He had a weapon time couldn't take away from him. But he was pretty sure he should keep that whole 'I can torture information out of just about anyone or thing' to himself this time around.

Sam was already looking at him like he was considering having him institutionalized. No need to give the kid more fuel.

Eventually, frustrated, Sam called it. His shoulders were tense, his hands still fisted and shaking, but his face was stone when he started for the car to get his laptop and search for an exorcism. Dean couldn't

help it. He stopped his brother with a pat to the chest, winked at the giant, and started reciting the Latin he knew by heart.

The shock on Sam's face was totally worth it.

The demon inhabiting Brady went kicking and screaming, but eventually collapsed in a choking, hacking explosion of black smoke. The plume was dragged into the ground and sent, presumably, back to the pits of Hell.

Good fucking riddance.

The kid that was actually Brady was, shockingly, still alive. With a few broken fingers, a bit of skull trauma, and probably screwed in the head seven ways from Sunday, but alive.

"We should get him to a hospital," Sam said quietly, carrying the unconscious body back to the Impala.

Dean just nodded, not asking what story they were going to give. He knew this couldn't be one of their drop and runs, like they usually did with civilians. This was Sam's friend. He listened with half an ear as Sam told the ER nurses of Brady's past drug abuse, of how he found him half alive on campus, suspecting a relapse and maybe a mugging gone bad. He waited until his brother sunk into the hard, plastic chairs in the waiting room to say anything at all.

"Sam, we gotta go."

The kid looked up at him with those puppy dog eyes and Dean hated himself a little more. "What?" He looked around at the other friends and family in states of distress, all waiting to hear about a loved one. "We can't just leave."

Yeah, it would be suspicious as hell, not that that's what Sam meant. But they didn't have the time or luxury to stick around.

"Sam."

His brother met his gaze again and swallowed as the reality of what had happened set it.

"I…We can't stay here, can we?"

Dean knew he wasn't talking about the hospital. He shook his head. "That demon will have gotten word to Yellow Eyes by now. Or will

soon."

Sam was up in the blink of an eye. "Jess."

Dean put a comforting hand to his brother's chest. "Is in a demon proofed house at the moment. I, uh, made some additions."

Sam looked relieved, but only so much. She may have been safe, but it was momentary. They would still have to leave. He didn't know where they would go. Where could they run to that demons couldn't follow? His mind flew through every place and dozens of plans, but he didn't have the answers, and that scared him to his core.

The two waited until the nurses at the front desk were looking away, and then took off. Dean kept it under the speed limit, but just barely as they headed back to the apartment.

Sam sat in the front seat of the Impala and tried to figure out what the hell he would tell Jess to convince her to leave town with them without freaking her completely out. He wasn't coming up with much, and panic was twisting his chest into knots.

As they hit a red light that Dean was sorely tempted to run, Sam quietly said, "She's never going to be safe, Dean. We can't- we can't run forever."

Dean rapped his knuckles on the steering wheel impatiently. "We'll take her to Bobby's. She'll be safe in the panic room. And we'll go from there."

Sam's brow furled and he finally looked at his brother. "Bobby has a panic room?"

God damn crap on a cracker. Dean ran a hand down his face. He was going to make a list of what they did and didn't know in 2005. First thing, soon as they were at Bobby's. That's what he was gonna do. Make a god damn list.

Instead, he forced a smirk onto his face and answered cockily, "Yeah, Sammy, Bobby has a panic room. See what happens when you run off to get an education? You miss learning the good stuff."

"Jerk," Sam said on impulse, rolling his eyes. "And it's Sam."

"Right. Sam." Dean nodded. The light turned green and he hit the gas. "Bitch."

-o-o-o-

Jess took it pretty well. At least, as well as a civilian with no clue as to what was going on could take her boyfriend coming home in a half panic, packing their bags, and insisting they had to leave. The usual questions came up: *Does this have something to do with your father? Your brother? Sam, what is going on? What aren't you telling me?*

For Sam's part, it was clear he didn't know what to tell her, so he didn't tell her anything. He said they were in danger, that they needed to leave, and he'd explain on the way.

All in all, they were in and out in under forty-five minutes. Dean kept guard at the front door (*"Is that- is that a **shotgun**? Sam, why does your brother have a gun!")* and escorted the two with their bags back to the Impala. Nothing came out of the shadows after them. He kept a careful eye on the rear view mirror for the first three hours of their drive.

Either Azazel had gotten slow, or he was waiting this out to see what Sam's play would be.

The younger Winchester sat in the front seat, a flask of holy water in the side door and a sawed-off under his feet. Despite the urge to keep it in his lap, ready at a moment's notice, there was no need to freak Jess out more by calling attention to it.

Jess was in the backseat, body language screaming 'freaked out' but facial expression surprisingly controlled. Her eyes kept darting between her boyfriend, his legs that were stretched out over a *gun* (yes, she had noticed that little fun fact, *thank you very much*), and his brother.

She knew Sam had issues with his family, especially the family business. She had always thought he had a controlling father, possibly abusive, who couldn't let his son live his own life. Privately, she'd been proud of him for getting away from that, even if she hadn't known him back when he'd made that choice. Now, staring at the duel hardened expressions of both brothers and the freaking *guns* within reach of both, she was wondering just how off base she'd been.

Sam had come home in a surprisingly somber variety of panic and Dean had been on them the entire time like a professional bodyguard.

Just what the hell was his family business?

“Sam,” she began softly, worriedly. She glanced at Dean – the wild card in all of this. “I think you need to explain everything to me. Right now.”

Her boyfriend looked over his shoulder at her. He looked wrecked. She knew this man – she *loved* this man. And whatever was happening was hurting him. But telling her was hurting him more.

“Jess, I- I can’t,” he said, keeping her gaze. His brown eyes were wide, begging her to believe him. To forgive him.

“Sam.”

Dean’s voice called both their attentions. There was a silent conversation there Jess didn’t understand, try as she might. But Sam obviously spoke the language.

“Dean, no.” He shook his head and leaned towards his brother, lowering his voice as if she *wasn’t* less than a foot away and hearing every word. “Are you kidding me? Family rule number one: we do what we do and we shut up about it!”

Oh yeah. This was boding *so well*.

“What are you going to do?” Dean asked mockingly. “You going to lock her in the panic room without an explanation? Sammy, it’s in the basement. It looks like a friggin’ war bunker out of a horror movie. She’s going to think we’re serial killers.”

And there it was. She had been trying really, *really* hard to stay away from that particular train of thought. Not that Dean, with his scary glares, militaristic guarding, and fucking shotgun, had been much help in that department.

“I am right here, you know!” she practically yelled. And if her voice went a few octaves higher than she intended and possibly edged towards the screechy levels of hysteria, well, they could both just fuck off about it.

“Jess.” He was looking at her again, puppy eyes ranked up to full blown ten.

“A demon’s coming for you.”

“Dean!”

“It’s after you to get to Sam.”

“Excuse me?”

Her boyfriend looked ready to punch his brother, who gave him a quick ‘tough luck’ glare. “You can’t hide it forever, Sam. Eventually you get to the point where the ‘truth is out there’ spiel is the only option left.”

Sam gritted his teeth. “We weren’t there yet.”

The leather of the steering wheel creaked under Dean’s knuckles. He didn’t look at his brother again, instead checking the rearview mirror before re-focusing on the road. “Yeah, well, we will be soon enough.”

Sam glanced in the side mirror, but didn’t see anything behind them. Not even distant headlights of another car on the road. His finger itched for the shotgun on the floor, but he resisted. It would do more harm than good.

“Somebody want to fill me in?” Jess was practically shaking in the back seat, but it wasn’t from fear. “A *demon*? Please tell me that’s some screwed up metaphor for something.”

Sam let out a heartbreaking sigh and rubbed his forehead. “It isn’t.” He said it with so much defeat in his voice, Jess had half a mind to believe him on the spot.

“Okay,” she worked through slowly, trying to reason out how else the word ‘demon’ could apply. “Is this, like- Is this some sort of….criminal? Like a hitman? Sam, is your family- are you part of the mafia?”

She’d heard of stranger things, and ‘the Demon’ was something she could see the mob naming one of their boogiemen. Of course, she wasn’t well-read on the subject outside of the occasional movie night, so 1950’s New York was pretty much all that came to mind. Try as she might, Jess couldn’t picture Sam coming from that sort of environment.

Maybe an ex-con? Or a serial killer. Maybe Sam’s family had been put into Witness Protection. His mom had died when he was a baby. Maybe she’d been murdered and his dad and brother had testified? It would explain the current situation, but not so much his hatred of the family business.

A bark of laughter from Dean and a silencing glare from Sam ended her wild speculation.

“We’re not in the mafia, Jess.”

“We’re hunters.” Her boyfriend looked once more ready to strangle his brother, who shrugged. “We chase down supernatural badasses that kill humans.”

Silence reigned in the Impala. Jess was staring at Dean. Dean was staring at the open road. Sam was trying to disappear into his seat. She had no idea how to respond.

“Sam?” The whisper was quiet. Questioning. Praying. He flinched, but ultimately gave a defeated sigh.

“It’s true.”

“But…” She gripped the back of his seat. “That- That stuff isn’t real. Sam, you have to know that stuff isn’t real.”

Suddenly the conversation they’d had a few nights ago about Halloween took on an entirely new perspective.

Sam sunk into his seat and closed his eyes. He wondered miserably if this was the last time he’d talk to Jess as the man she loved, and not the psychotic mental patient with severe psychosis who she had run away from, screaming.

“Sam, you got your ID on you?”

The question, such a non-sequitur to the current tension in the car, startled him out of his misery. “What?”

“An ID. Do you have one on you?”

Sam crinkled his nose in confusion. Dean would have called him out on the bitchface in any other situation. “Yeah. Why?”

The impala jerked to the left as Dean hit the brakes, pulling off the highway to make a sharp turn down a dirt side road. Sam grabbed at the dash to steady himself. Behind him, Jess’s fingers dug into the edges of his seat.

“Dean?”

His brother didn’t answer, just continued down the dirt road through

fields and farmland. They passed a picturesque farmhouse, white curtains framing every window, backlit with warm yellow light. They drove for another ten minutes, with Jess in the backseat praying she wasn't about to find out her boyfriend was a reluctant serial killer, egged on by the anti-religious delusions of his brother. Or any variation of that nightmare.

Dean stopped the car as they came to an intersection of another road. He climbed out and headed for the trunk. Jess didn't dare leave the safety of the backseat. Sam tried to send her a reassuring look (it really didn't work) before climbing out of the Impala after his brother.

"Dean, what are we doing here?"

He caught the spray paint when it was thrown at him. Dean shut the trunk, shaking a can of his own as he rounded the back of the car. In his other hand was a cigar box.

"We're gonna summon a crossroads demon."

Chapter 5: Season 1: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: The boys are summoning demons, Bobby is being awesome, and Lucifer is having tea.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 4

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam was left speechless as Dean walked past him to the center of the intersection. His brother set down the cigar box and began painting the same large, five-pointed star and symbols as he had only hours ago in the woods outside Palo Alto.

"We're- We're going to *what?*" Sam followed, grabbing him by the arm and hauling him up when he didn't answer. "What the hell, Dean?"

"You know another way to prove it to her, Sammy?" He gestured to the car, where Jess was slowly, warily climbing out. "A crossroads demon is the easiest to summon."

And possibly the stupidest, but you couldn't win 'em all, right?

Jess came to the edge of the nearest star point, staring down at it worriedly. Absently, she crossed her arms, rubbing her bare skin and trying to ignore the way her hands shook. If anyone asked, she would have said it was because of the cold.

Sam went through several different responses, throwing them all out when he couldn't seem to form the words correctly. Finally, he threw his arms out to his sides. "Are you insane?"

His brother didn't bother answering him. He just kept painting. Sam ran his free hand through his hair, tugging at the roots fiercely. Here they were, out in the middle of nowhere, about to summon a demon to show his girlfriend – the woman he wanted to marry – that monsters were real. How had this gone downhill so fast?

“How do you even know how to summon one, man?”

Dean finally stopped what he was doing and straightened up with a look that said he was approaching his own limit of crap he could handle in one day. “Come off it, Sammy- *Sam*. You were gone for four years. Well, I learned shit too. Now will you paint the damn circle?”

The younger Winchester dropped his gaze. His brother bent back over, finishing off the tail end of a symbol. Sam glanced at Jess, who was staring at him, pleading with him to see how crazy this was. He looked away. She hesitantly retreated to the car.

Maybe this was the easiest way to prove they weren’t crazy. But he’d wanted to keep all of this from her, and now he was going to put her right in front of it. Put a demon in front of her. A being of pure evil – a thing that had vowed to kill her – and they were going to summon one. Just to prove a point. This was crazy.

Sam glanced at his brother. Dean was right: he had been gone for four years. And he’d gotten rusty. His best friend had been possessed right under his nose, and he hadn’t noticed. Hadn’t even suspected. And what Brady had said. Sam took a shaky breath.

The way he had described it…

It was just like his dreams. *Just* like them. He’d been having those dreams for days. Dreams of Jess, on the ceiling. Of… Of exactly what Brady had described. Said he would do to her. And he’d *ignored* them. If it wasn’t for Dean, he would have *let* his best friend murder the love of his life.

He felt sick.

Not just rusty. Downright pathetic. Dad would beat the crap out of him if he could see him now.

But Dean… Dean knew what he was doing. Clearly, he and dad had been dealing with demons lately. He knew what was going on. He knew what to do.

Sam repeated it to himself like a mantra as he bent down and started to draw a circle to complete the pentagram.

When they finished the devils trap, Sam grabbed the holy water and his wallet out of the car, glancing hesitantly at Jess. She’d dug a

jacket out of her hastily packed go-bag and wrapped herself in it like a security blanket. Right now, the car and that jacket were her comfort zone. They were the only sense of safety, however false, that she had out there in the middle of nowhere, watching her boyfriend and his brother paint occult symbols in the dirt.

Dean was digging a hole in the center of the pentagram when Sam jogged back over to him. He held out the cigar box, lifting the lid for Sam to slide his California issued license into. The older hunter shut the box pretty quickly, but not before his brother caught sight of dirt, some small dried flowers, and what he was pretty sure was an animal bone.

Wonderful. At least Jess hadn't seen the contents. That wouldn't freak her out *at all*.

Dean placed the box into the small hole and quickly covered it back up, burying any evidence that it was there.

"Okay," he muttered, retreating out of the circle with Sam. The two brothers walked back over to the Impala, where Dean dug into his front pocket and pulled out two necklaces. Small, coin-like charms dangled from the black cord.

"Put these on." He handed one to each of them. Sam did so immediately, without question, while Jess ran her thumb over the little sun symbol raised out of cheap metal. It looked like some two-cent Hollywood prop or costume jewelry you might find at a street fair.

No way was she feeding Dean's delusions.

"Jess." Sam nudged gently, taking the charm from her and sliding it over her head. "Trust me, okay?"

She really, really wanted to. But she wasn't crazy.

Dean was watching the center of the intersection with a hard, waiting stare. Sam adopted a similar stance and Jess, with no other option and an increasing sense of dread, turned her gaze to it as well.

When a woman in red appeared out of nowhere, Jess reeled. Sam was immediately there, in front of her, shielding her, wrapping his presence around her like a blanket without ever touching her. She gripped his arm and knew she was leaving bruises with her fingertips.

Her brain short-circuited. The woman – a brunette with perfectly curled hair, done up to the nines in a deep red cocktail dress that fit all her curves sinfully well – must have come out of the fields. Only, it wasn't like they were surrounded by fucking corn. It was all low-laying crop that someone her size, petite as she was, would have had to lie down in. And neither her dress nor her smooth, dark skin had a fleck of dirt present.

Jess couldn't look away. She'd blinked once and the woman had appeared. What would happen if she did it again? Her grip tightened around Sam's bicep and he reached back with his other hand to grip hers. She clung to it and every reassuring squeeze he sent her way like a lifeline.

Was she losing it? Had they somehow drugged her and this was all a hallucination? Sam wouldn't do that to her. Hypnosis, maybe? That would explain the woman coming out of nowhere. Maybe Dean did it with the coin necklace. Like those old time cartoons, swinging pendulum crap and all that.

Yeah, that's a lot closer to the 'sane' end of the spectrum than a demon. Let's go with that.

The woman in the red dress made a 'tsk' sound with her tongue, grinning like the cat that caught the canary. She clasped her hands in front of her, swaying sensually and oozing sex appeal. "Sam Winchester."

The woman's eyes were locked on her boyfriend and Jess finally had to look away or risk insanity. Her eyes. Her eyes were glowing *red*. Hypnosis didn't include hallucination.

If this was some sort of bad trip, she wanted it to end *right now*.

The woman walked towards them. Jess whimpered and Sam stepped fully in front of her.

Dean cocked his shotgun and the woman suddenly stopped, red eyes widening. "What the hell is this?"

Jess, unable to ignore this horrible delusion, looked back up. The woman was frowning at her feet, set right at the edge of the circle of paint. Her red gaze suddenly vanished, leaving dark brown pupils glaring at the trio with a murderous intent Jess had never seen in another human being. She didn't move any closer.

"Insurance." It was Dean who answered, unfazed. He took a step forward and threw something at the woman in red. She screamed as steam rose from her skin and she stumbled back, away from the spray of water.

Jess looked down at the metal canister in Dean's hand. Sam held an identical container.

The woman hissed and bared her teeth like a wild animal. Her skin was red and blisters were forming, as if the water had been boiling. Jess looked at the uncapped canister again. No steam rose from the metal opening. She looked back at the poor woman's ruined face and shuddered at the inhuman rage there.

Demon was sounding more and more probable.

"You summoned *me!*" she screeched, fisting her hands at her sides and stomping a high-heeled foot. Jess wondered if they'd broken some unspoken rule about summoning things. It certainly sounded like they had.

"Yup," Dean answered. He gave a grin that had no humor in it, and Jess wondered what had happened to the man who had obnoxiously commented on her Smurf sleepwear. "And now we're gonna send you back to hell."

He began to speak, the words foreign but vaguely familiar. Jess's mind involuntarily supplied scenes from all those horror movies about possession and hauntings and demons that she'd watched as a teen. She'd loved them – loved scaring herself and curling up next to a friend or a boy or burrowing under blankets to peak through slatted fingers. She hadn't seen one in a while now – not since she'd met a boy who hated Halloween and monster movies with the kind of humorless self-deprecation of one who'd been personally offended by it.

She could kind of understand why now.

The woman screamed and wreathed and clutched at her choking throat. She fell to her knees, heaving up black, billowing smoke that defied gravity. It moved – *slithered* – as if alive. It writhed and wretched as it soaked into the ground. Soon enough, there was nothing left but the unmoving body of a woman in the center of a crossroads and a pagan circle.

Jess was trembling by the time Sam turned around and gathered her

into his arms.

-o-o-o-

Overall, Dean thought Sam's girlfriend handled it like a champ. There was some shaking, and some denial, and she was probably a couple shades whiter than was healthy. But there was no screaming or wailing, no tears, and no running for her life or calling the cops. After dropping the still alive woman off at the farmhouse (and luckily Jess was too out of it to complain about the game of ding-dong-ditch-the-unconscious-woman-on-your-porch), she sat silently in the backseat as they continued on towards Bobby.

At least the woman had lived. Dean didn't really want to find out how well Jess took burying a body in the middle of nowhere on top of everything else.

Sam tried to climb into the back seat with her, probably intent to comfort her with his puppy-dog eyes and Sasquatch hugs. But she shook her head and closed the car door. His brother wrestled the hurt look quickly off his face and climbed into the front seat. Dean didn't say a word.

An hour into the drive, Jess released a shaky breath (the first sound she'd made since, well, let's call it the *incident)* and asked, "That….wasn't a bad acid trip or something. Was it."

It hadn't been a question, but Sam quietly answered anyway, "No. It wasn't."

She took in a deep breath. Dean met her eyes briefly in the rear view mirror. They steeled as she let the air slowly back out through pursed lips. "Okay."

"Okay?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

She nodded and turned away, looking out the window. "Okay."

"Huh." Dean glanced at Sam, who gave a helpless little shrug before turning partially around in his seat to look at her. Dean looked over at the movement and frowned. "Damn it, Sammy. Seatbelt."

His brother ignored him. "Are you okay?"

Jess met his eyes, and he could see she was still shaken (who wouldn't be) but she gave a pretty firm nod. When she spoke, her voice was

quiet but steady. “Put your seatbelt on.”

He stared at her for a minute longer before he shared a small, sad smile. He settled back in his seat and did as she asked.

-o-o-o-

Two hours out of Sioux Falls, the sun started to rise once more and Dean decided it was safe to call Bobby to give him some heads up they were coming.

“This better be life or death, otherwise yer dead.”

Well. Sort of safe.

The gruff voice was so familiar and so damn missed that Dean choked on his own breath, and then his lungs and his tongue and his throat, just for good measure. Tears welled in his eyes before he could stop them and he valiantly blinked them out of existence.

“Uh,” Dean cleared his throat and tried to chuckle, but that, too, got caught. He pushed through it anyway, sort of sobbing out a humorless laugh. Awesome start. “Heya, Bobby.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Dean wasn’t that surprised about it, given the last time he’d seen Bobby in this timeline, but it still hurt like hell. The kid in him wanted to scream at his dead father figure (*Not dead, Dean. Not yet. No, not **ever***) to say something. To prove he was still there and this wasn’t all some cruel dream of a lonely, broken man.

“Dean?” He could hear Bobby’s bed creak as the man sat up. “Dean Winchester. What the hell, boy.”

“Sorry,” he choked out and fought back a second wave of waterworks. Damn it, no chick-flick moments. “I know it’s early.”

“Yer damn right it’s early. What the hell you calling me for at-” there was a pause and more creaking- “seven in the friggin’ morning? Whatever this is couldn’t wait?”

“Not unless you want houseguests still in your PJs,” he joked back, and that’s right – joking made this easier. Made him smile, because it was *so damn good* to hear Bobby’s gruff voice again. Now all he was missing was the trademark ‘idjit.’

“What? Yer coming here?” Bobby was up now and Dean heard him grabbing the shotgun he kept at the foot of the nightstand. “Something on yer tail?”

“Maybe, Bobby. We need you to prep the panic room.”

There was silence on the other line and Dean could picture the old man blinking, stunned, before staring down at his phone like it was the offender.

Finally there was a grunt. “How you know about that?”

“Please, I’ve been all over your house. Like you could keep something that cool a secret.” Dean looked out the driver window, pulling a grimace and hoping like hell the man would take the lie.

The silence was suspicious. The “uh-huh” even more so. But Bobby didn’t press him; just asked when they’d be getting there and who all was ‘they.’ The surprise at Sam being one of the incoming party was only outdone by the presence of his civilian girlfriend.

“Damn, son. What kinda crap did you step in?”

The older Winchester swallowed the lump in his throat by pure force of will. “Oh, you know me, Bobby. Only the best kind.”

There was a huff on the other line. “Idjit.”

There it was. Dean grinned like it was Christmas and if he was blinking back tears again, everyone could shut the hell up. “See you in two hours, Bobby.”

The line disconnecting was his only reply, and it made him grin wider.

-o-o-o-

Jess looked up at the old junkyard house as she closed the door to the Impala. Not that there was much to look at. The brothers were really going all out with this whole ‘let’s make sure very place we go could double as the set of a horror movie.’ At least they’d arrived in daylight.

“So. Who is this guy again?” She glanced to her right, where a giant Rottweiler was chilling on the hood of a blue pick-up turned tow-truck that had seen better days. The dog turned sad, droopy eyes towards them, heaved a sigh, and went back to napping in the sun. *Hell of a*

guard dog, that one, she thought.

Dean was grabbing duffel bags out of the trunk, tossing her and Sam's stuff to his brother. It was the younger of the two who answered, interrupted the first time around with an 'oof' as he caught his go-bag, thrown unnecessarily hard by his dick brother.

"He's… like our uncle. Sort of."

"He's a hunter. One of the best," Dean cut to the chase, shutting the trunk. He gave her a cheeky smile. "Dad used to dump us here as kids when we were too young to fight."

Sam leveled an annoyed look at him, but there was something else in there too: remnants of that stare he'd been giving him since Dean had woken up ten years in the past.

"What? I thought we agreed no pulling punches with her."

"No, *you* agreed. There are other ways to say it without making us sound like…like-"

"Like we had a crap father who raised us as soldiers?"

Yup. There was that look again.

Jess came between them, a hand on either of their shoulders. "Still right here, you know." She patted each of them twice before pushing through the brothers and marching up to Bobby's porch. She shouldered her bag and knocked on the screen door.

Dean raised his eyebrows before turning to his brother. Sam looked equal parts constipated and head over heels in love. Dean smirked. "I like her."

It turned out the old hunter could be surprisingly charming when he wanted to be (when Ellen immediately came to mind, Dean dropped the thought faster than you can say parental sex, because *ew.)* By the time the brothers carried their stuff into the house, double checked the wards, salt lines, and devils traps (God, did Dean love the paranoid old hunter), Bobby had Jess more at ease in his stuffy, dusty, book-lined house than she had been with either of the Winchesters since this whole thing started.

Sam tried not to let that hurt, and Dean tried not to laugh at his brother's award-winning impersonation of a kicked puppy.

They settled in the kitchen, Bobby leaning against the doorframe and the two brothers taking seats at the rickety table next to Jess. She was drinking a beer and digging into a freshly popped bag of popcorn.

"It's nine in the morning, Jess."

"I'm sorry, did you just have your entire world, belief system, and sanity brought into question overnight?"

Sam gave her such a hurt look that she stood up, got a second beer, popped the top on the edge of the counter, and handed it over. Sam accepted it with sagging shoulders. She offered him the open popcorn bag.

Dean was in fucking love. His brother needed to marry this girl *yesterday*.

While the sasquatch munched on some kernels and Dean was digging himself a handful as well, Bobby watched the surreal scene with a mixture of sympathy and exasperation. "If y'all are done gettin' comfy?"

Dean tried to talk through his mouth full of popcorn. Jess made a disgusted sound and Sam elbowed him in the arm. He had the decency to look guilty, close his mouth and resume chewing. Sam took over.

"Thanks for having us, Bobby."

"You wanna give me a little more info on why ya needed me to? Or what's chasing you boys?"

"Boy and girl, actually," Dean corrected as he swallowed heavily, stealing a swig of Sam's beer to wash down the ridiculously sized mouthful. He nodded his head at his annoyed brother and repulsed girlfriend. "Don't think the demons care much about me."

The silent '*yet*' was not so silent, even to an audience that had no idea what was coming.

"Demons?" Bobby had straightened, pushing off the doorframe. "You got demons on yer tail? As in *more than one*?"

He looked between the two brothers, both of whom seemed sheepishly unable to make eye contact. Sam was wrecked, which Bobby supposed was on point. As far as he'd known, the kid had run away to

college and gotten out of the life. If that had changed before all this, he would have heard about it. Which meant whatever shit they were knee-deep in had found him at school.

Dean avoided his gaze for completely different reasons. The old man knew him almost as well as Sammy did. And that didn't bode well for pulling off his whole 'nothing about me is different, nope, I'm not from the future or anything' gig. He'd pretty much blown it by hugging the man too long and too tightly when they'd first entered the house. And he definitely hadn't fled immediately afterward to hide the friggin' waterworks.

Were there allergies in November? There must be. No other reason his eyes kept watering all the damn time.

Bobby's eyes narrowed at them. "Alright. Spill it. Now."

They did. Dean let his brother do most of the talking. Sam seemed a lot less likely to accidentally slip up with information he wasn't supposed to know because he wasn't from the friggin' future. Dean considered that pretty solid reasoning to stay out of the story as much as possible. He added bits here and there, mostly so Bobby wouldn't get suspicious at his silence. Though, from the occasional looks he was getting, it wasn't working.

"Then we headed here," Sam concluded, looking over at Jess, who was hearing some of this for the first time. Her eyes were wide and she'd certainly had an interruption or two of her own when she'd learned that *Brady* had been a demon. Oh, yeah, and that they'd left him alone at the hospital recovering from two years of bodily possession.

Now she reached over and clasped Sam's hand, giving him a shaky smile. She was trying, despite all of it. Sam wanted to give that hand a grateful, loving, needy kiss, but decided to wait till they were alone. Dean had been waggling eyebrows like clockwork every hour since this all started. He really didn't need more fuel.

Bobby's eyes predictably turned to the older Winchester now that Sam had finished the story, including their little the-truth-is-out-there-and-we-can-prove-it stunt. Dean flinched instinctually.

"You summoned a *crossroads demon*?" The outrage in that sentence was worse than a disappointed parent and the kid shied away. "What were you thinking?"

He shrugged, standing up in a defensive push and heading for the fridge to get away from the man he considered more of a father than his own. A man who had, until yesterday, been dead, and was now ramping up for a lecture. It was too much to face without getting both choked up and pissed off and damn it, he was not going to fucking cry in Bobby's kitchen and blow this whole thing before he had fixed any of it.

Grabbing a beer, he spent a ridiculously long minute opening it, wasted a few more seconds taking an extended gulp, then finally turned around to face the music. "We had to prove it to her somehow."

"And summoning a *demon* was the first thing that came to mind, huh?" Bobby looked at the young hunter incredulously. Something wasn't adding up and he was determined to figure out what that was. "Why don't you just invite the damn devil over for tea next time!"

The bottle of beer shattered in Dean's hand, spilling foam and alcohol across the kitchen floor.

"Dean!" Sam was up and at his brother's side in seconds. He swiped a kitchen towel and pressed it into Dean's bleeding hand. The older of the two was ashen white. Bobby didn't miss the shaking in his hands as his brother cleared his palm of glass chunks and Jess fetched paper towels off the counter.

The injured hunter came back from whatever had gripped him, noticing the minor cuts as if for the first time.

"Shit! Sorry. I….Shit," Dean was rambling as he waved his brother off and grabbed the towel for himself, wrapping his hand. Bobby's eyes narrowed at the delay, which seemed dangerously like shock.

Something was up. Bobby had never seen Dean so jittery – so pent up. Boy was wound tighter than a mousetrap, and seemed just as ready to snap on a hair-pin trigger. And breaking a bottle with his bare hand? Bobby's eyes involuntarily glanced at the two remaining drinks on the table. That was one hell of a grip. Or one hell of a jerk reaction.

The question was, what set it off?

Sam crouched on the ground, helping Jess clean up the spilt liquid and glass with paper towels and what kitchen cloths they had at hand. Dean backed out of the way, still a few shades paler than he

should be. He rubbed at his chest with his uninjured hand, watching his brother clean up his most recent shit-show.

"You alright, son?" Bobby asked softly, treading carefully. He had no idea what had triggered him, but Dean was definitely not firing on all cylinders.

The older Winchester gave an absent nod. "Fine. Sorry. I-" He shook his head to clear it. "I haven't slept much the last couple days. I'm just on edge."

It wasn't a lie. He was on day three of no sleep, and while he'd gone on less for longer and in an older body to boot, it wasn't like he'd been in a stable place to begin with these last few days.

Adding Bobby to the mix had been rough enough. Now he couldn't shake the image of Cas's face, horridly contorted by Lucifer's smiling malice.

He wanted to throw up.

Bobby nodded in understanding, but still watched the hunter cautiously. Dean helped finish cleaning up the beer and Sam suggested maybe they call it for now. His brother obviously needed some sleep, and he was fairly certain he owed Jess some alone time and no shortage of overdue answers.

Their host gruffly agreed, saying the panic room was prepped and the couple could have their talk down there. His house was warded seven ways to Sunday, but that was still the safest place they could be.

The two headed downstairs with their bags. Dean collapsed on the achingly familiar couch in the study, towel still wrapped around his hand. Internally, he weighed the option of the bedroom upstairs with its sagging twin mattresses and privacy versus the couch that still bore sharpie stains from one of their stayovers during Sammy's Picasso phase. Ultimately, he chose the couch. He'd deal with the backlash of waking up screaming from a nightmare if it meant he'd be ready to fight should demons figure out where they were.

He chose to ignore the other reason: not wanting to let Bobby out of his sight just yet. He was too tired to beat back the deep ache at the thought of leaving the old hunter, even if it was just to head upstairs.

Bobby settled at his desk with a stack of books on demons. Dean pretended he didn't feel the hunter's eyes on him every few minutes

and instead focused on slowing his breathing. The scent of old spice and the turning of worn pages was a painfully missed lullaby. He prayed to absolutely no one he believed in that he wouldn't dream and fell asleep with his hand spread over his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Panic Room: While it's more likely Bobby built the panic room sometime during the show - mostly likely after the Hell's Gate was open - he never specifies when he built it. Since his wife was possessed/killed by a demon and that's what got him into hunting, I think it's fair to argue he could have built it long before the show started. Paranoid as hunters are, especially about the thing that got them into the business. Since it works perfectly for this story, I'm using that headcannon here :)

Chapter 6: Season 1: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dean gets his dream angel on, Sam's giving everyone all the answers, and Bobby's a bit skeptical.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 5

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

He was dreaming.

He'd had this dream so many times now that it was his first thought to recognize it for what it was. The mountain lake with its autumn leaves drifting across the calm surface. The slight wobble of the collapsible chair as he settled into it. The bobbing lure a few feet into the water. The tap of his boot against the edge of the wooden dock, drumming out the soothing beats of ACDC.

"Hello, Dean."

The hunter looked over and up. The angel was standing next to him, haloed by the afternoon sun as he stared forward, observing the lake with a seriousness that belied the serene view. Dean smiled as the last piece of the dream slid into place.

"Hey, Cas. How's it hanging?"

The angel looked down at him, a small frown forming between his eyes as he considered the question. Dean always loved when he did that. It amused him to no end.

"It is…hanging well."

The hunter snorted, mouth splitting into a wide grin. Castiel tilted his head.

"Nevermind. Inside joke."

Blue eyes regarded him profound severity. "We are not inside."

This time Dean rolled his eyes and looked back out onto the water.

“Human joke, then.”

“Ah.” Castiel returned his gaze to the water. They settled into silence. The trees rustled with the fall breeze. Cas’s trench coat flapped in time with the wind. Dean’s lure bobbed with a potential catch. He decided he could reel it in in a minute.

“You are injured.”

He looked up in surprise at the angel. “Huh?”

Castiel reached out and took his towel-wrapped hand from where it rested on the arm of the chair. A beer sat inches from his fingers, settled in the koozie drink holder. Dean vaguely remembered cutting himself on the bottle, though this one was intact. Huh.

“It’s nothing,” he dismissed, even as Castiel unwrapped the towel. There wasn’t any blood on the fabric, which Dean found curious. The cuts were fresh: the edges raw. Cas held his palm in both his hands, almost reverently as he stared down at the injury. Dean thought he could feel the angel’s thumbs rub gentle circles over his skin, but Cas’s fingers were not moving.

He looked up at his friend as they sat there, all but holding hands while nothing happened. Distantly, Dean thought he should be weirded out.

“You can’t heal me, can you?” He didn’t know why he asked it. The answer was obvious, laid out before him in the cuts that still marred his skin. Cas would have already healed them if he could. The words were nothing but salt in a painful wound for the angel. But still he said them.

Cas looked at him with such sorrow that he instantly regretted his impulsive, selfish mouth.

“There’s not enough left.” His words were quiet but even. There was nothing behind them, unlike the pain in the wrinkles of his forehead or the apology in his eyes. Merely a fact he couldn’t change.

Dean wasn’t sure what the angel meant, but assumed it was his diminished grace. Metatron had done quite the number on the thing Cas considered his soul.

His stomach twisted unpleasantly. Well, Metatron and Lucifer. “I’m sorry, Cas.”

The angel's piercing eyes come back to him. Storm clouds were moving in from the east, changing the blue sky to grey. The wind picked up, shuffling more dying leaves into the water. He swallowed heavily.

"I couldn't save you. I didn't…" Dean trailed off, looking away as he was unable to say it aloud. *I couldn't stop Lucifer from wearing you to the end of the world. I didn't even try.*

"It was my choice, Dean."

"Yeah, well, it was a stupid choice!" The hunter stood from the chair, towering over his friend, though he was hardly taller. Castiel only watched calmly. The lack of emotion – of any reaction – suddenly irritated him. "What the hell were you thinking, man? Saying yes to the Devil? After everything we went through putting him back in the box the first time?"

Cas didn't answer, just regarded the hunter silently until something drew his attention away. He looked over his shoulder, back towards shore.

"Damn it, Cas, don't you dare fly off on me!"

Castiel turned back to him, eyes lit and serious. The angel held out two fingers pressed familiarly together. "You need to wake up now, Dean."

Those fingers touched his forehead and, for a second, Dean wondered what would happen to the fish still caught on his line.

-o-o-o-

Dean shot off the couch with a gun in his uninjured hand and a blanket in the other. It took him a minute to orient himself, swinging the weapon in a half circle as he took in the room and all potential threats.

"Whoa, Dean, put the gun down, son. It's just us." It was Bobby, arms raised and to Dean's right, by his desk. Battle-hardened eyes accepted him as a non-threat and swung around to the other two occupants of the room, standing by the door to the hall. Sam pushed Jess behind him, keeping both his hands clearly visible.

The hardened hunter almost collapsed as his body released the tension and adrenaline it had stockpiled. Dean lowered the gun. The room

let out a collective breath as the others dropped their arms. Jess stepped out from behind Sam.

"Sorry," he mumbled, tucking the gun into his jeans. He looked down at the blanket in his hand, wondering how it had gotten there, before chucking it onto the couch.

"Are you-" His brother took an aborted step towards him, awkwardly trying to express his concern without actually showing any of it, in case it drove Dean further away. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," the older Winchester answered automatically, passing a hand through his hair as he looked around the room, at his younger brother and his (not) dead girlfriend, at his (not) dead father figure. Still in 2005. So, not a crazy dream after all.

Speaking of crazy dreams. His eyes landed back on the couch. That had been an odd one. He had never dreamt of Cas before – well, he *had*, obviously, but his mind had never been the one supplying the angel. It had always been the real Cas. Dean had never come up with the winged dick all on his own before. At least, not in that dream, with the lake and dock and the fish he never got to reel in. Nightmares were another story, and one he was steadfastly not going to think about.

But his mind had definitely been responsible for his feathered friend this time. Had to be, because Cas was gone. Or, well, not gone. But not here, in this timeline, aware of who Dean Winchester was and inclined to visit his dreams for some chitchat. And even if he did for some odd reason, this-time Castiel wouldn't be the same – wouldn't even know him. And he definitely wouldn't have known about Lucifer.

No, this had to be a product of his strained mental state. Dream-Cas hadn't even been Ten-Years-From-Now Cas. That one understood pop culture references (sort of) and got most of Dean's idioms (even if he was terrible at using them himself) and couldn't fly away from conversations he didn't want to have anymore. No, dream-Cas had been more like...Apocalypse Cas. Team-Free-Will era: pre-God, pre-purgatory and pre-Sam's-scarred-mind.

In some twisted way, it made sense that he'd conjured up that version. That had been his best friend, and those had been the high times of their friendship. Before so much crap and pain and lies had weighed them down until they barely knew each other anymore and

all that was left was guilt and loyalty leftover from better versions of themselves.

Dean shook his head. They didn't have time for this head-shrink crap. They had more important things than analyzing a crumbling relationship that didn't even exist anymore outside of a dream.

He gave the couch one last fierce look before he faced his family. All of who were sporting questioning expressions of their own.

"Sorry," he said automatically. "Odd dream."

"What kind of dream?" Sammy asked, a little too quickly and a lot too forwardly. Dean gave him a funny look.

Oh, you know, Sammy. Just the Touched By An Angel kind. Only you don't know angels exist and this one isn't supposed to be in my head yet.

"Just a dream," he answered instead, eyeing his brother warily. When Sam looked like he was about to press for more, Dean added with a shrug, "I was fishing. Off a dock on some mountain lake."

Sam's brow creased in confusion, then disappointment. "Oh."

"Yeah, 'Oh.'" Dean mimicked with confusion all his own. What the hell had the kid been hoping he was dreaming about?

"Well, if we're done sharing?" Bobby muttered, uncrossing his arms. "Can we get back to the demon crisis, ya idjits?"

They gathered around the desk where the old hunter had laid out several of his best demon guide books, all open to various traps and spells and exorcisms.

"Look, I spent the last six hours-" *Six hours?* Dean checked the clock shoved haphazardly between books on the shelf behind Bobby's desk. *Why the hell didn't anyone wake me up?* "-checking for demonic omens all around the University and Palo Alto for the last week. I got nothing."

"Demonic omens?" Sam asked, leaning over to scan one of the books.

"Crop death, animal mutilations, freak lighting storms. The signs vary, but they're all pretty easy to spot when they happen. Bunch of cows gutted in a field tends to make the evening news."

Jess looked fairly sick and Sam grimaced.

“But there was none of that near Stanford?” Sam asked, moving over to the large map of the California bay area Bobby had spread out.

“Not a lick anywhere on the map,” he answered with a huff. “If something was supposed to go down, it sure as hell wasn’t coming gift-wrapped.”

“What does that even mean?” the younger Winchester asked, straightening up. “Brady said they had plans for me. I’m assuming ‘*they*’ are demons higher up the food chain?”

Bobby gave a half shrug. “Sure, sounds ‘bout right. But I’m telling you, bigger fish would have left a calling card of some sort.” He waved his hands towards the map. “We got nothing.”

“Maybe…” Jess’s softer voice broke the silence in the room. She looked hopefully at Sam. “Maybe he was lying?”

He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her into his chest. He kissed the top of her forehead. “I don’t think that’s a risk we can take, Jess.”

She returned the hug for a moment, savoring his arms around her and letting herself have a second of codependent comfort before pulling away. Jess was a strikingly independent woman, one of the things she knew Sam loved about her and something she sure as hell loved about herself. Though this had shaken her to her core and she was definitely not okay in any definition of the word, she wasn’t the type to bury herself in comfort when they had things to face.

“So what’s next?” she asked, steel in her voice and determination in her eyes. Sam wanted to kiss her even more, but held himself back. He glanced over at his brother – a default move anytime he caught himself being too ‘chick-flicky’ with the love of his life. He hated himself for it; screw Dean’s macho insecurities and closet-homophobia.

Despite all that, he still looked fleetingly at his big brother and frowned at what he saw.

“Dean?”

The older hunter looked up from where he was staring at Bobby’s desk. His memory was pretty fuzzy on the whole thing, but he thought there had been signs in Palo Alto the first time around. He was pretty sure Dad had said as much, though he couldn’t recall when or why. But Dean pushed that to the side for now and raised his

eyebrows at his brother in question. He hadn't been paying much attention to whatever was being said. "Huh?"

"You…okay?"

Green eyes squinted under a furled brow and he gave that annoyed pull back of his head he did anytime he didn't get why someone was asking him something. "Yeah, fine. Why?"

Sam lowering his gaze to his brother's chest, where his hand was absently rubbing. Dean followed the pointed look, only to realize what he was doing and pull his arm away.

Huh. He'd been doing that a lot, hadn't he?

"I'm fine," he reassured all three of them yet again. He kept his thoughts away from holes caused by Hell and the slight ache spread across his pectorals like a heat wrap.

Sam opened his mouth, probably to argue some more about his definition of 'fine,' when Rumfeld's fierce barking erupted from outside. Jess jumped and Bobby had a shotgun already in hand. Dean knew better than to ask where the hell it had come from.

There was a knock at the door.

Dean and Sam drew their guns as well, now. All four of the rooms' occupants turned their sights to the front entryway beyond the hall. Jess moved behind the younger Winchester.

"You expecting guests?"

The old hunter shook his head and the group moved together to the front of the house. Sam kept Jess behind him when she refused to go down to the panic room if they weren't all going.

Dean gave Bobby a signaled look, tucking his gun back into his pants as another knock sounded. It was innocent enough – even polite as far as knocks went. But the hunters were too experienced to let their guard down for any reason. Bobby nodded back, shotgun already cocked. He stepped off to the side of the door, ready to fire should anything unfriendly come through. Eyes still locked on Dean, he pointed upwards at the ceiling and swirled his finger in a circle.

The older Winchester nodded in understanding.

Sam maneuvered Jess out of sight from the doorway, standing near her but within eye-line of the porch. He gave a nod to his brother, and Dean opened the door.

It was a young man standing on the other side, fist raised to knock for the third time. His eyes widened in surprise and he gave a little 'Oh!' before taking a step back. His smile was genuine, his dress shirt newly pressed and his tie ever so slightly askew. Absolutely nothing about him screamed evil.

Dean didn't buy it for a second. Rumfeld was still snapping and snarling at the end of his chain.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," the kid began, glancing a little nervously at the Rottweiler only a few feet away. "I'm with the Souix Falls Kingdom Hall, and I was hoping to speak to you today about our Lord and Savior-"

"Yeah, sorry, pal. We ain't the religious type."

"Oh, uh…" the kid's face fell and he looked around awkwardly. "That's- That's okay. Have you ever considered letting the Lord into your life?"

Dean stared at the man with an unwavering glare. "Yup. Didn't work out so well for me."

He blinked, clearly not expecting that. Dean wasn't surprised. Even if he was human, which he seriously doubted, it wasn't exactly a common reply. "I'm sorry to hear that. May I ask what went wrong?"

Sure, pal.

"The world ended. Now, if you don't mind." He made a shooing motion with his hand and the Jehova's Witness, eyes wide, looked back behind him at the way he'd come.

"Oh. Um. Yes, well." He looked down at the book in his hand, then back up to Dean. "If you're sure?"

"Pretty damn."

The kid just nodded and turned to step off the porch. The hunter actually thought he might well and truly leave. But he stopped at the edge, made an aborted movement, and spun back around. Dean's eyes narrowed.

“Are you sure you don’t-“

“Christo.”

The man’s eyes immediately turned black and he sneered, innocent act gone in the blink of those depthless eyes. Dean smirked, pointedly looking up at the devils trap newly painted in a subtle grey on the roof of the porch. Sam and Bobby had obviously made some improvements while Dean had slept. Awesome.

“Well, Sammy. Looks like you get to practice your first exorcism.”

-o-o-o-

They took care of the demon right then and there on the porch. He snarled and bitched and threatened to no avail. Bobby handed Sam a heavy tomb entitled *The Key of Solomon* and the kid performed the Latin exorcism without a hitch. This time, though, they sent the bastard back home with a message: Leave Jess out of this.

The others hadn’t quite known what to make of it when Dean said it aloud, but their agreement was there. They just weren’t sure what ‘this’ was. It was becoming more and more obvious that Dean did, though.

“Time to finish that earlier conversation, boys.” Bobby handed them both beers as he came down the basement stairs. His stony expression and pointed look in Dean’s direction told them he was serious. “I hear of three…maybe four possessions a year. You’ve got two in the span o’ twenty-four hours? What’s going on that you ain’t told me?”

They had relocated to the basement, with Jess tucked in the panic room, Sam sitting on the cot beside her, and Dean in the doorway. Bobby joined them, leaning against the small desk next to the entrance. It was a bit cramped, but they all agreed it was safer this way.

The demons obviously knew where they were now. Dean had no doubt the fake bible thumper had been a scout, seeing if the Winchesters had retreated to Singer’s and fully intending to leave once he had that information. Just hadn’t counted on a devil’s trap sticking him to the porch with no way out. At least with him kicking and screaming his way back downstairs, it would take longer for him to report to his superiors. They had a little time, but not much. Shit was going to go down, and it was probably going down soon.

Sam looked to Dean, expecting him to come clean. Dean knew the kid had no idea what he had to come clean about. Didn't matter anyway. He had no intention of telling the truth.

Problem was, he hadn't figured out what he *was* going to tell them.

The silence stretched on in the iron room as Dean wracked his brain for something plausible that would explain how he had known Brady was a demon, that Bobby had a panic room, and all the other shit he had no reasonable explanation for knowing. He couldn't keep dodging the question for much longer – he could tell from the looks his brother and Bobby were giving him.

But he needed time to think. A half-assed lie now would only get him caught sooner rather than later, and if he was going to fix everything he needed *time*.

Dean was an action sorta guy. He worked great under pressure when that pressure was something he could physically fight. Planning wasn't his strong suit, and neither was spinning last minute lies with no room to think them through.

Son of a bitch, what do I say?

"Dean." His brother's voice pulled him out of his desperate, circling thoughts that were going absolutely nowhere. He looked up, meeting Sammy's gaze and blinking in surprise at the expression on his brother's face. Sam's eyes were earnest and understanding and desperately pleading for something that he wasn't sure he understood.

"Have you…" he faltered, then steeled his expression as best as twenty-two-year-old Sam could. "Are you having dreams about things before they happen?"

Dean blinked. What? Why would Sam think-

His brain ground to a halt. Of course Sam would think he was having psychic dreams. Because *Sam was having psychic dreams*. Son of a bitch! How had he forgotten that?

Because it had been so long since he'd had one. Sam had stopped having them after they'd killed Azazel. Sure, he'd kept juicing up his psychic demon-killing abilities, but he never mentioned having dreams again.

It had been years and years ago, but Sam had once told Dean he'd dreamt of Jess's death days before it happened. Which meant he was having psychic dreams – those dreams – right *now*, and he didn't know why. And Sam, being Sam, would find relief in thinking he wasn't alone: that he wasn't the only freak. Dean was his brother by blood – why shouldn't he, too, be channeling the psychic mumbo-jumbo.

Not to mention he'd known about the woman in white after *waking up* in the Impala. Sure, that was because he'd woken up from a ten year time jump, but Sam didn't know that. For all he knew, Dean could have dreamt about Demon Brady and hauled ass back to Stanford cuz of it.

Suddenly the constipated looks his brother kept giving him made a hell of a lot more sense.

The older hunter scrubbed his hand through his hair and raced through the pros and cons of claiming he was dreaming of the future. His list was quickly piling up on the pros, with minor cons he could deal with later. Son of a bitch, this might actually work. Sammy was unknowingly giving him an out. And, even better, it was a plan that meant *not* isolating his little brother as a freak of nature this time around.

That would probably be a plus.

But he couldn't just outright admit it. No version of him, circa 2005 or later, would ever come out of the supernatural closet without some serious denial. So he hunched up his shoulders and tried for his best defensive, bitchy tone. "What? No. I haven't- What are you talking about Sammy?"

Sam swallowed heavily, but his eyes were set with determination. He'd played just enough panic into his words to make his little brother see the dismissal for what it was. "It's okay, Dean. I've been having them too."

Bobby's head whipped around to focus on the younger Winchester. He'd been sitting quiet, watching this all unfold (and giving Sam an odd look or two as the conversation turned back to dreaming once more). But now his attention was fully on the younger of the boys.

"Come again?"

Sam didn't answer the older hunter. His focus was solely on his brother as he stood from the cot. "Dean, what Brady said about-

about hurting Jess." He glanced down at the love of his life, who was watching him with wide, doe eyes. He looked back at his brother. "I've been dreaming about it. For- for weeks. Exactly as he… described."

Jess reached out and grabbed his hand in both of hers. She knew he'd been having nightmares for a while now, but he never told her what they were about. Not that she would have believed him before all of this. (Part of her was still struggling to believe any of this, even now.)

"I thought," Sam trailed off again. "I was too young to remember Mom, but you told me how she died. I thought I was just…getting cold feet or something. That it was just nerves."

It took a minute for Dean to realize what his brother was talking about. Sam had been thinking of proposing before Jess had died. Realization settled in his stomach like lead. It would have been so easy for Sam to write off his dreams as anxiety. His mother had died in a horrible manner, and he was about to ask the love of his life to marry him. To one day become the mother of his children. It was pretty easy to see the connection and sweep it under the rug as his mind's way of visualizing his anxieties.

Dean let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. Damn it. The kid hadn't told him that before.

Bobby was looking between the two of them with disbelief. Dean ran a hand through his hair and blew out a breath. He'd probably stalled enough to be believable.

"Yeah, Sammy." He made sure to put a touch of defeat in his tone. Never surrender without a fight; that was the Dean Winchester way. "I've been seeing shit too."

The sheer relief of '*I'm not alone'* that filled Sammy's face at Dean's confession was almost enough to make him wish he *was* having psychic dreams. If only so the feel-good comfort of offering his brother so much support wasn't tainted by the bittersweet knowledge that he was once again lying his ass off to his family.

Bobby stood to his full height, confronting Dean with his most serious *'no more bullshit'* face. "Let me see if I got this right. You boys-" he glanced at Sam, "- are seeing the future? In yer *dreams*?"

Dean knew it wasn't a lack of belief that Bobby was held up on. Hell, with all the shit he'd scene and company he kept, he knew there were

real psychics and clairvoyants out in the world. He just never thought in a million years that John Winchester's boys would be two of 'em.

"Dean," Sam croaked, interrupting the older hunter before Dean could formulate a believable Dean-2005 response. "Did you….did you dream of Jess, too?"

The older of the two brothers glanced at the woman on the cot beside Sam. She seemed small, now. Fragile, even though he knew she was pretty strong for a civilian. He shook his head. "No. I, uh, just knew Brady was possessed."

"And the woman in white?"

Bobby's head swiveled like a bobble head. "What woman in white?" He sounded about half a step away from beating answers out of the two brothers if they didn't start paying his questions some attention.

Dean gave a shrug. "Yeah, her too. Brady seemed more, you know, pressing." He turned to Bobby, knowing they were in for one heck of an explosion if someone didn't start talking sense. "The hunt I thought Dad was on, in California. It's a woman in white. I… uh….dreamt about it. And Brady."

He was thankful when Sam took the initiative and launched into his own dream experiences, since Dean didn't have much more of a lie ready to spin. Bobby listened as Sam described finding Jess pinned to the ceiling. She looked slightly green around the edges and he glossed over some of the more gruesome details Dean knew about. But the older of the two confirmed it was exactly as Mom had died, and exactly as Brady had described.

Bobby turned expectantly to him, crossing his arms over his chest. Dean shifted under the stare.

"I dreamt the kid was possessed. Was gonna make a move on Sam. Didn't know what," he lied, and winced as he realized how vague and utter crap-tastic this all sounded. "Just knew it was gonna happen soon."

The old man raised an eyebrow at him, suspicion clear in his body language. Bobby knew Dean. And the man he knew would have been damn uncomfortable about having psychic mojo, let alone embracing or *listening* to it.

"And you, what, knew you were psychic? Just like that?"

Dean managed not to flinch, instead clenching his jaw defensively. "It wasn't the first time," he lied through his teeth.

Sam perked up at that, but his brother didn't want to elaborate. If he played it off like it wasn't a story he was keen on retelling, they might drop it. Which would work well for him, as he didn't actually have a story and he definitely didn't want to try telling one.

"It was a couple weeks ago. I thought it was crazy, so I ignored it." He looked away. "Bad idea. People got hurt."

His brother immediately backed down, like he knew the kid would. Sammy knew the guilt Dean carried when civilians ended up with backlash from their jobs. He wouldn't push, especially if he thought that wound was recent.

"This time, it was Sammy," Dean finished, defensively. He shouldn't have to say anymore, Bobby would get the idea. "So yeah, I acted on it."

It seemed to work. The old hunter was still watching him warily, but accepted the information. "Alright," he answered begrudgingly. "So you're both…suddenly psychic. Think we can add that to the bucket of weird we got going on."

"Tell me about it," Dean muttered.

"What do you think it means?" Sam was looking between the two earnestly. Dean kept forgetting how young the kid was. Still so freakin' innocent, despite everything twenty-two years had shown him. But, in comparison to what the next ten years would deliver, this was definitely innocence.

"I haven't got a clue," Bobby supplied, shaking his head. He tore his cap off and ran his hands through his hair a couple times before replacing the trademark hat. "But I think whatever you've stepped into…it's serious crap, boys."

The group fell silent as the weight of events settled heavy in the room. They needed a next step, and they didn't have a lot of time to come up with it. Even with two 'psychics,' they were fighting blind.

And Dean didn't know how much he could risk telling them.

Chapter 7: Season 1: Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Super short chapter this time. Had difficulty cutting up five, six, and seven, so this one ended up a little short. Next one is back to full length!

Chapter Warnings: I...I think Dean may not even be swearing in this. My God, what is the world coming to. Nope, that's it. Skip this chapter, go ahead and just move right on to the next one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 6

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

In the end, they decided to abandon Bobby's place for some time. The hunter was none too happy to be leaving his home behind, even temporarily, but they all agreed that they didn't want to see what an angry demon would do to a house lacking the Winchesters.

So they filled one of his trucks with relevant books, supplies, and as many weapons as he had (which was no small number). Rumfeld climbed into the passenger seat, and Bobby told the boys he'd follow behind them.

The small caravan pulled out just two and a half hours after the possessed church-goer had come to tattletale on them. Forty five minutes of that had been taken up burying the poor guy who played meatsuit to the scout, and arranging Bobby's clunkers atop the freshly dug grave in case anyone stopped by over the next couple days.

Jess had stubbornly helped out, despite Sam's insistence that she should be inside in the panic room and definitely *not* out in the open burying a corpse. Dean was beginning to think she didn't like being locked in their little war-room like a princess in a tower, or something.

The two cars headed south. West was out – that was the way they came, and something about heading back didn't sit well with Sam or Jess. East was towards the Great Lakes. Dean didn't want to box

themselves in along the Canadian border in case Hell came at them hard. Southeast was the older Winchester's first choice – Kentucky was sounding like good pickings and was central enough to host all the directions as backup options. Except the logical route that shied away from the Lakes also took them way too close to Lawrence, Kansas. There was no way in hell Dean was driving anywhere near there with demons on the lookout for them.

So south they went.

They couldn't lie low with any of their friends. It was clear from the demon showing up at Bobby's that Hell was scouting out their acquaintances. Dean remembered Meg doing something similar, if not a hell of a lot more permanent. He hoped she wasn't on the playing field yet, but reminded himself he had a list to make, and she needed to be near the top of it.

Sam made quick calls to the friends they could get a hold of, telling them to go to ground for a few days or be weary of anyone coming by. None were happy to hear that the Winchesters had freaking *demons* on their tail and determined ones at that. But they promised to keep their eyes and ears open and stay safe.

Dean turned west once they hit Omaha, cutting onto Interstate 80 before they ended up in the too-close-to-home parts of Kansas. He'd turn south again once they'd cleared Lexington.

He resisted calling Ellen. They hadn't met her yet, so it was likely the demons wouldn't bother her or Jo. Although it still wouldn't hurt to give the Roadhouse a heads-up. Maybe he could convince Bobby to call them, so it wasn't suspicious coming from him. They needed to send some hunters to Jericho, too. The older hunter could probably wrangle someone up for that.

Bobby would need an anti-possession charm, too. They should have gotten him one before they got in separate cars. Really, they were going to have to visit a tattoo place sooner rather than later.

They drove until they were two states over and starving. The diner they stopped at specialized in grease and cold French fries, but it was the only place open, so they didn't complain. Well, Dean did, but the others just shoveled food while they argued about where to go next.

After some back and forth, they settled on Rufus' cabin. Dean had to pretend he didn't know what Bobby was talking about or who Rufus was. He only slipped up twice, but totally covered it like a pro. No

suspicions there, whatsoever. (And *no, Sammy, I haven't dreamt this already, now drop it!*)

The old hunter said the cabin was secluded, heavily protected, and unknown by almost anyone other than him and a handful of hunters. Even if demons did somehow get their claws into those guys, none of them would connect Rufus with the Winchesters. Hell, they'd hardly connect Rufus with Bobby anymore, since the two had a falling out some time ago (which Dean reminded himself he totally didn't know about because *he didn't know the man yet.*)

Bobby begrudgingly called the grumpy jackass as they headed out to the car. He promised a couple bottles of Johny Walker Blue in exchange for use of the cabin for a few weeks. The caravan turned north and headed for the Canadian border.

-o-o-o-

Jess was just starting to doze off when Sam turned around in the front seat and gently tapped her knee. "Jess, give me your phone."

She mumbled unintelligently as she dug into her pocket and pulled out the small flip device. She handed it over, peering at her boyfriend through exhausted lids. Sam turned the phone over and slid the battery cover and power unit out. She sat up, significantly more awake, as she realized what he was doing.

"They can track it," he answered her unasked question as he pulled out the chip and snapped it in half.

"Oh."

He passed the phone back with an apologetic expression. She took it with numb fingers and he threw the broken sim card out the window. Laying back down, she pressed her forehead to the cold glass. The scenery blurred past with every mile and she thought of nothing in particular.

-o-o-o-

Bobby scoffed when Dean mentioned an anti-possession charm at their next pit stop. He pulled a length of cord from the neckline of his shirt to show a much more complex token then the ones the Winchesters wore. Dean just smirked – should have known.

The older hunter took the, "You're awesome, Bobby," as apology

enough.

-o-o-o-

Montana was beautiful. Jess wondered why she'd never visited before. Possibly because golden wheat fields and flat farmlands were seemingly the only thing to see for three quarters of the state. But as they turned further west and dug into the mountains and forests that made up the western edge, Jess regretted not having made time before.

They stopped for dinner in Missoula. They'd been driving through the day and she was stiff and achy and so damn sick of the car. Those precious two hours they spent in an actual restaurant (that served more than burgers and beer, thank God) would be the last of civilization for some time. When she could drag her feet no longer, they got back in the car and headed for Whitefish.

An hour and a half later, the highway rounded a bend to reveal a large expanse of black in the night. It was a massive lake, nestled between looming peaks to the right and rolling hills to the left. The water was eerily calm as the highway stretched out along the shores. Jess could see silver pinpricks of light reflected in the inky depths. The sky was endless here, stretching into eternity and brimming with more stars than she had ever seen before. They clouded the night with their abundance and Jess realized she was looking at the Milky Way.

She wanted to tell the boys to pull over. Three days ago she would have called it romantic and insisted, teasingly, that her boyfriend hold her while they lay on the hood of the classic old car beneath the starry sky. Sam would press his cheek to her hair and whisper he loved her. She'd punch him in the arm and say he'd better. They'd lazily kiss as satellites passed above and the lapping of the lake sung to them.

But that was then, and today was not the same life. So she didn't say anything at all and they drove on.

The town of Whitefish, Montana was an hour past the big lake, nestled at the foot of heavy mountains. Signs pointed towards another lake, apparently the community's namesake and the center of the town, but they sped past without turning. This friend of Bobby's was a bit of a recluse, or so the old hunter had told them. His cabin was another forty-five minutes into the countryside, down dirt roads and dark woods.

‘Secluded’ was turning out to be an understatement.

-o-o-o-

When they finally arrived at the cabin, it was all any of them could do just to get their stuff through the door and collapse on whatever available bedding there was. Rumfeld tried his darnedest to claim one of the beds, but Bobby put an end to that pretty quickly.

Dean volunteered for floor duty, snagging one of the sleeping bags Rufus kept stashed in the minimal storage space available in the cabin. He was so tired he missed Bobby’s suspicious glare as he navigated the small lodge like he’d been there before.

Jess could care less where she slept, just as long as it wasn’t that damn car. Sam still gave her the bed (insisted) and folded himself up on an ugly, broken down couch.

Bobby shoved Rumfeld off the only other cot available and settled down himself. They weren’t a talkative group that night, and most of them were out within minutes.

-o-o-o-

Elsewhere, where the air was heavy with the scent of burning, of acid and sulfur and all the horrors of the earth, a meeting was just beginning. It was an unprecedented gathering; the forces of Hell rarely got together due to the fact that objectives were hard to accomplish when the players wanted to slit each other’s throats.

This time it was different. This time the ruling heads of Hell had a common goal that outweighed petty power struggles.

There was a middle-aged man, hair thinning and skin just beginning to loosen and wrinkle in age. He looked like he should be working a farm in his plaid flannel and worn jeans. Possibly with two kids, a faithful but unhappy wife, and a white picket fence that had become more off-white after so many years without care.

There was a young girl, offset and out of place in such a dark and bleeding space. She wasn’t even a tweener yet, in a pretty yellow dress with a big white bow in the back. Her presence was all wrong, but if someone had asked about it, they would assume it was the atmosphere of Hell throwing such disdain and wickedness into what should be an innocent countenance.

The last of the three was a dapper fellow. It was an expensive suit he wore in all black. Even the finely pressed dress shirt was black. The only splash of color, if it could be called that, was a tie so dark blue it was nearly black itself. It was perfectly knotted.

He looked positively miserable, swirling a glass of scotch in his hand with a chunk of ice that never melted, despite the awful heat around them.

"The Winchesters have gone off grid," the farmer was saying to the little girl. She had a pretty little frown on her small face. "We're searching for them, but they're hunters. They know how to hide."

"Then flush them out," the child ordered, crossing her arms over her flat chest. "They have friends, don't they?"

The farmer gave a shrug. "Also gone to ground. Looks like the boys warned 'em we were coming."

The man all in black looked like he wanted to be anywhere else, for reasons of sheer boredom as he stared down at his drink with idle interest. The other two talked around him.

"This wouldn't have happened if your boy hadn't given himself away, Azazel."

"And it's the reason he's on the rack, right now." The ever-present screams of Hell could easily be heard in their meeting spot. Those wails could be heard all throughout Hell; they were not escapable. Just another part of home sweet home. "Though, he is rather insistent Dean knew beforehand."

"Impossible," the girl dismissed flippantly.

Azazel shrugged. The dapper fellow swirled his glass miserably before taking a long sip. The ice clinked against the glass.

"Not entirely impossible," he finally spoke, voice lilting with a British accent. "It lines up with what my girl had to say. Dean Winchester called her up like some two-cent whore." He sounded personally insulted. "Sent her packing and didn't even pay. It's bad form."

"Forget bad form, Crowley," the girl snapped, tapping her shiny white dress shoe against the hard, scorched earth that made up the room they stood in. "He shouldn't have any form at all. We spent two decades observing that waste of a meatsuit. He's competent as a

hunter, fine, but he's a hothead. Not exactly the brains of the operation."

The little girl rolled her eyes petulantly and concluded, "We know how to deal with him."

"Clearly not." In contradiction to his words, Crowley sounded like he couldn't care one way or another.

The girl, on the edge of a temper tantrum as her pretty face turned red and puffed like an offended peacock, reigned herself in with practiced control. "Forget Dean Winchester. We need to get back on track with Sam. Move up the schedule if we have to."

"I've still got a few tricks when it comes to the Winchesters," the farmer said. His eyes flashed a pale yellow that did horrible things to the face he wore. "My children will get to them one way or another."

The girl nodded, satisfied. "Tell that daughter of yours that I want John Winchester. I don't care how she finds him. We'll use him to get Sam on course if we have to." She scrunched up her nose in distaste. "I'd rather fry his bitch, but daddy will do."

Azazel frowned, concern ill-fitting in his yellow pupils. "We may be passed that, Lilith. Even if we do kill the girl, Sam may not succumb to revenge. With how much Dean has interfered already, we may not be able to get him on that path. Besides, the boy has never been close to his father – that move has even less chance of success."

"No," she insisted, stomping her foot. "That brainless idiot had a fluke moment of intelligence. Your man is the one that screwed up, Azazel. The plan is fine."

"There is another explanation," the British one spoke up again. He was staring down at the circling cube of ice. The others turned to him: the farmer in vague interest, the little girl in clear disdain. "Upstairs may have caught wind of what we're doing."

He paused for a dramatic moment, raising his eyebrows at his companions. "And I mean the attic, boys and girls."

Lilith frowned fiercely. "If that's true, then we're screwed."

"We've been watching the gate," Azazel argued. "There's been no movement. There hasn't been any in centuries."

Crowley shrugged. “I’m only saying it would explain why Dean is suddenly two steps ahead of us.”

The little girl’s eyes narrowed. “Then we should move. If angels are getting involved, we move up the timetable. We take John Winchester now.”

The dapper man raised a cynical eyebrow. “Isn’t that showing our hand a bit early, love?”

She shook her head, black hair and yellow ribbons tossing side to side. “No. We break him, we break the first seal.”

“*If* he’s the righteous man,” the farmer interrupted. “Which we already know he most likely isn’t.”

“Doesn’t matter. We don’t lose anything trying, and we have one less fly to swat.” The little girl’s eyes gleamed with sinister intent. “The halos keep busy searching Hell for their righteous man, while we figure out how to drag Dean’s ass down here. And if Daddy turns out to be Mr. Righteous, then we kill the hothead and pump Sam up while the halos are busy protecting the rest of the seals.”

Azazel hesitated, calculating their options. He had planned this for far too long to give in to premature fear or rash decisions. “No. I don’t want to take John until we’re sure about the angels. If they invade Hell to save him and he *isn’t* the righteous man, we’ll have half the force of Heaven down here when we do get Dean. We’ll need more time than that to break him.”

Crowley scowled down at his glass. “And if the angels *have* gotten involved?”

The toothy smile the farmer gave stretched his face. “Then we go to plan B.”

Chapter End Notes

> **John Winchester as the Righteous Man:** it was always my interpretation that Hell took John and tried to break him on the off chance he fulfilled the prophecy and broke the first seal. I think they knew he wasn't likely the one they needed, but they weren't taking chances, and getting him out of the way was a plus, either way. Whether he wasn't it because he didn't break or because he wasn't Righteous is a debate for another day ;)

Chapter 8: Season 1: Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: mild violence, demonic possession, blazing guns (and yelling obscenities)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 7

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Jess woke from dreams wrought with red eyes, demons made from writhing smoke, and flames that licked at her from every side. She woke gasping and sweating, immediately sickened by the smell of bacon and the sound of it cooking.

Dean was in the 'other' room (what could be called a second room in a one-room cabin) next to the ancient stove, sipping on a beer and cooking up what meager supplies they'd brought with them from Bobby's. The boys had pretty much dumped the contents of his fridge into a cooler and called it done. Which meant every meal after this one would consist of beer, rot-gut whiskey, and more beer.

And maybe mustard. She was pretty sure she saw Heinz Yellow in there.

Bobby was out like a light on the cot next to her bunk, snoring up all kinds of a racket. Jess wondered if it was his demonic breathing that had inspired her vivid nightmares instead of the events of yesterday. He sure as hell sounded like the devil incarnate.

Sam was sitting upright on the old red thing that passed as a couch only because of how exhausted they'd all been when they'd arrived late last night. He was fiddling with his laptop, but she could tell from across the room that he was frustrated about something.

"Morning, Sunshine." She turned her attention to Dean, who gave her a surprisingly cheerful smile for someone who had spent the night in a dusty sleeping bag on the hard, uneven floor. She groaned, pulling herself out of bed to tromp across the cabin and plop down in the creaky armchair beside the coffee table.

She wasn't a morning person to begin with, and certainly not after the

nightmare of a day, and night, and another day that she had had. At least she wore bitch-face with style. Sam didn't even *try* to say morning to her. Just pushed his mug of coffee her direction, forfeiting the liquid gold for the sake of the group.

Jess curled up into the chair with the acquired cup and pretended the world didn't exist for another eleven minutes while Dean finished making up breakfast.

The older Winchester was, indeed, chipper this morning. He felt great; not only had he not dreamt the night before, but he'd slept well despite dreading the aches he would feel after a night on the hard wood floor. He'd practically sprung up the next morning in all his gorgeous, young glory. Being twenty-six again freaking rocked. And sure, his body had hurt *some* from the unforgiving boards, but nothing compared to the creaks and groans he was used to suffering just climbing out of a *bed* every morning.

Youth was so friggin' wasted on the young.

He cracked the last egg on the wood burning stove (and my god, he forgot how ancient this cabin was) and went about flipping the bacon. Sam was moaning about something, Jess was focused solely on the warmth between her hands, and Bobby was grumbling that they were all too loud as he finally roused.

Dean grinned as he listened to the old hunter gripe, flipping the eggs and dividing the bacon between four plates. He paused, watching the older man as he made his way outside for the facilities. As soon as the door had closed behind him, Dean glanced to Rumfeld with a raised eyebrow. The dog was sitting patiently next to the fridge, inching forward every few seconds, tail twitching at the sudden attention.

The hunter snagged a piece of bacon off of Bobby's plate and snuck it to the dog. Rumfeld snatched it away and took off with his prize, tailing whipping back and forth in victory. Sam let out a surprised yelp as the dog jumped onto the couch with him. His cry turned quickly into disgust as Rumfeld proceeded to slobber all over his half of the furniture.

"Dean!"

The hunter snickered, distributing the eggs and grabbing plates. He handed one to Jess and the other to Sam, ignoring bitchface # 2 (*'Ew, Dean, gross!'*). Grabbing his own sustenance, he started shoveling food into his mouth as obnoxiously as possible, just for added effect.

Bobby came back in, snagging his plate off the counter. He frowned at the single piece of bacon, compared to the others' three, and the one very happy dog eyeing Sam's plate. He decided that was one fight he wouldn't win, so tucked in to his meal in silence.

"What's the plan, boys?" he asked between bites, eyeing the brothers. Jess hadn't touched her food yet, leaving it on the low table in favor of coffee. Sam was glaring at Rumfeld, holding his plate protectively to his chest and insisting '*No*' as if that was going to do a damn thing to deter the dog.

Ha.

"I want to go into town," the younger Winchester said, glancing up from his battle to protect his breakfast. "I want to check for demonic omens, see if we can figure out where the demons are. This place doesn't have internet, Bobby."

The older hunter shrugged at the young hunter's accusatory whining. "Don't think Rufus knows what internet is."

Sam groaned and Rumfeld took the opportunity to steal half his bacon, almost tipping the entire plate and instigating a slapstick struggle on Sam's part to keep from losing the rest of his breakfast to the floor. He glared at the dog who sat, happily chomping. The giant of a man got up off the couch with his surviving meal and moved to lean against the wall instead.

"I'll go with you," Jess spoke up, eyes watching the dog in a detached way that worried Sam a bit. She turned her gaze to him with a light, weary smile. "I could use civilization like I could use a shower."

His answering smile was apologetic and hurting, and she couldn't look at it for long.

Dean finished his breakfast with a loud burp, pushing his plate onto the coffee table. "I'll go with."

Sam raised an eyebrow and he shrugged. "We need a food run. And I can spend whatever time you two need at a bar." He let the patented Dean Winchester smile shine through. "Maybe I can hustle up some pool."

"Dude."

"What?" He matched Sam's bitchface (#7: *'Really, Dean? Really?'*)

with one of his own. "We're low on cash."

"It's not even noon," his brother groused. "No one's going to be playing pool in some dive bar."

"Oh, Sammy." Dean's smile only grew as he stood and stretched. "You don't know my people."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Thank God for that."

Rumfeld chose that moment to make a dash for Jess's still full plate on the table. Bobby gave a holler but he took off with the whole thing, eggs and bacon flopping up and down and everywhere as he ran. Jess cracked a smile and Sam handed the rest of his plate to her.

-o-o-o-

Dean did not hit up the nearest dive bar once they'd gotten into town. After he dropped Sam and Jess off at a local coffee shop to do their tech-geek thing, he headed to a small diner just off the main drag.

He ordered a second helping of breakfast (now more like brunch) and a coffee. He sweet talked a pad of paper and a pen off the haggard waitress, who seemed more generous after a few well-timed compliments and the promise of a good tip.

Now he was staring down at the pad of paper lying on the table and the ballpoint pen in his hand. Where the hell did he even start?

Stalling, he wrote at the top: '*Original Timeline'*. Then Dean sat, staring at the title for a while (long enough to get a refill on his coffee) before he put his pen to the first line.

11/2/2005: Jess death, Stanford.

Guess starting at the beginning was as good a place as any.

-o-o-o-

While Sam immediately got to work on checking for demonic omens (and Jess was still not thinking about what that actually entailed), Jess settled down across from him at small table in the coffee shop and opened up her laptop.

The blinking password field atop her darkened desktop seemed somehow surreal to her. The icons, still open Word Document for her psych final, and saved browser tabs were even more so. This laptop

belonged to a different person: a Jess that existed last week. A college kid that didn't know about the things that went bump in the night. A twenty-one year old woman who wasn't being chased by monsters, whose biggest concern was passing Calc next quarter.

She ran a hand down her face tiredly. Her skin felt tight across her bones and her eyes would not stop aching despite the six hours of sleep she'd managed last night in that rickety bed. She'd pulled her own share of late nights and stressful stretches since she'd started at Stanford, but none of them had left her this bone-weary and tired. Of course, nothing in college had turned her life quite as upside down as finding out the boy sitting across from her hunted monsters.

Jess logged into the school website and pulled up her e-mails. She needed to message her advisor; she was going to miss the start of next quarter for sure. In fact, she was thinking of maybe taking it off entirely to get her head back on straight. That was, of course, if demons weren't still trying to kill her three months from now. God, she couldn't imagine living this way for months. But going to classes after all this...it seemed absurd. It was everything she desperately, desperately wanted – a return to normality, to safety – but somehow now absurd.

It took her a while to word the e-mail correctly and not sound crazy, or desperate, or in need of some serious counselling. Instead, she went with the succinct and simple family emergency that would require at least a month off, maybe more. Her advisor was a pretty damn awesome lady, so she was fairly sure she'd be able to swing her some sort of deal that would keep her on track for her courses.

She answered a few of the e-mails she had, a couple from teachers, one from the volleyball club that reminded her to also tell them she wouldn't be back. It broke her heart to decline a work study she'd worked her ass off to apply to and get, but it couldn't be helped.

Finally, she pulled up her Myspace and Facebook accounts. The latter had only just gone live to non-college students a month ago, so the traffic on it was fairly light compared to her Myspace. Mostly just club events and campus parties. Not that she had a lot to respond to on Myspace, either. She really only had it because all of her friends had bugged her non-stop about it until she'd finally made an account.

Last week she had been trying to convince Sam to join Facebook so she could change her relationship status and show off her cute

boyfriend to the world (the world being all her college friends who already knew they were dating, of course). Now it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Her stomach twisted unpleasantly, threatening to ruin the actually halfway decent breakfast Dean had cooked them. She hadn't expected him to know a spatula from a spoon in the kitchen, but he'd proven a pretty decent chef, much to her surprise (and Sam's: *"Okay, who are you and what have you done with my brother?")*

She shut down the two social media tabs without looking at them again.

A ding from her computer meant she had a new e-mail in her personal account. The only people who e-mailed her there were high school friends and her parents. Who she should probably send an e-mail to concerning the whole 'skipping next quarter and I lost my phone so don't call, my boyfriend totally didn't destroy it so demons couldn't track us or anything and, oh yeah, I'm not even in California right now but I'm absolutely safe and not in any trouble at all'.

Her to-do list sucked.

Sure enough, the unread message was from her mom. She clicked on it, already mentally preparing her reply before she read the first line.

Sam's search on crop death in the greater Iowa area was abruptly interrupted when his girlfriend launched herself from her seat hard enough to knock it over. The look of horror on her face had him by her side before the clatter of the chair hitting the floor silenced the coffee shop.

-o-o-o-

Dean wrote a list.

And then he crumpled that list up, tossed it to the side, and wrote another list. And another. He was on his fourth crumpled up piece of paper when he realized he was going to need more than one list.

There were hunts he needed to recall, witnesses they had to save, information vital to the case they would need, and things he had to remember to avoid. Like getting electrocuted on a rawhead hunt.

There were enemies alive now that they'd killed so many years ago. Weapons and books and information he couldn't recall enough of to

be sure it was reliable. Events were coming that were paramount to the apocalypse but would seem unrelated, and he had to remember it all.

They'd need the colt and the knife. Even if the colt hadn't worked on the devil, it had killed Azazel. So they needed it. It would have to come first, anyway. He had no idea where Ruby had gotten that knife, so he'd have to wait till she showed her ugly mug before he could take it off her. And then kill her well and good before she sunk her claws into Sam.

But before that, he was going to have to take care of Azazel. And Meg. And Lilith. The list was insurmountable, and he had to remind himself several times that they'd done it all before, and over a five year period at that. This didn't have to happen overnight. He had time, and he could do this.

It helped chase the panic away, but did nothing for the heavy knot in his stomach.

He crumpled his fifth paper up and tossed it aside. This wasn't working. There was just too much.

He tore out ten sheets of paper and lined them up in a row. Then, along the bottom of each he drew a line. At the end he wrote "*5/25/2016: Amara fight*" and at the start he rewrote "*11/2/2005: Jess dead*". From there, he filled in the big things he had dates for. Dad's death (10:41 am – he could still hear the doc calling it), Sammy's death and his deal (he'd never forget that date). When his deal came due (possibly harder to forget than the first one). The day Cas pulled him out of hell. The day Sam released Lucifer. The day Sam and Lucifer went into the cage.

He went ahead and filled out the rest of the years too, though he furiously told himself those things wouldn't come to pass – wouldn't matter. But they could still be important: things they'd learned that might help them stop this shit show before it ever got started. People they could go to for help that they hadn't met this time around. Or who hadn't died yet.

Dean was writing down Charlie's name when the waitress came over to refill his coffee yet again. She eyed the papers he was frantically drawing across.

"You a writer, hon?"

He looked up at her with a harried expression, startled by her presence though she'd hardly snuck up on him. "What?"

"You writing a novel?" she repeated, gesturing with the coffee pot at all his little papers and scribbles. She gave him an encouraging, if somewhat pitying smile. "Looks like a depressing one."

Dean looked back down at the papers as she wandered off to see to other customers' needs. Each mark he'd made along the timeline and all the notes at the top were generally death dates. He swallowed tightly at the amount of loss he was looking at in the next few years.

His brain short-circuited for a minute, coming to a full stop.

Writing. Chuck.

He'd forgotten about the damn Prophet of the Lord.

Truthfully, he hadn't thought of the man as the writer in a while, not since discovering he was a hell of a lot more. Fucking bastard. Dean gave the idea of going to God for help all of about three seconds of consideration before shoving the thought and the hope that came with it far, far away. He knew better than to think that asshat of a dad was ever going to step in.

It had taken his own imminent death to even make him consider helping them with Amara. And he still refused to apologize or take any blame for the damn apocalypse – *or anything that had happened after*. No, 'Chuck' wasn't going to help him here.

He was on his own.

The hunter moved on to trying to fill in details. In the lines above the timeline, he listed everything he could remember happening in between major events. He wasn't sure of the order of most of the stuff, but the hardcoded dates along the timeline helped.

He knew Meg went after their friends for the colt. He knew she tried to trap them to get to John Winchester. Both happened before his dad's death, obviously. At least one was after they got the colt from Elkins, though he couldn't remember if the old hunter had ate it before or after Meg showed up the first time. He was pretty sure it was after. They'd seen Dad at least once by the time they met up in Colorado over the vampire nest. That meant all of it happened in 2006. He marked Meg trapping John with a little '1', Elkins with a '2', and Meg killing their friends with a '3'.

It was a start.

He'd gotten as far as Dad's death and the car accident when his phone rang. He was still missing huge gaps, and he could only remember a handful of the hunts he and Sam had done (and almost no definitive dates to pair with them), but he'd written them down all the same. It would have to be enough going forward.

"What's up, Sammy?" he answered the phone without looking. He frowned at what he heard over the line. "What? Where are you? Stay there, I'm coming to you."

He snapped the phone shut, gathered the dozen sheets of paper and shoved them and the pad of paper they'd come out of into his jacket before heading out of the diner.

-o-o-o-

A demon had Jess's parents.

Sam had met Frank and Anne Moore for the first time four months ago when they had visited their daughter and her semi-serious boyfriend they'd heard non-stop about for almost a year. The small group had gone into San Francisco for a day of touring and a wonderful dinner down on the Embarcadero.

He'd liked them immediately, despite being mostly preoccupied with not making a fool of himself. This was the first 'meet the parents' he'd ever had to face outside of that one Thanksgiving at Stephanie Belmont's house back in sixth grade. And while he was definitely nervous back then, it was nothing compared to how his leg shook under the table all throughout dinner.

Jess's hand on his thigh certainly had more of a calming effect than Stephanie's had as a kid.

Frank was an avid fisherman, with his own boat and lobster license too. He worked in construction management and owned a small, but very successful company in Northeastern Boston. Anne was retired, and spent much of her free time volunteering at the hospital where she had spent fifteen years of her Administrative career. The two were somehow still madly in love, had date nights once a week, and we're infamous in the family for their bouts of public dancing (particularly on date nights).

Nothing on earth except a demon could make Frank Moore's face take

on such hideous glee while he held a knife to his sobbing wife's throat.

Jess hadn't been able to look at the photo attached to the email since the coffee shop, and had eventually left the safety of Rufus' cabin for some fresh air when the boys and Bobby wouldn't stop *talking* about it.

Not that it mattered. She'd told them in no uncertain terms they were going. They were going to Boston and she'd give the demons whatever they wanted and they would save her parents. Neither of the brothers had argued or even so much as blinked at the demand.

"Of course we're going," Dean had said before Sam could.

That had been that. The details of it didn't matter to her, and she couldn't be in the same room with them has they hashed it out and wasted time her parents *didn't have*.

The delay was about *how* to go. Dean was insistent they drive. And only partially because he hated flying and had only successfully managed it twice now. Mostly it was because how the hell were they going to get an arsenal of weapons through security?

But Sam insisted they didn't need their gear. He was new to the demon-fighting game, he freely admitted it, but what could they use against a demon other than holy water and exorcisms?

Bobby didn't like the way Dean's knuckles tightened on the table, like he was restraining himself from saying anything.

It didn't stop him from saying all sorts of things, of course. Like how bullets might not kill the damn things, but they sure as hell slowed them down. (They really didn't, but Dean didn't like going into a hunt without at least one weapon).

That was the point where Jess left the cabin.

In the end, they decided to fly. Whitefish was remote enough as it was without trying to drive halfway across the country. The trip would take them at least two days, and none of them had had enough sleep in the last three to safely traverse the country *and* take on a demon at the end of the road.

If they flew out that night, they'd be there in the morning and could hopefully catch some sleep on the plane.

Bobby didn't like it much either, but he could bend to reason and was

a fair bit more flexible than Dean Winchester would ever be. He promised to make some calls and get them at least a minor arsenal and a car for when they landed. It appeased Dean somewhat but left him with nothing else to fight accept his abhorrent fear of flying (which Sam had easily deduced (for the second time) and still found moments to tease him, despite the situation)

So that afternoon Bobby drove Rumfeld into town and checked him into a dog boarding ranch under a fake name, a fraudulent credit card, and some bullshit excuse of last minute vacation for the girl at the front counter. He didn't feel good about it – felt worse at the look his buddy gave him as they dragged him into the back – but it was what it was.

They left for the Kalispell airport that evening.

-o-o-o-

Sam and Bobby got some sleep on the plane. Dean spent the flight trying to put dents into the armrests with his fingertips. Jess stared out the window at the passing lights far below them and focused her not inconsiderable brain power on not thinking anything at all, lest she spiral into the panic that awaited her at the endless horrors that could be happening to her parents.

-o-o-o-

Dean was a stressed out mess by the time they landed, and only barely managed not to fall to his knees and kiss the ground. At least this plane didn't almost crash. It was a lot better when they didn't almost crash.

As promised, Bobby had contacted a couple hunter friends of his in the Northeast, and they agreed to meet the group with a clean car they could use and some weapons on loan for the job. Neither of the two hunters offered their assistance, and the group didn't ask.

They dumped their duffel bags into the back of the pickup and climbed into the old Ford truck. Dean had fidgeted all the way through security as the officers eyed him and his four empty canteens, two rosaries, two bibles, one gigantic tomb older than all four of them combined (and was there some reason the *Key of Solomon* couldn't come in an edition smaller than a freaking flat screen TV?), and draw string bag filled to the brim with rock salt. Sam had elbowed him more than once and muttered under his breath to chill out before he got them all thrown in Gitmo.

Jess gave them her parents' address, and they headed out. No one talked much half hour drive. Dean said he had a plan, Sam was fidgety about the lack of details, Bobby had given up trying to get in the middle of the two of them, and Jess didn't want to hear it.

They arrived at the somewhat secluded 1228 Quail Road in Andover, MA at 9:28 that morning. Dean pulled the car off to the side of the street as far from sight as he could and they all stared at the house set back in the wooded area with trepidation.

It didn't look like a demon had moved in. Then again, it never did.

"How do we know they're in there?" Sam asked. There was a car in the driveway, but it wasn't like demons needed motor transportation.

"They're in there." Dean sounded completely sure, and Jess glanced at him. She tried to take comfort in his confidence, but only succeeded in miniscule amounts.

Sam didn't want to ask what his brother was thinking, not in front of Jess, because he didn't want her to know that there was a high likelihood this wouldn't go in their favor. He may not have faced a demon before (Brady didn't count, that demon was already in a devil-proofed trunk by the time he got involved), but he had grilled Dean and Bobby every chance he'd got in the last four days. He needed to know what they were up against.

And now he was pretty sure they were screwed. There was no way they'd be able to take down Frank before he killed Anne in retaliation. Or just because he felt like it. He didn't even need to be near her to do it – he could snap her neck from across the room. The thought made him sick to his stomach, but he sucked it up and shoved it deep down.

"So what's this plan you say you have?" Bobby fiddled with his shotgun in the back seat, loading it up with shells. Beside him, Jess eyed the weapon nervously, despite the fact that they'd already had the discussion concerning a strict 'no shooting the parents' ground rule.

"It's rock salt, Jess," Dean had answered, and she'd found it odd that it may have been the first time he'd ever actually called her by name. "It'll sting like a bitch, but it's not fatal."

"But it'll kill the…demon, right?"

Sam had shaken his head while Dean looked reluctant to answer. "It'll slow him down a bit."

"Piss 'em off, s'more likely."

In response to Bobby's gruff input, Sam had wrapped his hand around hers, thumb rubbing against her skin in what was supposed to be comforting circles. "It'll keep him distracted – away from you and your mom."

Jess nodded, but hardly looked convinced. It took Bobby assuring her they'd use the guns as a last resort only (and giving Dean a pointed look as he did so) that finally settled the manner.

Now Dean was watching Jess in the rear view mirror. "You said it's an old house, right?"

She nodded and listed off the near-ancient date of its construction. The house had been in her mom's family for years, and though the Moores had done some serious remodeling over the years, they'd kept the historical bits the same. They said they liked the old feel and the history. Anne was proud of her Bostonian roots, and more than proud to own a house with two and a half centuries of history in its bones.

Including the sprinkler system from the early forties that Dean seemed oddly interested in. Jess's great-grandfather had been a paranoid nutball. He'd been incredibly proud of the newly installed system back in the day. Called it a marvel of technology and security. He used to tell any who'd listen that most homeowners could only dream of such safety measures.

He was also the reason there was an old rotted out bunker buried somewhere in the backyard with enough SPAM inside to last through 2046.

"Alright, then we spike the water." Bobby and Sam turned sharp eyes to Dean and he grinned at them. "The house is on well water, yeah? We throw a Rosary in there, purify the water, and then we set the house of fire."

"What?" Jess shrieked and the hunter winced.

"Okay, I didn't mean *on fire*. I meant we trigger the sprinklers."

"And the water that comes out would be holy," Sam added, sounding almost breathless as he thought through his brother's plan.

That….That wasn't a bad idea. The water would damage a demon enough to at least distract it – at least long enough for Jess to get her mom out of there, maybe even start an exorcism. It didn't guarantee anything; Sam had little hope it would be enough to do the job alone.

That was what Winchester luck was for. It just needed a starting place, and holy water sounded like as good as any.

Bobby was staring at Dean again with narrowed eyes. Where the hell was the kid getting this from? Dean Winchester had always been a hell of a hunter, just like his daddy, but neither of them had won that title from cleverness. Both of 'em earned it out of sheer stubbornness.

But it was a good plan, so he sat back and said nothing. He'd save that battle for another time.

-o-o-o-

They went in guns blazing.

Well, Dean and Bobby went in guns blazing.

Well, Dean and Bobby went in guns blazing with exception to the whole 'we won't shoot your dad, we promise' bit. So really, they went in more like kicking down doors and shouting obscenities once Jess triggered the sprinklers.

Sam gave her a leg up (a pair of six foot tall shoulders more accurately) to pull herself onto the back patio roof about five minutes before the whole rescue operation was going down. From there, she slid her old bedroom window open and slipped inside. It was a trick she'd done a hundred times as a teenage girl sneaking out after curfew and back in before dawn.

A lifetime ago, Sam would have teased her for her delinquent days and she would have slid right up to him and whispered that she'd show him something delinquent alright.

Today, she was pulling a lighter out of her pocket and holding it up to the old pipes and metal sprinkler hanging above her childhood bed. For a moment, nothing happened and her racing heart practically stopped beating. Then water exploded everywhere and she dropped back to the mattress, face and hair soaked and the rest following as she heard the sprinklers kick in out in the hall too.

Enraged screaming followed.

Jess threw herself off the bed, the time for stealth long gone, and broke out into the hall just Dean and Bobby kicked in the front door. True to their word, they didn't shoot her dad. Dean fired off a warning shot aimed more at the ceiling than anything else. Jess rounded the top of the stairs and barreled down almost to the point of falling.

She skidded into the living room in time to see her father facing off against the two hunters just as Dean cocked his shotgun for a second go around and leveled it at Frank. Jess didn't have time to pray that he'd stick to his word, and instead focused on her mom. Anne was huddled over by the sofa, her arms protectively covering her face and her shoulders shaking.

Jess slid to her knees as water pattered down on the ancient hard wood floors. The sprinklers had an automatic shut off after several minutes, but already it was starting to pool on the ground. Her mother was going to be pissed about the water damage when all this settled down.

"Mom!" She wrapped her hands around her mother's shoulders, shaking the older woman gently. "Mom, it's Jess. We have to get out of here; you have to come with me."

Her mother trembled under her hands, but raised her face to her daughter and Jess realized their mistake immediately.

Anne's face was red and blistered, her eyes a deadly black, and the grin that stretched her skin, demented.

Jess couldn't breathe, couldn't even yell. She snatched her hands away like she'd been burned, and with the gleam in her mom's once kind eyes, she might as well have been.

"Hello, *Jessie*," the thing hissed, breaking into a laugh even as she lunged for her daughter.

Jess went down hard beneath her mom, body still rooted stalk still. Only her mom called her that. Everyone else called her Jess, but Anne Moore had stuck to calling her daughter the same thing she'd called her in the hospital nursery unit twenty-one years ago, and every afternoon at the park down the street, and on every trip to the mall, and even still through teary-eyed goodbyes on her first day of college.

Jesus Christ, her mom was *in there*.

And that's when Jess started screaming. She kicked and pushed and shoved at the woman that was and was not her mom, who didn't move an inch other than to pull back and raise a knife – the knife her father held to her throat in that wretched photo – high above her head. Jess watched in terror as her mom tried to kill her.

She screamed, but blocked Anne's swing with her arm. Jess gasped as the blade sliced through skin and muscle in her fumbled attempt at self-preservation. The blood-tipped knife angled downward towards her heart instead as she wrapped her fingers around her mother's wrist. This wasn't her mom – this thing was far stronger than the fifty-six year old yoga enthusiast who frequented the gym more for the social hour and lunch date with her girlfriends than the actual exorcise. Jess's muscles ached under the strain and her whole arm shook as she kept the knife away from her chest by inches only.

There was a blur of movement to her right and then Anne was suddenly gone in a spectacular tackle by her six-and-a-half foot giant of a boyfriend. The small woman did not go down easy, though, despite her opponent's size. She rolled like a nimble gymnast half her age, coming to a crouch with a barbaric hiss and a sneer at the Winchester boy.

Jess scrambled back, chest heaving from fear and exertion. Sam kept her behind him with an outstretched arm, a canteen in the other. He began reciting an exorcism, keeping Anne at bay with the holy water anytime she tried to get too close. She still had the knife, gripped tightly in her hand as the two circled each other.

When force-throwing Sam across the room and over the back of the couch wasn't enough to stop the exorcism, Anne let out a terrible screech. In a single movement, she spun and threw the knife hilt over blade before flinging herself from Anne Moore's body in a terrible trail of black smoke.

Jess screamed, her first thought for Sam and my god, she was going to watch her boyfriend take a knife to the gut. But when the blade flew past Sam, missing him by several feet, to embed itself in her father's side, she lost it. She didn't care that there was a demon inside of him – that was her *father* her mother had just stabbed.

Dean caught her across the middle as she hurdled herself towards the demon, who stared down at the knife as if it was nothing more than a nuisance. His body was already twitching and jerking with the exorcism, and wisps of black smoke leaked from the bleeding wound.

Frank Moore looked up from the blade to his little baby girl as she kicked and screamed in the arms of the hunter.

He grinned as he opened his mouth and smoked out of the dying meatsuit.

Chapter 9: Season 1: Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> **Chapter Warnings:** None for this chapter. I think even Dean mostly behaves himself. Our favorite King of the Crossroads gets some screen time (though he is less than happy about it).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 8

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean was an idiot. He was a waste of time and space and god-damn angelic effort. He was useless, was what he was.

For the life of him, he couldn't understand why he'd been so stupid as to think it would only be one demon. As if he hadn't dealt with the bastards long enough and often enough to know that they were cruel, and rarely ever simple.

He'd let himself be lulled by the security of 2005. Two thousand and fucking five, when demon possessions weren't handed out like condoms at a college party. He should have known better. Hell was rearing for an apocalypse, and this was Azazel they were up against. Like hell he'd have sent in just one demon.

Dean resisted his dire need to hit something for the sixth time since they'd arrived at the hospital. He'd have to leave soon, if only to find a wall nurses wouldn't kick him out for punching a hole through. The hunter scrubbed a hand over his face and chanced a look down the hall.

Jess was sitting, numb and unmoving, in one of the waiting halls. Her forearm had been stitched and wrapped tightly in white, sterile gauze. Sam sat next to her, his bean stalk frame slumped. He held her hand and neither of them said a word.

Dean knew what was coming. Even in a new timeline, in a hospital he'd never been in after a fight he'd never fought first time around, he could see what was coming.

So he pushed off the wall and headed in the opposite direction.

This was going to end, Jess and her family were going to be safe, and he damn well knew what was needed to do it.

-o-o-o-

“I can’t do this.”

She hadn’t meant to say it. Or, rather, she had meant to say it – had been meaning to say it for almost a week – but she hadn’t meant to say it like that. Just blurt it out, in the middle of a silent hospital hallway, with Sam sitting next to her while they waited to find out if she still had a father.

Frank had gone into surgery the minute they’d arrived, tires screeching to a halt outside the Emergency entrance. The car they’d borrowed from those other guys was a mess of blood now. She wondered with detached concern who would clean it.

Anne was in a room of her own, sleeping off the sedation administered shortly after they arrived. She’d been hysterical, almost unable to speak. The EMTs that met them at the door said words like ‘shock’ and ‘acute distress’. When the doctors learned it was her husband being escorted into surgery with a knife in his gut and his blood on her hands, they’d given her a sedative and decided to keep her for 24-hour observation.

They still hadn’t heard anything about Frank yet.

Sam’s hand tightened around hers. “I know.”

She stared at the scrapes on his knuckles and the patches of gauze nurses had taped over the wounds deep enough to need cleaning. Jess tried, she really tired, to find comfort in the fingers wrapped around hers. She used to love how small her hand felt in his. How long his fingers were entwined around hers. It had been a silly thought, like a little girl daydreaming, but she’d always known the photograph of their clasped hands and a set of matching rings would be her favorite picture from their wedding day.

Sam was suddenly in front of her, crouched at eye level and holding both her hands in his. He was looking at her like she was the only light in his world; a light he’d knowingly extinguished.

“I know,” he said again, and leaned forward to press his forehead to

hers. Their fingers, still entangled, lay unmoving in her lap. He didn't say anything else; she didn't need him to.

They sat like that until the tears finally came and she sobbed into his chest for everything they'd lost, and what she might lose still.

-o-o-o--

Bobby left a couple hours after Dean did. He told Sam he'd be on call if they needed anything – anything at all – but this fight wasn't over yet and they'd need eyes on the books if they were going to figure out why demons were gunning for them. Sam, who had taken the conversation a few feet away from Jess to try and give her some seclusion from it all, only nodded tiredly.

The old hunter dug into his pocket and pulled out a worn, crinkled business card to hand to Sam. It was for a psychiatrist.

"She knows all about the life," Bobby mumbled with a half shrug. Sam stared at him in surprise for a moment, but he supposed there were people out there – *normal* people – who learned about the things that went bump in the night and decided to help others without turning into nomadic, revenge-driven hunters hell bent on a life of death and loneliness. And if there were, leave it to Bobby to know of them. "She ain't local, but least they'll have someone they can talk to."

Sam had to blink back the tears that filled his eyes. Usually, he was able to keep it together better, but this really was the week from hell and he tried not to beat himself up too terribly for it. Bobby made a grunt that probably meant 'come here, son' before he enveloped the younger Winchester in a tight hug.

"Thank you, Bobby," Sam whispered and the older hunter clapped him supportively on the back like his father never did.

Bobby hopped a plane back to Whitefish a couple hours later, collected his junker and his dog, and headed back to Sioux Falls and the stacks of books waiting for him there.

-o-o-o--

Where are you?

Sam stared at the screen of his phone, awaiting Dean's reply, as he tapped his foot against the leg of the hospital chair in a move of

anxiety, tiredness, worry, and guilt that perfectly summed up how he was feeling internally. Frank had gotten out of surgery an hour ago, and the doctors had thankfully reported he would make a full, but slow, recovery. Jess was in his room now with her mom.

Meanwhile, now that one crisis was partially resolved, Sam had a million more to juggle. Truth be told, over the last five days he'd felt like someone had cut both his arms off, morbidly added them to the pile of things he was supposed to balance, and then stared expectantly.

On top of his brother acting downright weird, demons apparently wanted his girlfriend dead and his head on a stick (or something equally confounding), Jess's parents had been attacked and the family was irreparably scarred for life, the five-day road trip from exhaustive hell had culminated in the realization that Sam was likely never going back to school nor marrying the girl of his dreams, and now Dean had up and left with nothing more than a worrisome text about having a plan to 'fix everything.'

He honestly wasn't sure what was holding back the panic attack and instinct to find a hole, curl into a ball and spiral into madness. Sam had a feeling that dam, whatever it was, was about to break.

Everything hurt, from his body to his soul to his mind.

There was an ache in his heart he couldn't ease up on, knowing as he'd known for days now that this was the end of the road for him and Jess. He couldn't ask her to keep living a life on the run. He couldn't ask her to face death because demons had an unexplainable hard-on for him. And he had no clue how he was going to get her or her family out of it.

He would find a way, no matter what it took. She deserved so much better than this.

But he couldn't deal with that right now. Maybe it was his brother's influence back in his life, but he packed up all the hurt and chaos that came with that knowledge and pushed it aside. Unlike his brother, he *would* deal with it later, but right now it was just one of the many things he had to fix, and he couldn't work on all of them at once without falling into that spiraling hole of madness he was barely keeping at bay.

So he focused on the Dean Crisis. Well, one of the Dean Crises. Actually, the least troublesome of the multiple crises his brother was

currently spawning.

Driving to CO text u when i get there

Sam frowned as his phone buzzed with the reply. Why the hell was his brother halfway across the country? Not to be selfish, but he could sort of use some damn family support right now.

Gonna fix it Sammy i swear

The younger of the Winchester boys let out a frustrated sound as he stared at his phone. Nothing in that text boded well for them. Dean had a martyr complex that could rival a damn saint, only with a fraction of the likelihood of ending up in the Catholic Hall of Fame. God only knew what trouble .he was getting himself into in his effort to bear the weight of the whole damn world alone.

Sam didn't have a clue what had been going on with his brother for the last week, but it was like that weight had increased a hundred fold. Not to mention he was acting as if he'd already failed. Not that Sam knew what it was he could have possibly done, given *none* of this was his fault, but he knew the signs of a guilt-torn Dean. It was like the brother he had always known, only cranked up to about a thousand and minus the protective mask of crude humor, sexual prowess, and arrogance.

It was baffling, and all Sam could come up with was that Dean had seen something.

As far as the younger Winchester could hazard, Dean's visions were a lot stronger than his own. They had a clarity to them that Sam wasn't getting. His always ended in a pounding skull and a mess of blurry images and leftover emotional stimuli. Dean walked around like he knew the damn future and it didn't cost him a thing.

Well, other than the world's biggest (and heaviest) medal for martyrdom.

Sam was stubbornly ignoring the twinge of jealousy that niggled the darkest parts of his brain anytime he thought of the differences in their new psychic abilities. *That* was a mini-crisis he would happily lock in a closet and never address again.

Hows Frank?

He sighed, compartmentalized once more, and texted his brother back.

Okay. Out of surgery. Why Colorado?

Sam waited impatiently for his brother to text him back. His foot resumed its tapping against the cheap metal of the chair.

Driving text u later

He had to work really, really hard not to throw the phone at the wall opposite him. Award-worthy hard. His brother was an asshole. Still, Sam could picture the damn grin he had on his face in the front seat of the Impala, glancing at the screen of his phone every couple of minutes, awaiting Sam's bitchface reply.

Despite everything, he figured some things never did change.

The younger Winchester took a deep breath, chose to find solace in that small thing, and texted back exactly what he knew his brother was expecting.

Jerk.

Bitch

The speed of his reply only confirmed that Dean had already had the damn thing typed out in expectation of sending. His brother was an asshole. But, one of the things that came with martyrdom was affection, apparently.

Sam closed his phone and decided that crisis, while confusing and probably going to bite him in the ass in the very near future, could be downgraded to orange. He had more pressing red alerts to deal with now.

-o-o-o-

They tried to talk once more, the first night after Jess's dad pulled through surgery. They sat in their borrowed car outside the Moore family home (the blood mysteriously gone from the backseat, but Jess didn't ask and suspected Bobby had something to do with it). Sam drove Anne and Jess back once visiting hours ended. Her mom quietly got out of the car and headed inside, hesitating only for a moment at the door.

Jess looked desperately like she wanted to follow, to support her poor mother who was struggling with the aftermath of trauma, but she stayed where she was. Bobby had already been back earlier in the

afternoon while Sam stayed at the hospital, to try and mop up the water and clean the blood off the living room floor. Sam joined him as soon as Frank was declared stable, and helped the older hunter finish the cleanup and secure the house from future attacks. Both men were adamant with Mrs. Moore that no demons were ever getting into that house again.

The water damage was going to need some addressing, but that was hardly her primary concern. She insisted she wanted to go home rather than a hotel.

"I never wanted this to happen," Sam whispered in the silence of the car. He looked at Jess, all the pain and anguish that he'd brought her summed up in the guilt on his face.

She leaned forward, cutting him off before he could stumble through the speech he'd rehearsed a million times since the hallway. Gentle hands cupped either side of his neck and she kissed him across the face. Soft, desperate, sad lips pressed to his own and to his cheek, and his forehead, and his nose.

Jess was crying by the time she pulled away, thumbs stroking across Sam's skin. "I know, Sam. Of course, I know."

He was crying too and he buried his head into her neck.

-o-o-o--

Two days later, Frank was declared fit enough for release and Sam was waiting with Jess at the hospital to drive him back home. She was helping him out of bed and into a wheelchair with the assistance of a nurse when Dean finally showed back up.

He hadn't texted much over the last forty eight hours, obstinately refusing to answer any of Sam's questions.

"Sorry I was gone so long, man," Dean immediately said upon spotting Sam and jogging down the hallway towards Frank's room. He had a rectangular, wooden carrier box in his hands and he looked like shit.

Sam was still pissed, but seeing the dark bags under his brother's eyes, the stress lines pulling his skin tight and the couple days of growth on his chin, he was a little less pissed. He'd done the math; to drive to Colorado and end up back in Boston with the Impala meant Dean had flown to Montana first. Which meant he'd not only gotten on a plane, alone and most likely beating his terrified self up, but then spent

almost forty five hours straight driving all over the country.

He looked it, too.

“We’re gonna keep her safe. We’ll make it right.” Dean handed over the box with a firm nod and an air that went past determined and straight into desperation and guilt. Sam added it to the list of things to address when they got around to that whole ‘this isn’t your fault’ and ‘oh, by the way, what the hell is going on with you?’ talk.

He lifted the lid with no small amount of curiosity at what had driven his brother across the continent. Propped within was an old style revolver. Like, Old West, Cowboys and Indians era revolver alongside five numbered, silver bullets.

Sam lowered the lid with a quick glance around the hallway, before leveling his brother with a raised brow. “A gun?”

“Not just any gun, Sammy,” Dean said with a smirk that didn’t reach his eyes. He tilted his head in half a nod as he corrected, “Sam.”

The younger Winchester eyed his brother and tried to decide if ‘he’s completely lost it’ was umbrella enough to encompass everything that was currently going on.

-o-o-o-

That night, Sam said goodbye to the Moores once they got Frank settled in the house. Anne had gone to town calling floor specialists and her contractor (yes, apparently he was on speed dial in her cell). The new floors were coming in next week, and the current ones had been treated temporarily to stem off further damage. All the susceptible furniture was sent out or cleaned in house. The place was half chaos, half terrifying efficiency and spoke to the frantic, desperate fear lying just underneath the surface.

When he had both of them before him, Anne in a nervous fidget as she cleaned things here and there and Frank sitting tired in a dining room chair, he apologized. There weren’t words in the English language to make up for the last seventy-two hours, but he tried. He tried to tell them all of this was because of him, that he’d put them, their daughter, in terrible danger and he’d never meant to. That he loved her, and had so badly wanted to love them too.

Frank grabbed him before he got more than a sentence and a half out and pulled him into a fierce hug, despite Anne shrieking to be careful

with his stitches. The older man didn't say a word, just held firm to the Winchester's back. Sam was crying again by the time he pulled away and he wiped at his face as he tried not to break down in front of this family that had faced so much because of him.

Anne placed a gentle hand on his forearm. She hadn't spoken much to him since that night, and he understood why. He could see it in her eyes. Anne Moore was not a cruel woman, but she didn't want him near her family. It hurt to see it, to know it. She tried her best to mask it, intrinsically not wanting to blame her own fear and pain on the young man before her, but she couldn't hide it all. Sam didn't hold it against her.

He'd put her family in danger and would continue to do so if he stayed.

So he told them both that he and his brother had a plan, and that if all went well it was the last they'd see of him. Jess squeezed his hand, her face a brittle mask. Anne started crying silently, but nodded at his words. Frank held out his hand, the kind of serious glint in his eye that meant there weren't words that could be spoken.

Sam walked out of the Moore house with the weight of the world buried in a black hole in his chest that hurt worse than any wound he'd ever gotten hunting. He had really wanted to be a part of their family. More than he'd ever wanted anything.

Dean was waiting for him in the Impala.

-o-o-o--

They were, once more, headed to a crossroads. Jess insisted once more that she come with (Sam hadn't argued very hard: she needed to see this through as much as any of them) and directed them to a slightly less populated area to the north that had a couple dirt roads and fields that might culminate in a crossroad.

Sam went for the spray can in the trunk, but Dean shook his head.

"No trap this time." Knowing that would surely start an argument, he cut it off at the head. "We already ganked one of his demons. He isn't gonna be stupid enough to show up in the center of the crossroads."

"Who?"

But Dean didn't answer, instead getting out the necessary items for

summoning a deal demon. He finished off the crossroads box with his ID and a small scrap of paper with something written on it that Sam didn't catch before closing the lid tight and heading to the center of the roads.

Jess waited by the car once more as the boys buried their second cigar box that week.

The wait was quiet and tense, but lacked the same suspense present during their last summoning. Jess, who rightly should have still been freaking out even seven days later, was calm and quiet. Numb.

Dean was a solid rock with the reassuring weight of the colt in his hand. Sam was less sure, but held a stiff, defensive stance of his own. He was ready to take on whatever came at them, fidgeting nervously at the lack of trap.

"You've got some set of balls on you, Winchester. I'll give you that."

The three humans spun at the new voice, an English drawl that was simultaneously lazy and dangerous. To the right of the Impala stood a short, portly man in an expensive suit and crimson tie. His hands were tucked in his pants pockets and he had an incredibly bored expression on his face that masked the indignation and surprise beneath.

Jess immediately moved away from the demon, though he hadn't appeared near enough to her to be a threat. At least, not a physical one. Still, she moved quickly behind the two hunters, much to Sam's relief.

"Crowley," Dean greeted, and Sam looked at him like he really had lost it. "We want to talk with the yellow eyed demon."

"Oh, do you now?" The Brit's eyebrows rose in amusement. He looked like he couldn't decide if he wanted to humor the hunter or snap his neck. "Well summon *him* then, you bloody gnats."

"Yeah, we summoned you."

"I noticed." The demon's voice was dry and his left eye twitched as he looked to the side. He shoved his hands in his suit pockets and Sam got the distinct impression he was trying not to clench his fists. Instead, he let out a dramatic sigh. "Very well. What are you offering in exchange?"

“Oh, you’re doing this one for free.” Dean lifted his gun, his aim true. “We’ll wait.”

Crowley’s bored expression turned ugly as he took in the gun and immediately recognized it for the Colt. Bollocks. “Any particular reason I shouldn’t kill you and the happy couple? Take the shiny toy gun for myself?”

Dean shrugged a shoulder. “You can try, but I’m a quick shot. And I’ve heard demons have this nasty habit of saving their own skin.”

The king of the crossroads regarded the hunter with true, though carefully hidden, bafflement. He’d heard from his own girl that Dean was up on the take in ways they’d never predicted. Azazel had said the same of his brat, but it wasn’t like Crowley really believed them. The older Winchester was a mook. An angelic condom mook maybe, but still a mook.

Besides, demons lied. They lied most often when it was their hide on the rack.

But this, this was irreparable proof staring him down the barrel of a limited edition, supernatural-deluxe, Texas Patterson 1836. This was new.

And where the hell had they gotten that bloody gun?

“Hm,” he hummed as he exuded nonchalance and a proper air of kingliness. Rolling on the balls of his feet, he considered the hunter’s proposition as one would select a fine steak from a butcher. Took his time in doing so, too, just to see Dean’s itchy-trigger finger.

The shaking leaf of a thing behind the two men caught his eye and the corner of his mouth quirked upward. “Are you sure you want ole’ Yellow Eyes here? Seems to me you haven’t thought this through, boys.”

Sam’s glare turned hostile as he stepped fully in front of Jess. The hammer of the Colt cocked back under his brother’s thumb.

“Alright, alright,” Crowley conceded, raising his hands placating. “No need to get violent, gentlemen. I’ll fetch your Mommy Killer.”

If they hadn’t had a history – wouldn’t have a history – Dean might have shot him.

He lowered the gun as the demon disappeared in the blink of an eye. Turning to Jess, Sam placed both of his hands on her shoulders to reassure himself of her presence as much as comfort her. She was biting her lip and refusing to look at where the demon had been, but otherwise stood strong within her lover's arms. Dean turned away to give them a moment.

Crowley popped back into existence in the center of the crossroads without so much as a confetti bomb. By his side was Azazel, wrapped in the body that Dean would kill him in.

But not tonight.

"You know what this is?" He held up the revolver and pale, yellow eyes trained on it with a look of distaste. Dean took it as the affirmation it was, then tossed the gun to Sam.

Jess screamed as he pressed the muzzle flush to his temple.

"You want me?" Sam asked, eyes never leaving the demon who had killed his mother, who had planned to kill his girlfriend. The creature that had ruined his life twice over. "Then Jess is out. Her parents, her extended family, anyone who so much as knows her name. They're untouchable."

The demon tilted his head, eyes glinting as he evaluated the situation before him with as much curiosity as caution.

Dean held Jess back with an arm, keeping his eyes trained on the two demons. There were so many ways this could go south, and he was going against every protective instinct carved into him over the years by handing his brother that gun.

Because damn if they didn't both want to put a bullet between Azazel's eyes. Dean knew everything he had done, everything he would do. Sam knew enough to want him just as dead. They couldn't, no matter how much they wanted to. No matter how justified they'd be. Tonight had to be about the Moore family; they had to procure their safety. If the brothers killed the bastard now, they'd have an army of demons out for revenge in the worst ways possible. Jess's family wouldn't make it through the week.

For his part, Crowley looked astounded as he glanced between the two parties like a tennis match. It was a damn beautiful sight to be sure and one Dean might have enjoyed in a less dire moment. He'd sure treasure it the next time he had to deal with the smarmy bastard.

Azazel was far more composed, and exuded danger. If he was relying on appearance alone, Dean might be worried he wouldn't take the bait. Those pale yellow irises were daring Sam to pull the trigger, just to see if he would. It was only because the older Winchester knew the end goal that they could even pull this off. Hell needed Sammy alive, but Dean knew he wouldn't hesitate to pull that trigger if it meant saving Jess.

And Azazel knew it to.

Sam's hand was steady even has his legs shook, standing for the first time in front of the thing that he and his brother and his dad had spent the last twenty-two years hunting down. Sam's whole life, summed up in a middle-aged man with yellow eyes standing in the center of a crossroads. "There's no bringing me back from this. So she's out and I keep breathing."

The demon watched for another moment, testing the younger hunter's conviction, before settling back on his heels in a suddenly relaxed stance that gave away how tense he'd actually been. A smile broke across his face, splitting his skin into something foul and wicked. "Alright. She's out."

Sam's finger tightened on the trigger and the demon sighed dramatically.

"And her family too. Don't get your panties in a twist, tiger," he condescended, raising his hands in a mockery of defeat. They quickly shifted to far more dominant position, pointing at the boy with a grand sweep. "But you've got to keep hunting."

Sam's brow furled. The last thing he expected a demon to want was another hunter in the world. Azazel smiled brightly, teeth glinting in the moonlight.

"It's what you were made for, Sammy-boy. Bred for, really."

Beside him, he missed Dean's eyes narrowing. But the demons didn't.

"Fine." Sam loosened his finger on the trigger, but didn't lower the gun. "I want your word."

Azazel raised a brow mockingly at the boy, but Sam Winchester wasn't looking at him. He was looking at Crowley.

The King of the Crossroads was well and truly stumped by the scene

unfolding before him. The two dimwitted brothers apparently not only had a significant clue to Samuel's role in future events, but also knew Crowley by name, and had a hell of a pair of balls between them to ask for the demon who'd orchestrated all of this to begin with.

And yes, Crowley was fucking *pissed* he was being used as a god damn messenger, thank you for asking. He was the King of the Crossroads, god damn it. Some respect would be appreciated.

Now, *now*, he was staring at Sam Winchester like the moose of a human being (and sweet Jesus what were they feeding that kid?!) had gone and grown two heads.

No. No, that wasn't it. Crowley had seen a human with two heads before. This was far more ludicrous than a genetic freak of nature.

This was bloody insanity.

"What?" he asked, perfectly calm and rather polite given the situation, and not in a shrieking sort of manner at all. Not at all. That would not be very kingly. He raised his hands, quite content to be the messenger. "I've got nothing to do with this."

"You're a crossroads demon, aren't you?"

Crowley bristled at the common label slung about like a meager insult. As if he was just some two-bit salesman. He was the bloody king and he'd earned that title!

Sam's trigger-happy hand twitched on the Colt and Crowley simmered down with a growl and a damn unhappy grimace. He didn't need that thing pointed at him anytime soon, either. The moose didn't let up, but he did continue, "You make deals, so officiate this one. I want your word as King of the Crossroads. Jess if off limits, or both our lives are forfeit."

Crowley was speaking before the younger of the two *insane* hunters even finished speaking. "No bloody way-"

"Deal."

All parties turned to Azazel, who smiled sweetly at them.

"No deal!" Crowley growled back, fisting his hands at his sides as he regarded the demon, now both offended and appalled. The fucking bugger had a lot of nerve. "It's not your bloody life they're asking for.

You can bargain with your own damned soul."

"Too late." Sam finally lowered the blasted gun to his side with a grim smile that looked more like death than an expression of victory.

Crowley sneered at all of them, the bastards. With a mumbled *'bollocks'* and a hastily written contract that he all but chucked at Sam Winchester's soul, he whisked himself away back to his fortress and his 30 year old Craig. He was owed a good long sulk and perhaps a temper tantrum.

Sam's grip on the Colt tightened when the Yellow Eyed Demon did not leave as well.

He was watching Sam with a gleam in his eye that might have once been pride on the face he wore, but now just looked like malicious delight.

"You know," he began, and though he never moved from the center of the crossroads, it damn well felt like he was circling, "things are turning out far more interesting than we predicted."

His pale irises shifted to look at Dean and Jess. "I wonder why that is."

Then he was gone.

Sam all but collapsed, bending over to brace his hands on his knees as he let out a shaky breath and took in a gulp of air that nearly had him choking. Dean couldn't have stopped Jess from going to his side if he had tried, and he didn't. Sam straightened to scoop her into his arms and press his face into her hair and breathe in the familiar, comforting scent. She was chastising him as much as she was kissing him, and he tried to reassure her with a shaky voice that he was in no way suicidal.

Over her shoulder, he handed his brother back the Colt. The relief of its weight gone from his hand made his stomach clench.

He would have done it. Dean had been sure he wouldn't have to, but that wasn't the point. Despite the comforting words he mumbled into Jess's ear, he would have done it. He was ready to do it. His legs felt like jelly beneath him and he cursed his own fear. He was a hunter, damn it. Death was part of the gig.

Within his arms, Jess turned her head to glare at Dean, who was

tucking the Colt into the back of his jeans. "This had better work."

The older hunter stared at her in surprise for a moment, unsure if the venom was coming from the fact that he'd put Sammy in danger with his plan or that he'd put them all in danger by dragging his brother back into hunting in the first place. Or altering the timeline and dragging her family into it instead. There were just so many options to choose from.

"Trust me," he tried to instill as much confidence and assuredness as he could into his words, to promise that her family would be safe from now on. That she would be safe. "Crowley will do whatever it takes to save his own skin."

-o-o-o-

Sam didn't talk on the drive back from dropping Jess off at the Moore home. He didn't say a word as they pulled into the dingy one-star motel parking lot, tiredly grabbed their bags and headed inside. He sat on the edge of the thin mattress on its squeaky frame, his back to the room and the world.

Dean watched from the doorway as his little brother tried to hold it together, staring at the wall. But his shoulders began to shake and his head ended up in his hands.

Dean Winchester had never been good with feelings. At damn near forty years old, he still had no idea what to do with a distraught, hurting Sam.

He could see the same shades of sadness in his brother that had been there once before. This time around, instead of the anger and self-loathing and guilt, there was only sadness. It wasn't great – could hardly even be called an improvement because he had still lost Jess – but Dean knew that it was better.

She would live a full and happy life, even if Sam couldn't be in it. And that difference *mattered*.

His little brother was still walking the path of a hunter, so in a lot of ways nothing had changed. The apocalypse was still set for a five year swing. But Dean was determined not to let that make this small triumph mean less. Because his brother wasn't suffering the same loss and he wasn't sinking into the cold-edged revenge that would define the rest of his life.

A life of pain and hurting that ended in a graveyard and puddle of blood. If things were going to change, Dean Winchester was going to have to do some changing of his own.

So he walked over to the side of Sam's bed and sat down beside him. He might not have any idea what to say, but for once in his life he was going to figure it out.

"I wanted to marry her."

He looked at his brother's hands, and white-knuckled around a ring box, and his heart broke a little on his brother's behalf. He ached for the kid. Dean raised his hand to settle on his brother's shoulder, hesitating and not having a clue what he was doing, but clasping Sam's shoulder all the same. He could feel the tremors just beneath the skin, and gave a reassuring squeeze, hoping he wasn't making it worse.

"It probably doesn't help – Hell, I know it doesn't help. But I think she wanted that too."

His younger brother laughed, the mirthless sound breaking down into a sob that he tried to fight, but lost. He was crying, and damn it all, Dean didn't have a way to fix this. He had always been better at messing these sorts of things up than fixing them.

But he stayed. Sam cried and Dean stayed, and if Time was an oracle you could talk to, she'd have said the future had a little more hope.

Chapter End Notes

> **Jess Leaving:** I couldn't picture her staying, no matter how badass a chick I thought she would be. That dramatic a change, I don't think most people would be able to handle it. The two of them don't love each other any less (and I'm hoping my writing made that pretty clear) but it's just not the life either of them had hoped for or wanted. And sometimes you have to go your separate ways when you hit that point, no matter how much you love someone.

Chapter 10: Season 1: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Now we're really getting started. Boys are back on the road, the Apocalypse is rearing, Dean-o's back to swearing, and Sam is not so stupid.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 9

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam threw the last of their bags in the trunk before he slid into the passenger seat of the Impala and closed the door. Dean was already settled in the driver's seat, the engine purring as she warmed up and fought off the incoming chill of the northeastern November weather. It wasn't cold yet, not for Kansas born boys who had experienced winter in almost every state, but it was getting down there.

He held his hands in front of the heater more out of pleasure than necessity. It was unusual for Dean to not have put the car in gear and got a move on, half the time before Sam even got the door fully closed. At least, that's how it had been before he left for Stanford. Who knew with this new Dean.

"Are we waiting on something?" the younger Winchester asked mostly in jest, but when Dean didn't immediately snark back, he glanced to the driver's side with a more serious expression.

"What do you wanna do, Sammy?"

The question, which seemed a complete non-sequitur to everything that had happened in the last five days, had Sam truly baffled. "With what? And it's Sam."

Dean shrugged. "Your life."

The brunette gave a shake of his head, still not following. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about what you want to do, Sam. Do you want to go back to school? Become a lawyer? Dress in green tights and be a literal walking ad for the Jolly Green Giant! Whatever you want; you name

it, and I'll get you there."

Brown eyes widened, but his heavy, sasquatch brow furled over them quickly. "Dean, I can't do any of those things," and honestly the last one didn't deserve recognition, "Yellow Eyes said I had to keep hunting. I don't have a clue why or what the hell he wants me for, but if it's the only way to keep Jess safe, then that's what I'm going to do. So…"

He gestured to the windshield and the world beyond in part question and part impatience.

His brother watched him with soft eyes. Softer than he'd seen them in a long time. "Is that what you want? Because if it isn't – if you want to go back to school, we'll figure out a way."

"Dean…." Sam dropped his shoulders and with it came the weight and exhaustion he'd been valiantly hiding. "I don't know what I want. I don't know anything anymore."

It was the truth. He had never wanted to be a hunter, had done everything he could to escape the life. And for a while, he had been happy. Really happy. But that was gone now, and returning to college, to the pursuit of law and a white picket fence with a pretty wife and two point five kids and an expensive car….it seemed cheap. Fake. Hollow as the aching pit in his chest.

He raised his head, jaw clenched but chin firm. "I know I want to keep Jess safe. I *need* to keep her safe. If hunting is the requirement, then let's go. Let's find a hunt."

"Alright then."

Despite knowing that was the answer the kid would give, Dean had to ask. He had promised to change things this time around, and that meant giving Sam the choice. He wished he could have kept him out of it completely, but Dean was starting to realize that changing the future would not be as simple as deciding who participated in it or not. Destiny wasn't going to be any easier to derail this time around, even if they were tearing up the tracks five years earlier.

So he put the car into gear and turned towards the highway. As they left Boston behind them, he told his brother about a nice little Wendigo hunt he'd caught wind of in Colorado that was calling the Winchester name.

-o-o-o-

“The thing that killed mom was a demon.”

Dean looked over at Sam, who had been quiet for last hour or so. The older Winchester wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, or where it was coming from. They’d known Yellow Eyes was a demon for almost a week now – it had been pretty obvious since Brady. Even so, Dean suddenly got the impression he was walking into a mine field.

“Uh….yeah.”

“Did you know?” Sam was angry, already rearing up for the answer he most suspected. “Did Dad know?”

Dean’s hands tightened on the steering wheel as he thought of all the things John Winchester had kept from his sons. Azazel, his pursuit of the bastard, the truth about Sammy, the deal for Dean’s life.

The last words he ever said to his oldest son. A son he had raised to do one thing and one thing only: protect Sammy.

Had John Winchester known all along? Or at least suspected that it had never been about Mary?

If he’d had let his boys help instead of giving them the runaround, would things have gone differently? Dean didn’t know, but he wasn’t planning on finding out. He and Sam were keeping as far away from their father as they could this time around. At least until Dean worked the whole thing out and stopped what was coming.

“If he did, he kept it to himself.”

Sam looked away and tense silence reigned. His anger was lessoning, replaced with confusion and hurt born from something he didn’t yet understand. Because truth was, even with Dean keeping something from him – and he could tell it was more than just one thing – he was still his big brother. He was still the kid that had raised him, the man that had come and gotten him every time he’d been lost, and more often than not when he didn’t want to be found.

His brother who had saved Jess. Who was still sitting next to him, standing by him, despite everything this week had laid bare.

“The thing we’ve spent our whole life hunting…and now it’s after me?”

Dean didn't answer, and Sam could see the tension in his shoulders. He had an answer, but he didn't want to say it. Dean always looked like that any time Dad took him aside to have a private conversation. A talk that Sam almost always knew was about responsibility. Was about him.

"Mom died in your nursery, Sammy." When his brother spoke, it was hesitant, and he didn't take his eyes off the road. He was trying to soften a blow that couldn't be softened. "I think it was always after you."

Sam grew a few shades pallor as realization hit him like a bucket of lead in his stomach. He had never- it had never- there was no reason before now to think that Yellow Eyes had killed their mom for any other reason than that was just what monsters did.

But now, now Sam couldn't breathe.

"It's my fault she died."

"No!" Dean shook his head firmly, voice absolute. He finally looked at his brother, his eyes fierce. "That's not what I said."

"It doesn't matter what you said, Dean! It is what it is. Mom died because I have a demon after me. Jess almost died because of me." Sam's eyes grew panicked and pained as realization only grew. "It's not going to stop. You, and Dad-"

"Can take care of ourselves."

Sam's hands were clenched against his thighs, and he hardly looked comforted by the thought. The car was silent outside of his heavy breathing and the Metallica track still filtering out of the speakers. When he spoke, there was panic in his voice that Dean rarely heard. A panic fueled entirely by the number of people Sam cared about that were going to fall into the path of this nightmare.

"What does it want from me?"

His older brother didn't know how to answer, so he didn't say anything at all.

-o-o-o-

They stopped for gas and road snacks outside of Scranton ("*They don't serve salads at the Gas'N'Sip, you leaf-eating freak. Eat like a normal*

person!"). Dean wasn't thinking when he tossed Sam the keys over the hood as they filled up.

His younger brother stared at them, and then him, and then back at the keys. He finally settled an astonished look on Dean. "You're letting me drive?"

The man from the future blinked, realizing that in 2005 it was not a thing he'd do lightly. Even in 2016 it wasn't something he did 'lightly,' per se. He never liked anyone other than him behind Baby's wheel. But he trusted Sam with her.

When he thought about it, he recalled the first time he'd let the kid drive her, other than the occasional lesson when he was younger and the even rarer breakdown following a bout of puppy dog eyes before Stanford. He'd done it because the kid had been damn heartbroken over Jess and Dean needed to do something – *anything* – to get that cold, expressionless look off his face. Showing Sammy he trusted him to drive her had been it.

He supposed this time around wouldn't be all that different.

"Why not?" He smirked as his brother grinned and ran to the driver's side of the car like a friggin teacher's pet on the first day of school.

Nerd.

-o-o-o-

The second leg of their drive had passed mainly in silence, with the occasional banter started mostly by the older hunter in an effort to keep the younger from sinking too deep into dark thoughts. It was infinitely easier this time around. But now Sam was glancing sidelong at him, and Dean knew he wasn't going to enjoy the coming conversation. "That gun…

"The Colt?"

"How did you know about it? Was it a dream?"

"Nah." For once, Dean was ready. He had his story straight. He'd had almost fifty hours of flying and driving to figure out how to cover his ass this time. And if he felt bad lying to his brother, he reminded himself what the inside of a psychiatric hospital looked like. Because he'd been there, done that, and he was not eager to see where Sam placed time travel on the sanity scale.

“Dad told me. Daniel Elkins – a hunter buddy – had it. He used to be a mentor of sorts for dad. They had a falling out because he always thought Elkins had the gun, but never came clean about it.”

“And dad wanted it because it can kill demons.”

“Bingo.”

“But how’d you know Elkins had it?”

Dean shrugged a shoulder. “Hunch. Dad was pretty sure. The man’s never wrong.”

He’d even rehearsed that line again and again until he *almost* believed it like 2005 Dean would have believed it.

Sam was quiet for a moment, giving his brother the stink eye that he was starting to catalogue as Bitchface #12 (*“What is going on with you?”* which was really *“I know you’re lying to me, future boy”* without proper context).

“Dad never struck me as the sharing type.”

Ha! Sammy thought he could trip him up, but Dean was on his game today. Now he had a *list*, and this time he was armed with forethought. Besides. It wasn’t really lying. Dad had told them, just in another life.

“Beer and a bad hunt, Sammy.” He grinned at his brother. “Goes a long way with the old man.”

“It’s Sam.”

“Right.”

The car fell silent again.

“How’d you get it from him?” Sam was staring out the windshield with a furled brow. Kid was gonna get wrinkles if he kept that up (which Dean knew he wouldn’t, at least not in the next ten years, but seriously, Sasquatch, lighten up.) “If it really can kill *anything*, that’s a powerful weapon.”

The younger hunter’s words trailed off as realization dawned across his face. He turned his most scandalized bitchface (#10, which was basically just *“Dean!”*) on his brother, staring at him. “What did you do?”

“Come on, Sam,” he balked, “it’s not like I went Liam Neeson on some old hunter with my ‘very particular set of skills.’” Sam raised an eyebrow, so he rolled his eyes. “I talked to him.”

And he actually had. Sure, there was a threat or two mixed in with the rest of the words, but truth was he’d talked that gun out of Elkin’s safe for the second time.

“Right.”

“It’s true! Bitch.”

“Jerk. How’d you know about Crowley?” Sam didn’t miss a beat, though he went for a surprisingly nonchalant tone this time as he pulled out his phone and started typing away.

Dean might not know it, but Sam wasn’t missing a thing and he’d started a list of his own. Most recently added was the reference to a relatively low-key actor for Dean’s usual choice of TV and movie watching. *Schindler’s List* wasn’t exactly the older Winchester’s genre of choice when it came to pay-per-view.

There was that stint as a Jedi, but the nerd in Sam didn’t talk about Episode I.

The limited wifi he got on his phone was telling him Neeson had starred in that Batman reboot that came out last summer. That wasn’t only up Dean’s alley, it pretty much encompassed the whole damn block, so it was enough to garner a movie reference. Sam hadn’t seen it, so he couldn’t say one way or the other.

Maybe the drama actor was breaking into action. Weirder things had happened.

He tucked his phone back in his jacket pocket. “King of the Crossroad’s a pretty heavy hitter to just summon out of the blue.”

Dean winced. Because now he was going to straight up lie, and he was going to do it using the Sam-given justification he really wasn’t comfortable abusing.

“That was a dream. Not a good one either, the smarmy bastard.”

Brown eyes turned to him, slightly wide. He hadn’t been expecting an honest answer, considering most of what came out of Dean’s mouth these days was utter crap and they both knew it.

“Really?” He straightened up in the passenger seat. “What was it like? The ones with….” He cut off, looking away from those dreams that still taunted him nightly. “The ones I had back at Stanford. They were…really vivid. They felt completely real, but I had a hell of a headache each time.”

Dean nodded, having expected that. “Mine aren’t vivid. They play out more like….step by step instructions. Hunting by numbers, heh. Don’t get a headache, though.”

His brother was watching him like a hawk: gullible puppy dog eyes but a suspicious pair of eyebrows. Dean hoped he was buying it. He’d worked his ass off pre-planning this. And he was really more of the ‘shoot first, shoot last, deal with it once everyone was dead’ kinda guy.

He thought he was pulling a pretty good act. It sounded natural, or at least it had when he’d rehearsed it over and over again on his way back from Manning.

The problem with all of this, and which had taken damn near the entire drive to talk himself into, was that he had been trying to lie less to Sammy. Ever since the Gadreel ordeal, he’d promised no more lies, no matter what. He’d even managed to be somewhat forthright about the mark and his connection with Amara.

He glanced at Sam, who was watching him with a curious frown. Of course, this wasn’t the brother he’d lied to (and been lied to) over and over again for almost a decade of cyclical cause and effect. This was before all that. And, if he could do what he was thinking about doing, maybe those lies would never be necessary in the first place.

Besides, desperate times and all that. You’d think coming from the future would qualify as a special exception.

“Does your chest hurt?”

“Huh?” The older hunter took his eyes off the road long enough to give his brother a confused look.

“You rub at it at a lot.”

“No, I don’t.”

His brother huffed that particular scoff-slash-laugh that was both concern and disbelief. “Dude, you’re doing it right now.”

Dean looked down to find his hand absently kneading a small, repetitive pattern across his sternum. He frowned, simultaneously removing his hand as if burned, as well as hesitating like it physically hurt to pull away. Despite his brain demanding he rest his arm along the window, the hunter's fingers twitched to return to the warmth in his chest and he ended up fisting his fingers against the edge of the glass as he gritted his teeth.

Okay, maybe Sam had a point.

"Sometimes," he fessed up, though he'd never connected the ache in his chest with his 'dreams.' Probably because he wasn't freaking having psychic dreams to begin with.

It was just…. He wasn't used to the warmth. For the better half of a decade, Dean had walked around with a black hole in his chest, ever sucking, ever hungry, ever unfulfilled. He'd dealt with it and, like any chronic pain, it eventually regulated to something duller, to something that became normal.

Now he had a supernova in his chest.

That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but it damn near felt like it to him. He was whole and he was happy. His brother had just broken up with the love of his life, was forcibly dragged back into hunting, and the apocalypse was still chugging ahead right on schedule. But Dean was *happy*. Happier than he'd been since Sam had run off to Stanford, almost fifteen years ago for him.

He'd forgotten what it was like to not be broken, in more ways than one.

The part of him that remembered, the part of him that was still a shattered, ruined soul just disguised in a new, fresh casing, didn't want to be an inch away from that happiness. It needed the contact, the assurance. To feel that warmth and wholeness and goodness and *know* that it was still there. That it wasn't going anywhere. That it was his, and it was him, and it always would be this time around.

His hand twitched against the window.

Sam accepted his bare-bones admission and didn't push.

-o-o-o-

"I don't know, Bobby." He shifted to push the cell phone against his

ear with his shoulder as he pulled back the motel curtains and glanced at the empty parking lot. "It's like he's…older. Tired and bitter and trying to hide it. It's not like him."

Dean was on a food run while Sam started researching the missing hikers in Blackwater Ridge. His brother had cited the need for a ride with the windows down and the music up and no bitching co-pilot. Sam used the opportunity to have an over-due chat with Bobby.

They'd called him briefly outside of Boston to fill him in on the Moores, as well as give someone a heads-up that they were headed to Colorado on a hunt. He'd been damn surprised to hear Sam's continued hunting was a stipulation of the demon's deal (and boy, did the two boys catch hell for that: '*You summoned WHAT? You made a DEAL? You goddamn idjits!*'). So Bobby had immediately hit the books and the national weather read outs with little to show for it, but a promise to keep digging. Hell was up to something, that was for sure, and someone had to do the legwork to figure out what.

"Four years is a long time, Sam. People change."

The hunter smiled bitterly down at the carpet as he let the curtains go. Like he hadn't thought of that a hundred times. "Some people, maybe: not Dean. Besides, the night he grabbed me from Stanford he was the same snarky ass I remember. And even if that was some weird exception, you've seen him over the last four years. Does he seem like Dean to you?"

He could picture Bobby pulling off his ball cap and scratching at his head. The accompanying sigh confirmed it. "Can't say he does," he huffed down the line. "You sure it's him?"

Sam laughed, but there was little humor in it. "I tried every test I know, Bobby. And he *let* me. Even recommended a few." Bobby scoffed and Sam chuckled. Yup, that sounded like Dean, despite everything. "I'm not saying it's not him, but either he's something we've never seen before or…"

"Or he's the real Dean."

Sam was quiet as he thought about which of those options he'd actually prefer. It should be an easy choice. If this wasn't Dean, than either his brother was tied and holed up somewhere only his imposter knew or he was dead. There was no way all of this could go down without his brother catching wind of someone impersonating him, not to mention all the demonic activity.

So, it should be an easy choice. But there was a tension to this Dean, a weight and responsibility that went beyond anything Sam had ever seen in his brother's eyes. If this really was him, then what the hell happened that night between Stanford and Jericho to change his brother so much? Dean always blamed himself for everything, always carried the weight of the job and their family and particularly Sam's safety. But this was a whole new level. It was like he was carrying the weight of the entire planet around, and refusing to share any of the load.

"He's different, Bobby. Sometimes he acts like his old self, and sometimes…It's like he's seen the end of the world."

Sam said it half joking, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth the dread that had settled in the bottom of his stomach for a week now roiled around uncomfortably.

"Maybe he has." Bobby's words only confirmed what he was already thinking. "Or something like it. He has those visions of his, and we don't exactly work in a future-friendly industry, kid."

The younger Winchester ran a hand through his hair, frustration warring with guilt and worry, and all of it gnawing at his gut. "Then why hasn't he told us, Bobby? If he's seen something bad and it's coming our way, we need to know."

"Hell, Sam, you know your brother. He's a damn martyr with a guilt complex taller than my house. If he's seen something and there ain't shit to be done…." Bobby trailed off with a sigh and sounded far more tired than his years. "He won't tell us. He'll fix it on his own, or die trying."

And that was it. That was exactly what had been eating at Sam but hadn't yet been put to words. He clenched his jaw, fingers threatening to break the plastic casing of his phone.

"Not this time. We make him to tell us. One way or another. I'm not letting some psychic vision dictate my future."

When Bobby didn't answer, which was an answer all itself, Sam straightened, mind made up and determination setting his shoulders straight and his spine rigid.

"I'm not letting Dean dictate it either."

-o-o-o-

Their first hunt together went pretty damn smooth, if you asked Dean. They even managed to save the asshole guide those kids hired. He'd kind of hoped he and Sam could get in and out of the woods before the sister-brother duo and their douchebag forest man decided on a rescue mission. Alas, they'd shown up the same damn day they had the first time around, something Dean couldn't recall in detail until he realized he was actually living it. Again.

Talk about Déjà vu. The Matrix had nothing on him.

The five of them walked out of the woods with the malnourished, traumatized brother on a stretcher between them. Among the rangers and the EMTs and a thankful family, Sam turned to him and freaking *smiled*. A job well done, four souls saved, two Wendigos burned straight to Purgatory, never to return.

"Maybe we should get some camping gear," Sam was saying as they entered the motel room, planning on collapsing on the crappy beds and thin blankets and sleeping like they hadn't slept in a week. Wendigos *sucked*. "Save money on hotels."

Dean fell face first on the bed, his answer muffled by the questionably stained pillow case (eh, he'd seen worse). He couldn't imagine voluntarily spending time out in the woods. Without internet, or coffee, or freaking TV. No thank you. He would take his motels with their questionable stains, crappy instant make, and never-working ice machines. And then they would go home and he could curl up happily in his room and appreciate four walls and a door more than he had in almost his whole adult.

"That's what the bunker's for, Sammy."

Shit.

"What?"

Shit, shit, *shit*.

Double. Friggin'. Crap. On. A. Friggin'. Cracker.

Now he *ached* for home. For his bedroom, and his weapon collection, and his war room, and his fully-stocked kitchen with actual home cooked food. His home that wasn't a home in this timeline. It was a sickening realization how much he missed it. The only home he'd ever had. A home that was locked up tighter than Fort Knox with a missing key that *didn't exist* at this current moment in time, and

wouldn't until two thousand and fucking thirteen when it showed up with their paternal grandfather in tow.

Son of a bitch!

The only thing that kept him from rubbing at his sternum was his herculean-strength stubbornness. Well, that and he was currently lying on his chest with no plans of moving for the next nine hours.

"Sorry." He flopped his hand in the direction of his brother, praying the kid hadn't heard him right and that he could play off the whole whiney bitch nickname bit. "Sam."

"No, not that." The sasquatch titled his head to the side. "I mean, yeah that, but the other thing. What did you say?"

"I said shut your blasphemous mouth," he lied like his life depended on it, growling and lifting his head off the pillow to glare at his giant of a kid brother. "I'm riding the high of a successful hunt here, Sam. Don't ruin it with talk of freezing the family jewels off just to take a piss in the middle of the night. I'll keep my crap motel and it's equally crap indoor plumbing, thank you very much, you tree-hugging hippie."

Sam was watching him in amusement as he unpacked his bag and Dean declared his runaround a success. He collapsed back into the pillow with a sinfully delighted groan and set about achieving that goal of not moving for the next nine hours.

When his brother started snoring, Sam Winchester opened his laptop, pulled up a mislabeled document sent to himself from his phone, and wrote down '*bunker*' next to '*Daniel Elkins*' and '*Cass*'.

Chapter 11: Season 1: Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Bloody Mary in her Bloody Mirror Time! Crowley's back for a bit, Alistair makes a surprise appearance (it's not as exciting as it sounds), and a certain demon joins the playing field.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 10

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean remembered Bloody Mary. He remembered most of the Urban Legend cases pretty well. One, because they weren't your run of the mill case and they always made for good stories later. And B, they were more often than not a bitch to figure out.

The key to this Mary had been a mirror. He remembered Sammy had summoned her because of some big secret that got Jess killed (and yeah, looking back now, it was obviously the visions he'd been having) and she'd come after him from the mirror she died in front of or something.

Problem number one: Dean knew that secret now. So she wasn't going after Sam. Which kind of messed up the whole 'step ahead of the rest' thing he had been rocking on their other hunts. In theory, being from the future should be damn awesome when it came to hunting. It should make him the most badass hunter around.

Problem number two: It wasn't and it didn't because he wasn't *alone*.

He had to walk on eggshells about everything around Sammy, and everyone else for that matter. Dean couldn't just go to Mr. Yamashiro's antique shop (he'd yellow-paged it as soon as they got to town) and cut the bitch down. He wouldn't be able to explain how he knew where to go with no research or what the bitch was without digging. So he lied, and he bluffed, and he led their witnesses as much as he could as fast as he could without his brother realizing he already knew the information he was trying to get out of them.

Their other hunts so far had been easier to fake his way around. Half

the time they had to wait for specific timing anyway to even use his fancy future knowledge mojo. But this one, he knew where the damn mirror was and how to gank the ghost before she killed any more innocents.

But he couldn't go to it.

For the whole damn case he found himself cursing Cas's name again and again. Twenty-four hours earlier, and he wouldn't have to beat around a thousand bushes. He knew, now, that it wouldn't have truly mattered. Nothing he could have done would have kept Sammy out of the hunting life, twenty-four hours or whole months. But damn it, sometimes he needed to think he could have. That Sam would be at law school with Jess and Dean could go waste this bitch without jumping through hoops, lying to his little brother left and right, and claiming psychic dreams when that didn't cover it all.

As if having psychic dreams wasn't already the biggest damn lie.

His whole life was becoming a never-ending web of deception. Dean knew – knew too well – where that led. It led to a prophet and a kid and a friend, dead in the bunker with his eyes burned out of his head.

God knew (and Hell and the Pagans, and everyone else in the friggin' cosmos) that he couldn't keep this up forever. Not without making all the same mistakes he'd come back to fix.

"So you think she's killing people who summon her with a secret?"

They were in the Impala, driving to Estate Antiques in Toledo while Charlie Patterson sat at home with all of the mirrors in her room covered. Dean had remembered too late who the other victims were, and they'd lost her friend, Jill, to the pissed off ghost. Now Charlie was next on the list. If he didn't have to play a thousand questions right now, he could have saved the bitch prom queen, and the terrified teen holed up in her house wouldn't have PTSD for the rest of her life.

He seriously wanted to punch something. Luckily, they were on their way to a store with a lot of shiny, breakable objects.

"Not just any secret: one where someone got killed." Dean pulled onto the street the shop was located on. Yep, this looked familiar.

Sam gazed blankly out the window as his thoughts inevitably turned to the dreams he'd been having before this all started. The ones he'd

ignored that had almost gotten Jess killed. Because of his brother she was still alive, at home in Boston recovering with her parents from an ordeal he was sure the family would never fully get over.

"So what secret aren't you telling me that got someone killed?" Dean pulled into the parking lot outside the store and got out of the car without answering. Sam followed, leaning over the top of the car to watch his brother who was watching the building. "Come on, Dean. I know you're going to summon her; it's written all over your face."

"We should check for an alarm." The older hunter was frowning up at the sign above the store. "I got a bad feeling about an alarm in there."

Annoyed, Sam moved around the car to stop his brother before he could advance on the antiques shop. "Seriously, man. When are you going to tell me what's going on?"

Dean finally looked at him and grinned that cocky, broken smile that was always his tell when he had a lie he couldn't hide but would die before he gave up. "Wouldn't be much of a secret if I told you."

He proceeded to the door, pulling out his lock picks and Sam followed after in a huff.

A few minutes later and Sammy was calling out that the alarm system was down (Ha! He was totally right. The cops *had* shown up the first time around. Score one for future Dean!) and the two got to work on finding the ghost's stupid mirror in a shop full of stupid mirrors. It wasn't quite the needle in the needle stack Dean grumbled it was, but it still took a fair bit of time to spot the one that matched the newspaper clipping on Mary Worthington's tragic death.

"Dean, over here." The older hunter joined his brother, who stood in front of a mirror that perfectly matched the one from the photo, right down to the whole creep vibe.

"Yep, that's it." He pocketed the clipping and held out his hand for the crowbar.

The beanstalk of a man passed it over reluctantly. "You sure about this?"

Dean raised an eyebrow. "What, you got someone killed recently I don't know about?"

Hurt and indignation fought for control over his brother's face, before

he settled on the one that was far easier to express. "And you have?"

'Not yet.' Inner Dean muttered deep within his own mind. Aloud, he rebuked more caustically than necessary and rolled his eyes. "Secret, Sam. It won't be much of one if you keep asking."

Dean started the summoning before Sam could rebuke. He spoke the first two names steadily, but paused before the final call to cast a final *'here goes'* look at Sam. His brother rolled his shoulders and raised the flashlight across the dusty surface of the mirror. "Bloody Mary."

The two stood in silence, one with crowbar raised and ready for a homerun swing, the other an unwavering light on the reflective surface, just waiting for the ghost of Mary Worthington to show herself.

There was the inhale to his left, slow and shaky and screaming creepy ghost woman. Dean spun, but it was only his own reflection watching him in the many mirrors that surrounded the two hunters.

"Dean!"

"I know, I know, stay on her friggin' mirror." Another breath sounded and he swore he could feel that one on his skin. He spun again, crowbar kept tight to his body so he didn't swing the thing into Sam. Still, only their own reflections stared back.

"Where is she?" Sam's eyes darted to the other mirrors, snapping back to Mary's when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. But there was nothing there. "Dean, do you see her?"

The older Winchester didn't answer, and Sam cast a worried look his way. His brother wasn't moving, standing stalk still in front of a mirror, staring at himself like it was the very ghost they were hunting.

"Dean?"

"No. I won't," he whispered, breathe catching even as he did and that was all Sam needed to round on the mirror his brother was standing on front of and smash it to pieces with a couple hard blows with the butt of the flashlight. Dean broke out of his trance and stumbled back.

"Shit, Sam, the mirror!"

“She wasn’t in it!”

Dean turned to find the source reflection but drew up short at the sight of himself ten years from now. No. Not ten years. More like eight and an apocalypse later. So much more like 2014 Dean, who was cold and hard and bitter and sent his best friend and his crew to their death for a god damn distraction. A Dean who had lost his brother to the Devil.

Green eyes stared at him with such hatred, such disappointment that it took his breath away and sent pain shooting through his head like a physical blow.

“You’re going to get them all killed.”

“Shut your mouth.”

“You’re nothing but a screw up, Dean. You and me? We only know how to make things worse. The whole world’s gonna burn, and this time it’ll be all your fault.”

“Shut up, you son of a bitch! I’m not you!” He charged the mirror with the crowbar and, in a show of excessive force, sent the frame tumbling backwards to crash into another mirror, cracking that one on the floor.

“Dean!”

“Find her, Sam!” He stumbled with a gasp, putting a hand to the side of his head. God, he had a killer headache. He heard his brother smash a mirror, and then another, calling out to Mary, daring her to go into the one they needed. But Dean couldn’t focus. His head felt like it was swimming in a damn punch bowl. He fell to his knees and the crowbar clattered to the ground.

He clutched at his chest. His heart was racing like a friggin’ freight train. Pain laced through him on every slamming beat and he felt something warm and thick sliding down his cheek. Shit.

“You’re going to hell, Dean.” The hunter’s breath hitched and his head shot up, pain arcing across the inside of his skull to shoot down his spine. His reflection towered over him, staring down on him in disregard.

His eyes were pitch black.

“You’re going to hell, again. And this is what you’re going to become.”

Blood soaked fingers dragged his sleeve up, leaving red streaks across his skin like a sick finger painting: a trail that led straight to the mark of Cain. It burned hot and angry on his forearm.

“N-No…” Dean couldn’t look. He dropped his head and watched blood drip to the floor beneath him. Crap, this was so not going to plan.

Sam’s flashlight went through the mirror, shattering Demon Dean and raining shards of glass on the collapsed hunter. The flashlight hit the ground with a clatter and the younger Winchester left it, abandoned, to grab Dean beneath his arms. He hauled him back and away from the mirrors as glass clinked and cracked in their wake.

When they were a couple feet to safety, the sasquatch bent down and hauled his brother up with an arm wrapped over his shoulder. He didn’t make it a yard before he heard glass crunch behind them. The hunter glanced back over his shoulder, body tense and spine rigid.

Mary Worthington was climbing out of her mirror like something out of a nightmare. Only much, much worse because this was very real.

“Shit!” Sam muttered, dropping his brother on the ground with a grunt as he dove for the abandoned crowbar. If nothing else, it had iron in it.

His hand had just wrapped around cold metal when he felt it. The blood rushing to his brain, the pain filling his head like a cup soon to overflow. Sam tried to keep his grip on the weapon, tried to raise it to the ghost straightening up and stalking towards him and his brother. He could feel the blood leaking from his eyes, could feel it filling his nose and throat.

“S-Sammy,” he turned, but it felt like it took a lifetime. His brother was staring at him from eyes squinting past blood and pain. He was trying to point at something. “Mir-mirror. Use a mirror.”

Sam turned back to the ghost, feet dragging across the glass-scattered floor. She had a jagged piece in hand, clenched around a bloody fist and poised to kill. He looked to his left, where an intact mirror was lying on its side. With a deep breath, he grabbed at the thing and struggled to hold it up, praying to God that they could turn her vengeful justice on herself.

Because if not, they were screwed.

Mary choked on her own screams and cries of sin, clawing at her face to hide from whatever it was she saw in the mirror's surface. She writhed and bent in on herself, folding into impossible tightness before she collapsed into nothing more than a pile of blood.

The pain immediately drained from his head and Sam fell to the ground. He wrapped his hand around the crowbar once more and proceeded to smash the mirror to pieces.

Dean stumbled to his feet and made his way to Mary Worthington's mirror. He kicked it hard, nearly losing his balance. The mirror fell to the ground, cracks spiraling through it and breaking the smooth surface.

"Bitch," he muttered as he turned around to look at his brother. He slid to his knees, wincing at the glass biting into his legs.

Sam huffed out a laugh, sitting back on his heels and looking at the destroyed shop around them. "This has to be a couple hundred years of bad luck."

"Just what we need." Dean laughed, stopping to spit out a mouthful of blood, but laughing all the same.

That was, until they heard the sirens in the distance.

"Shit," the older of the two muttered, pushing himself up again and grabbing his brother to help him stand. "Someone must have heard the showdown."

"We weren't exactly subtle," Sam chuckled back, grabbing the crowbar and the flashlight as they raced out of the store. They had to take anything that might have their prints. But damn, was bending over a bad idea in his current state.

"You know how to smash a mirror *quietly* and didn't tell me?"

He grinned at his brother as they hobbled as quickly as two people covered in blood and nearly dying of an aneurysm could. Neither should probably be driving, but it wasn't like they had much of a choice. Dean put the Impala into drive and the two hauled ass away from Estate Antiques before the cops showed up.

-o-o-o-

They were pulling off the main highway and into the hotel they were camped at for the night when Sam started the conversation he knew his brother would fight tooth and nail to avoid. The older hunter turned to him expectantly as he put the car in park. There was still a streak of dried blood across his left cheek and the corner of his eye, despite his best attempts to wipe at his face with the sleeve of his jacket.

"Dean, who is it you think you got killed?"

Dean Winchester stared at his brother, honestly debating what to say. He knew what he had to say, but it wasn't what he wanted to say. He wanted to tell him the truth. Or at least, he didn't want to lie to him again. Didn't want to cause that look in his eyes when he thought his big brother didn't trust him.

But he didn't have much of a choice and it looked like time was damn determined to repeat itself in some ways no matter what he did. It friggin' sucked.

"No can do, Sammy." He gave a weak-ass smile. The one that said he knew what his brother wanted, but couldn't give it to him. "If I told you, then I'd have to kill you."

Sam looked pissed at him making light of it, but it was a misdirect that would keep him from digging deeper, at least for now. He certainly adopted that expression that said he knew Dean didn't trust him. But he didn't say much, just settled back with a full grown man's pout and indignantly insisted, "It's Sam."

"Course it is."

-o-o-o-

The masses of Hell would be muttering and whispering for weeks. Something was up. Something was coming. Two meetings by the powerhouses of Hell in less than a week, and not one of them had tried to kill the others.

And none of the three aforementioned leaders of the Underworld were happy about it.

"He knew my *name*. They summoned me by my bloody name!" Crowley was spewing in his anger, red faced and hair out of place from constant tugging. He had been pissed as soon as he and the barmy yellow eyed bastard returned to Hell.

Azazel, far more calm and composed, had suggested an emergency meeting with Lilith. She brought along her top torturer, much to the displeasure of everyone involved.

"And then, to top it off, this bastard agrees to my head on the chopping block!" The King of the Crossroads thumbed at his companion, as if the motion itself could somehow stab Azazel through the heart and rip his life force out to roast on a spit.

He was just a little displeased by current events.

"Quit your whining, Crowley." Alastair looked at the other man with great displeasure and more than a little disdain. The day to day dealings of Hell and Earth were below him. He had humans to be breaking; his talents were far more needed elsewhere.

The crossroads demon sputtered and the purpling of his face promised both retribution and possible self-asphyxiation. Whichever one happened first. "Whining? Whining, he says!"

"Enough." The gathered men turned their attention at the powerful command coming from such a small body. Lilith regarded them all like idiot children she hardly had the time to discipline. "Clearly, Dean Winchester is getting information from *someone*."

"There's been no movement at the gate." Azazel was as calm and indifferent as always. Perhaps that was why their Father had picked him to start everything. "It's not Heaven."

"Then a pagan," Lilith supplied, looking less than pleased. While it was a far better situation than the cloud-hoppers, she hated dealing with those primitives. "We anticipated the lesser deities taking offence at us ending the world."

She said it so casually. Crowley might have found entertainment in that, if he wasn't still boiling over (and rightly so, might he add). Of course, the best part was that she was missing the most likely category of saboteur to their little party. The category he, himself fit into when he wasn't busy playing his part as an officer in the Apocalypse Club.

"Or a demon." Alistair seemed unaffected by the treason he so easily suggested and Crowley resisted glaring daggers in his general direction. "A traitor would benefit greatly from the power struggle a coup would cause if Lucifer fails to rise."

The little girl and current Queen of Hell balked. "A coup? You're

suggesting some demon thinks *hunters* can stop us? Let alone kill… who? Me? Azazel? You? Don't make me laugh, Alistair."

Crowley had to use all his not insignificant self-control to ignore the way she casually passed him over on that list. Oh, he could not wait for the day the Winchesters put this bitch's head on a spike. He might even offer his services. Perhaps he could suggest a few targets for that new gun of theirs.

Hell's top torturer just shrugged. He could care less what happened. Whether Lucifer rose or not, he would get to continue his work and that's all that mattered to him. "You've underestimated the Righteous Man once before, look where that got you."

Lilith seethed through gritted teeth and small fists. She spun on Azazel, who regarded her with little change in expression. "Pull your daughter off of John Winchester. Get someone else to track him down. I want her saddled up to Dean and finding out who or what the hell is helping him."

The yellow eyed demon shrugged in acquiescence. His eldest was the best of his children, and Dean was a serious demotion for her skills. But arguing with Lucifer's First was useless when she was like this.

He had little doubt his daughter would wheedle her way past the obvious holes in the hunter's defenses in less than a week. Finding someone else to get to John would be a challenge, though. He was a resourceful human, capable of giving even Hell's best the slip. If she was having trouble finding him, it was unlikely any of his other children would fare better.

As the meeting broke up, Azazel pondered an option he had not previously considered. He hadn't needed to. But it looked like their timetable was speeding up, and that would require more…aggressive planning.

Perhaps it was time to take a page out of Dean Winchester's book. There were more than a couple pagans and monsters with skill sets far more suited to tracking than a demon's.

-o-o-o-

Over the next couple of weeks, the brother's fell into an easy routine. Find a hunt, kill the monster, rinse and repeat. Sometimes rinse really, really, really well. God, Dean had not needed to relive the bug curse ever, ever again.

He'd been worried at the beginning – damn near gave himself a panic attack actually – about not following their steps exactly as they had the first time. What if they missed hunts where they had saved people? What happened to those souls this time around? And how screwed up could he make the timeline before he started seeing consequences? What was one life, versus stopping the apocalypse?

The nightmares generated from those questions alone were enough to keep Dean up most nights.

It happened on occasion. Of course it happened. The older hunter couldn't remember every hunt they'd been on, try as he might, and some he could remember the monster or a memorable moment, but not enough of the important details to track the case down. Especially when, more often than not, he couldn't recall when or where it would happen.

They'd roamed the country last time, checking news articles and obituaries and making their way hunt to hunt. There was no way to say which newspapers they'd picked up, which town they were in when they found their next case. He tried to go by instinct, but in reality it was a fucking guessing game and there was nothing he could do when he got it wrong.

The lack of déjà vu was always his first clue.

It sucked how badly he hoped for it now, how he started the mantra in his head when they entered whatever nameless town was in need of saving. A silent, repeated prayer, begging for the trippy sense of familiarity to start any second now. Because going without it meant they'd done something different this time around. It meant innocent people they were supposed to save were going to die instead.

It was another drop in the cup of changing the future and Dean wasn't sure how full that cup was, or how much it could hold from the start.

The older hunter never knew what monster they had missed or where he'd messed up (had he skipped a local newspaper? Decided to turn left on the highway when last time he went right? Had he distracted Sam with some inane joke right at the moment the kid would have found the hunt?) He lived in complete paranoia the first week after the Wendigo as they looked for their next gig. Eventually Sam threatened a mutiny over driving rights and a trip straight to Bobby's for a break and possibly a head check if his brother didn't calm the hell down and relax.

Luckily, Sam seemed to think it was the whole 'demons want my little brother on a silver platter' anomaly causing the odd behavior.

So Dean caved and forced himself to let whatever would happen, happen.

Besides, if Time wanted so badly to walk the same road, then it could deal with the cleanup whenever Dean fucked up.

Right?

-o-o-o-

He knew the second she kissed him that she wasn't human.

She was gorgeous. Never-ending curves and full breasts, everything just barely contained in the sinfully tight jean skirt and cut off top that perfectly fit the dive bar they were in. She even had the cowboy boots that screamed 'kinky.' Sex was clearly on the menu tonight, and up until she'd locked lips with him, Dean had considered ordering the full course meal.

He'd never kissed a demon hiding behind the face of a human before: only the crossroads demon, and he'd known what he was getting himself into with that one. The background taste of sulfur in this demon's mouth was unmistakable, though, and stomach-turning. How the hell Ruby talked her way into his brother's bed tasting like that, he'd never know.

They managed to play it cool. He signaled to Sam that something was up in the same line he used to invite the woman back to his place. Sammy rolled his eyes appropriately and didn't bother watching them leave with her draped over his brother like silk. They made their way out of the bar and started the block and a half walk back to the motel. He stalled for time using every other walled-surface as an excuse for heavy groping, selling it hard.

Next gas station they stopped at, he was buying out their supply of mouthwash and toothpaste.

Sam was already in the room when they stumbled in. She was stripping Dean of his jacket when he stepped out from behind the door, a bottle of holy water in one hand and the *Key of Solomon* in the other.

"Shit." She didn't even try to deny it as Dean took three hasty steps

out of the devil's trap spray-painted into the crappy carpet. Yeah, their fake credit card was definitely getting charged for that one come morning.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand but it did little to chase away the foul taste still clinging on his tongue. The bitch crossed her arms, borrowed face full of disbelief, anger, and amusement all wrapped up in a smirk that was eerily familiar to Dean. He didn't recognize the woman playing host, and it was kind of hard to tell demons apart by facial expressions alone. They pretty much all had the same basic personality, bought on discount at *'Evil Villains and Cliché Monsters Co.',* just ratcheted up to different levels.

Sam started the exorcism and the woman sneered.

"How'd you know?" She directed her question at the older Winchester with a hint of a smirk. The demon was clearly pissed, but in a calm sort of way that screamed 'cat' in the canary-who's-about-to-get-eaten scenario. Which put Dean on edge, considering he and his brother were definitely supposed to be the cats here.

He got the uncomfortable feeling that he had, in fact, met this demon before.

"You taste like sulfur, bitch."

She laughed, even as she choked on her own black essence.

-o-o-o-

"Why would demons still be after us?" Sam let out a frustrated noise as they packed up and hit the road, not daring to stay overnight in a town where demons had found them. Dean climbed into the driver's seat, wondering if he still remembered the ingredients for those Hex bags Ruby always gave them. With the bunker proofed seven ways to Sunday, it had been a while since he made one. "I thought we had a deal. I'm hunting!"

The older brother just shrugged, less surprised and far less concerned about Hell being on their six. It was kind of expected, actually. "Deal didn't say anything about them leaving us alone. Just Jess. Besides, whatever Yellow Eyes wants you for is big. I'm not surprised they're keeping an eye on us."

Sam looked less than happy at that.

-o-o-o-

It was in Indiana they caught trail of a skinwalker, or what they thought was a skinwalker. Dean wasn't sure as nothing memorable was coming up about this hunt. They'd have to see what John's journal said, since he was pretty rusty on the monsters.

"Wait," Sam pulled up short on their way back to the Impala. Surprise was written all over his face. "You have Dad's journal?"

"Yeah, it's-" Dean stopped. Because it wasn't in the trunk. He'd done inventory back in Stanford and again before they left Boston for the wendigo hunt. Its absence hadn't occurred to him then but it sure as hell did now. He thumped his fist on the roof of the impala and resisted the urge to swear like a sailor.

Dad's journal was in a box in the evidence locker of the Jericho Police Department.

Son of a bitch!

-o-o-o--

"This is a terrible idea."

"For the thousandth time. Shut. Up."

Dean stretched his arms up as far as he could, flashlight held between his teeth, as he worked the edge of a knife under the sill of a second story window of the JPD.

Okay, so this was a terrible idea. Breaking into a police station was easy pickings for Ten-Years-From-Now Sam. But Fresh-Out-Of-College Sam lacked the confidence and still held enough sanity to realize breaking into a building full of cops was *a really terrible idea*. Which made him a horrible breaking-and-entering partner.

Technically, Sam wasn't breaking in. Dean was. His gargantuan brother was just acting as support. Six and a half feet of it.

"Are you sure this is how we did it in your dream, Dean?" the whiney moose whined, wincing as Dean purposefully dug his heel into his giant shoulders.

"Just shut up and lift, Sammy. I've almost got it."

"It's Sam."

Dean was gonna kill him. Right after he covered his loud mouth in duct tape.

“Right. Sam. Short for Sam-fucking-amantha. The whiniest bitch in all of-” The latch lifted with a click and Dean broke out in a grin. “Aha! Got it!”

He hoisted himself up, reveling in his young, strong muscles. Dude, growing old sucked. He wiggled his way through the narrow window.

Sam breathed a sigh of relief as his brother’s feet finally left his sore shoulders. He was going to have bruises. He watched Dean pass through the window, shoulders then torso and hips. Suddenly, he disappeared altogether with a crash and a muffled yelp from the other side of the wall.

“…Dean?”

A hand waved floppily at him through the window. He heard another crash and several expletives as Dean made his way out of the supply room.

This was a terrible idea.

Chapter 12: Season 1: Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Our Mystery Beast makes it's first appearance, the boys contemplate their existence in this timeline, Azazel is being a dirty rotten no good demon, and Dream-Cas gets his fishing on.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 11

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Crowley was done. He was beyond done with everything. Not only was he now an unwilling participant of the Apocalypse he'd spent years planning to avoid, bound by contract in his own damn trade, but his talents were once more wasted playing the friggin' messenger. Again.

Letting the whole world burn was looking more appetizing by the minute.

The King of the Crossroads scuffed the toe of his favorite Italian leather shoes against the dirt with more force then necessary. He'd have his tailor buff those clean when he got home. Someone deserved to suffer his indignation.

There was a rustle to his left and he huffed. *Finally*.

A beast emerged from the forest, massive paws pressing down lose dirt and sticks and leaves. Fiery amber eyes regarded the demon as the thing settled on its haunches.

"Tokorum," Crowley greeted with a nod of his head and no mention of how the damn animal was two hours late. "Pleasure as always."

"You're a terrible liar, Crowley." His voice was a rumble that rolled across the demon's awareness. He resisted the shiver that started at the base of his neck and crawled down his spine. Damn telepaths.

"I am a *fantastic* liar. I'm just not putting in any effort." He pulled his hands from his pockets. Pleasantries exchanged, it was time to get down to business. Thank Satan. "We have a task for you."

The fur along the thing's back rose as it bristled. His trunk swung to the side in indignation. "I am not your servant."

Crowley clenched his teeth. Good God Almighty, was he ever done. "It's a paid task."

The beast settled almost immediately. The old ones were always so much testier, and Tokorum was a right bastard compared to most of his kind. Crowley had not been thrilled to be the one dealing with the thing. But, as Azazel pointed out, he had the most history with the creature.

Yay for him.

"What is the payment?"

"Ten souls."

The words had hardly finished passing his lips when Tokorum countered. "One hundred."

Crowley balked. At first, because he thought the beast was joking. And then again when he realized that was not the case. He stared at the thing in both shock and disgust. "Well, aren't we greedy," he mocked, eyeing the enormous monster from head to tail. "Perhaps you should reconsider, darling. You're starting to get a bit chubby."

The growl was a physical one, and it rumbled through the earth as paws shifted in agitation across the ground. Crowley hardly batted an eye. Tokorum did not scare him in the slightest.

"Damned souls are not as good."

The demon rolled his eyes. "You don't even know what the job is."

"No job is worth only ten."

"Yes, well, damned souls are more expensive. Less of them, you see." Crowley gave a grim smile, the one that said *'don't negotiate with me, I'm the bloody king, sweetheart.'* "I'll give you fifteen."

"Seventy-five. I must insist, *Fergus*."

Bloody telepaths.

It was the demon's turn to growl low in his throat. It was a warning that the beast would not survive the meeting much longer. Hell and

its plan be damned.

“You know what?” Crowley suddenly brightened, straightening with a wide smile. “I’m in a generous mood.” Mostly because he wanted this meeting to be over as much as the damn creature. “Let’s call it an even fifty, and I get to rip your heart out and feed it to your prey if you ever use THAT BLOODY NAME AGAIN.”

The creature’s curled ears twitched at the volume change. Crowley released a deep breath, straightened his tie, and regained his demonic composure.

“What is the task?”

That was more like it. “We need John Winchester. Alive and *whole*.”

“No.”

Crowley gave it more than a few moments thought before he decided that burning the entire woods to the ground would be a touch dramatic. People would probably talk. So instead focused his rage into a sharp huff.

The dumb beast did not seem especially grateful that his life was being spared by Crowley’s self-control.

“A hunter like that has a reputation, Crowley, one that spreads quickly. We have avoided the attention of such men for centuries by *not* courting their attention.”

“You don’t need to approach him,” Crowley answered with a roll of his eyes. “We’ll handle that. We just need to know *where* he is.”

The beast regarded him. But the demon could already see he had won. He always could, especially when it came to the desperate or greedy. And Tokorum was certainly one of those things. After a moment, the creature gave a nod and rolled his head and shoulders to the side as he moved back into the forest.

“I’ll be hearing back from you shortly, then?”

The beast paused, looking back over his shoulder at the king of the crossroads. His amber eyes conveyed his annoyance at the falsely sweetened condescension, as had been the intention.

“It will not take long. Everyone sleeps eventually. Even hunters.”

-o-o-o-

Dean sat in the passenger seat of the Impala, staring at the leather jacket in his lap. His old leather jacket. Well, his now.

It had been in a second evidence box next to the one he'd gone looking for at the Jericho Police Department. He knew the cops would eventually find the hotel room, even without the brothers to accidentally tip them off to it. But to be honest, he'd forgotten about his Dad's jacket.

He'd missed that thing.

Sam watched his older brother as he stared down at their dad's jacket like it was a bomb rigged to blow at the slightest jolt. He really had no clue what was going on with him, but he was pretty much at wits end about it.

"Let's find him." His brother looked up as Sam stared expectantly at him. "We need to find him, Dean."

That seemed to jostle the older man out of his morose thoughts and he leaned forward to finally pull the thing on. It felt good to wear it again. "No, we gotta keep hunting. Demon say so."

"What do you think Dad's doing?" Sam balked, incredulity and frustration growing on his features. "He's hunting, and we can help. We need to help. Hell, we probably know more about the yellow-eyed-demon at this point than he does!"

"Don't count on it," Dean muttered under his breath. He could still hear John's words, pressed against his ear, the last thing he ever said to him. Kill Sammy. Yeah, fuck going and finding John Winchester. The man knew plenty and had never shared it with them.

Besides, if there really was any hope of saving him then Dean and Sam needed to stay away. That's how the demons had caught him the first time, it was how Azazel got to him the second time, and it was the reason he ended up in Hell after all of it.

Nope, John was safer if they just stayed the hell away. And so were they.

"Look, we don't even know where he is. His cell's still off. Last we heard he was here and he's clearly not here anymore. Trail's gone cold, Sam. So drop it." Dean gestured emphatically for his brother to

get them back on the road. They had places to be and none of them were Jericho, California.

Sam's jaw was clenched tighter than a dog with a bone, but he turned the key in the ignition (maybe a bit harder than necessary, to Dean's chagrin) and pulled back onto the highway.

-o-o-o-

They still saved people. People that maybe hadn't been saved the first time around.

The skinwalker in Indiana was definitely off-menu once they got to it. Dean would have remembered a guy posing as an alligator in the sewers and a Sasquatch in the woods just out of town in order to draw some tourism and help generate income for the small bookshop his girlfriend ran on the main drag. Apparently, the store specialized in tales of urban legends and fictional beasts.

The brothers ended up letting that one live once he proved he wasn't the one mauling people to death. Turned out? Actual rabid dog. That shit never happened for real.

So much so that, for a while there, Dean was looking for candy wrappers at the crime scenes.

They did manage to save a pair of kids from an ugly end and put the unfortunate pooch down. Couldn't get the older girl out of the six painful rabies shots to the gut, though. She got her arm munched on protecting her baby brother from the dog before the hunters showed.

Dean gave the kid mad props.

Other cases were more familiar. They managed to avoid the entire 'I'm not a sadist and a murderer' shapeshifter fiasco by catching the freak before he had the opportunity to knock Dean out. That case he sure as shit remembered. Which was *GREAT*; emphasis on the all caps. He didn't have to imagine how many times he *wouldn't* be asked if he was the same Dean Winchester from St. Louis.

You know. The dead, rapey one.

The déjà vu itself was weird as hell. Sometimes he could tell you exactly what was about to occur, but in a fuzzy, dreamlike way that gained clarity only right before it happened. He'd saved himself a nasty cut to the shoulder from a werewolf by remembering a second

before the swing to friggin' *duck* this time.

Other times he repeated the same course of action, no matter how rotten his gut felt or how hard he tried to recall why. In Twin Falls, he'd tripped over a dog, tangled himself in the owner's leash, and ended up with a black eye courtesy of a lamp post after having *appreciated* a woman walking past. He hadn't remembered that happening until he saw Sam laughing so hard he was crying. Yeah. That part he recalled perfectly.

Sometimes, the same shit happened no matter how hard Dean avoided it. They'd caught the Hook Man case again, and he remembered the Pastor's daughter being the cause. But the same people still died, despite burning her silver cross necklace two days sooner. This time around, the Hookman worked on an accelerated schedule, like what had happened was supposed to happen, no matter what the brothers did to change it.

Dean wanted to find Time and punch the bitch in the face.

She could at least be consistent. She could, you know, not give him hope that things could change – that they could save people this time that hadn't been saved, that he could stop the apocalypse from happening, that he could stop Sam from dying – only to yank it away in a single hunt that showed Dean he really had no control at all.

He cursed Cas's name over and over again because he could. The guy could have at least left him with a manual or something. Some friggin' instructions for this crap. A whole chapter on self-help entitled 'Yes, You Can Change the Future' would be good by him.

The worst bit about being from the future, though, was being with Sam. Don't get him wrong; it was great – fan-freaking-tastic, actually – to see his kid brother again, lighter than he'd been in a decade and years before the various rifts that would drive them apart and back again. Some days Dean forgot when he was from and what he had to do. Some days he just enjoyed the drive, the banter, and the life.

But letting his guard down meant forgetting that he wasn't the Dean this Sam knew. That this wasn't the Sam he knew, or at least not the most recent Sam that he knew.

It meant mentioned that time they'd caught that lucky rabbit foot case and Sam had been a *literal* walking disaster.

Only, Sam had no idea what he was talking about, and Dean had to

awkwardly scramble and play if off like it had been Garth. Because who wouldn't confuse the mouse that was Garth with the Moose that was Sam Winchester. The two were just so similar.

He couldn't police what he said all the time, though. When he tried early on, he didn't last the day before he was so exhausted and frustrated that he ended up mostly tongue-tied any time he tried to speak. Sam had eyed him worriedly, to which he'd finally snapped. When the epic rant (that had made absolutely no sense to either party and was mostly just grunts and wordless yells) finally finished, his brother told him to stop PMSing, Dean called him a bitch, got a jerk in return, and that was that. Dean decided he'd just get by saying whatever came to mind, as usual. He'd be no good to the future if he spent all his time *thinking*.

So he slipped up. A lot. Sam's Bitchface #12 became official in Dean's count. The younger Winchester used it. A lot.

The older brother categorized the look as the most monotone of bitchfaces, and although it had several sub-versions of *'what the hell is wrong with you?'*, *'I don't know what you're talking about,'* and *'Where are you getting this from?',* the most base expression boiled down to *'you are lying to me.'*

Dean hated that face.

On top of all that, he was pretty sure his brother was keeping a list of his own. He'd play on his phone or pull out the laptop as inconspicuously as possible, especially when he thought Dean was asleep. The older hunter couldn't be sure (he hadn't managed to find the file yet and Sam seemed to police his electronics a lot more carefully than he remembered) but he knew his kid brother. And suspicion always led to sleuthing. Which meant keeping lists.

There was crap that he could do about it, even if he did find whatever Sammy was always writing down. It wasn't like he could delete it without raising more suspicion. And trying to address it off hand would go about as well as sneaking out of the motel room with clown shoes on. Dean wasn't the most graceful when it came to subtlety.

Besides, even with Sam being far from stupid, there was still only about a 0.1% chance in hell that 'time travel' would be among the theories he came up with.

Instead, there was just a growing tension pervading their brotherhood. It was a tension he was uncomfortably familiar with.

Which royally sucked, because damn it, this was supposed to be before all of that. Back when they were just brothers, before the lies and the distrust. Sure, it wasn't nearly as negative as it would be in the future (*wouldn't be*, Dean reminded himself, *you're going to stop all that*) but it was still there.

And it sucked.

-o-o-o-

"I want another go."

Azazel glanced sidelong at the voice bubbling up through the goblet of blood on Amanda Stutson's white and pink dresser. She was six months old today, sleeping peacefully in the crib beneath him. Her mother was still choking on her own life liquid, ever weakening fingers clasping at her slashed throat as she leaked impressive amounts of blood all over her daughter's pristine carpet.

Really, white in a nursery was just asking for trouble.

The yellow eyed demon gave little Amanda's cheek a soft stroke and big brown eyes sleepily opened. Her daddy had unwittingly sold her humanity to him seven years ago exactly in exchange for a successful climb up the company ladder and a soon-to-be-dead wife far too pretty to actually be interested in him.

"Get me topside, and I'll get you Dean Winchester."

Azazel regarded the goblet with distaste. His daughter may be his creation, turned by his own blade and trained from the moment she'd taken the knife under her hand, but that didn't mean much more to a demon than pride.

And right now, he was not feeling particularly proud.

"You didn't last an hour with them."

He could picture her face, charred and twisted with the very essence of evil that had warped them all, scrunched into something pissy at his words. He could hear it in her voice. "Dean's definitely on the take. I don't know who's feeding him information, but it's in real time."

Azazel raised an eyebrow at that. If that information was right, it severely limited the number of things that could be assisting Dean

Winchester. There weren't many creatures that could speak and not be seen by a demon.

A psychic perhaps. They hadn't considered human involvement as the wrench in their plans. But if some upstart psychic saw what was coming and decided to change it….

A powerful psychic like, say, a prophet?

"Did he say how he knew?" He rolled up his sleeve, smiling down at the baby who was beginning to wake up, kicking her little feet and starting a fuss. She must be hungry. He would help with that.

"Said I tasted like sulfur." Her father's skeptic silence was question enough. "I'm pretty sure he's full of shit, but considering he tasted like righteousness…."

Azazel chuckled lightly at her disgust and held his wrist out over the crib, digging his nail into his skin hard enough to slice through the fleshy meatsuit.

"I can still get to him," his daughter insisted once more, blood bubbling with determination. She had always been a stubborn thing. He'd liked that about her the minute he'd dug his blade into her soft belly.

"How?" Little Amanda blinked in shock when something warm splashed onto her lips and chubby cheeks.

"I'll go through Sam." When he scoffed, she continued, "Worst case, you get to find out if he's in on it too, or if it's just Dean. But I don't think he is. And I'll get to them through him."

Azazel did not immediately answer, instead watching Amanda's little tongue slide out experimentally with the lack of coordination that came with still growing muscles. In the face of his silence, his daughter's stubborn hold-out caved to begging. "Just get me topside, and I'll get you what you need."

Amanda began to cry as the metallic tang bit at her tongue and she tasted evil.

"I need the Colt."

The silence that followed from the goblet spoke volumes as to what he was asking. On the other end, trapped in Hell and desperate to once

more escape, his daughter hesitated. A human reaction that had not been carved completely out of her. Should she fail again, he'd have to correct that mistake.

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly, voice bolstering with determination he knew she did not feel. "But one thing at a time. Sam Winchester first."

"I'll find you a gate." With that, the blood silenced and settled. Amanda was kicking up quite a fit now, and Azazel heard the telltale sounds of a waking father in the hall.

"Honey? Is there someone in there with you?"

The demon stroked the infant's cheek, swiping up the missed blood and painting her lips red with it. Looked like little Amanda would be growing up an orphan.

-o-o-o-

Dean was fishing off the dock in the mountains again. He was halfway through his first beer and his line hadn't caught anything yet. That didn't usually happen until after Cas showed up.

"We need to talk."

Speak of the angel.

Dean looked up at the man, haloed by the sun as he always was when he first appeared by the hunter's side. Sometimes he wondered if Cas did it on purpose, or if that bit was all him. Giving an angel a halo of light.

He snorted. There was something wrong with his head. Really.

"Dean."

"So talk," he bit out, looking back out at the lake. He still remembered his last dream with Not-Real-Cas and the way the angel looked when he asked why he had let the devil in. So nonplussed, like the answer was obvious and Dean was just another stupid human too small to comprehend.

Just thinking about it pissed him off.

Castiel was silent long enough for Dean to get even more annoyed. He refused to look at him – at what his mind had summoned up as his

best friend, because the guy next to him *wasn't real* – but he knew his friend was staring at him with that hurt look on his face, and he didn't want to see it. He was the one who was hurting, he was the one who deserved answers here. Not Cas.

"You need to be more careful. The changes you're making, they will not go unseen." Dean didn't answer, instead focusing a morose and angry glare on the line sunk into the lapping water. He waited for the inevitable tug. "Dean, I am serious. The demons have already taken notice. Meg was just the first."

The hunter straightened in the camping chair, finally looking at the angel.

Son of a bitch.

Of course it was Meg. He'd known that stupid smirk and bitch attitude. How had he not picked up on that sooner? No, he had to wait for his brain to figure it out and tell him via Fake-Dream-Cas-Chat. He must be more of a masochist then he thought to keep putting himself through this shit.

"What am I supposed to do then, huh? You didn't leave me with much to go on, Cas!" He stood up, leaving behind the pole and fish to face the angel. They'd always been the same height, but every time he got into Castiel's personal space the angel had a habit of somehow looking up at him. Like Dean had more than even odds at being the stronger of the two.

It should have been his first clue when it was Lucifer wearing those eyes.

Dean turned away, fists clenching.

"You are angry with me."

"Hell yes I am, Cas!" He spun back to his best friend, gesturing between the two of them with his hand. "You and me? We're not okay, and we're not going to be okay until you can tell me why you let Lucifer ride you for weeks. Explain it to me in a way that this stupid human can comprehend!"

Castiel frowned at the hunter. He didn't need to ask what it was he should be explaining.

"You are far from stupid, Dean." The man considered punching the

angel in the face for yet again avoiding the question. But he didn't have to. "I needed to be…useful."

Something inside the hunter lurched at the words. It was something angry and it was something hurt.

"What?" Dean waivered, staring at the angel who looked no bigger than a man. "No, seriously, *what*?"

Castiel shifted, uncomfortable, and Dean was suddenly flooded with cold. Like a bucket of ice water being poured over a pleasant memory. This, this felt too real. All of a sudden, he was no longer dreaming. This was him and Cas, and something was trying to claw its way up his throat and choke him.

"Cas…Why doesn't this feel like a dream?"

The angel gave him a sidelong look – one of his old, fierce ones that told him to stop asking questions.

"You need to be more careful, Dean. The waves you're making, they are getting too big." The angel took a step forward, forcing the hunter to counter with a step back, lest they be all but pressed together. And two dudes didn't do…that.

"This plan- Hell's plan, Heaven's plan, *my Father's* plan- it has been in motion for a millennia, and written in stone for far longer. You cannot stop following the script without those who have read it a thousand times noticing your alterations."

Dean swallowed heavily, staring into those piercing blue irises. "Then what am I supposed to do, Cas?"

The angel watched him, eyes darting back and forth between his own. "You must let some things happen, Dean. Somethings must stay the same."

The hunter wet his lips nervously. He could feel the warmth of Castiel's body so close to his own. Could feel the ends of the trench coat brush against his jeans in the breeze. Something….something wasn't right here.

Castiel had never given off warmth as an angel. Vessels were always oddly cold.

"Cas," he breathed and he swore the angel swayed closer. "Are you

really here?"

The angel put a hand to his chest and something in Dean flared for a moment, so brief he wasn't sure it had happened at all. So confusing he was sure he made it up. Then Cas pushed and Dean was tumbling backwards into the water.

-o-o-o-

He woke with a gasp, hand to his chest and lungs telling him not to breathe because it would be a mouthful of lake he inhaled. The hunter still choked, despite being in a hotel room, sitting upright in bed and definitely not in the water surrounded by fall leaves and fish.

Sammy was sitting in the bed across from him, legs over the side and a scrap of paper gripped his hands. Dean let his breathing calm down to manageable levels before he even attempted to speak. His brother beat him to it.

"Did you have a vision?"

The older hunter wanted to groan. God, he was sick of lying to Sam, and he was even more sick of hearing that question. "No," he answered, chest still heaving and fighting valiantly to sound normal. "I…I don't know."

Because what the hell had that been? For a second there…he'd sworn he'd felt Cas. The angel had been there, in his head, like the good old days. But that wasn't possible. It wasn't.

'Cas?' he whispered the prayer, sending it upwards with a thought of the nerd angel and heaven. *'Castiel?'*

Nothing happened, and Dean tried not to be disappointed. Of course it hadn't been him. He was ten years in the future, lying dead in a graveyard. Right next to Sammy.

"Dean?" He looked over at to his little brother, who was very much alive despite the slightly ashen pallor of his skin. "I had one."

That got the hunter's attention, and he straightened up, hand falling from his chest. "A vision?"

Sam nodded, fingers tightening around the paper in his hand. No, not paper. A picture.

“I think…I think we have to go back home. Back to Kansas.”

Chapter 13: Season 1: Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> **Chapter Warnings:** Our episode-iest episode yet. Dean's still swearing, Sammy's getting fed up, and Missouri Moseley never changes 'cause some things have to stay the same.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 12

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean needed time to think.

How was it possible he'd bought himself ten years of borrowed time, and still he needed more?

He remembered the case. How could he forget? It was one of the hardest cases he and Sam had ever worked, solely because it was so damn personal. It was his mom. And it all started with a solid crack straight through the foundation of his entire world view. It was when black and white, supernatural and normal, human and monster, turned grey.

And smack dab in that new grey block was little Sammy.

Overwhelmed hadn't quite covered Dean's emotional turmoil that day.

This time around wasn't going much better. He hadn't wanted to go home ten years ago, when he'd promised himself he would never set foot in that town again. He didn't want to go home now, not after he'd kept that promise going forward. They'd never gone back to Lawrence, Kansas.

At least, not without dick angels sending him there involuntarily thirty years in the past (and then voluntarily, but almost dying to do it – *'weakened' my ass*.)

That town did *not* have good memories. And Dean did not feel particularly inclined to try his luck at making new ones.

He swallowed, but his throat was dry and there was nothing to go down. Sam was watching him, a storm building that he didn't have the radar capacity to see coming.

"Dean, did you hear what I said? I'm dreaming about our old house. That's where it all started, right? That has to mean something!" Sam was standing, body tense and agitation coursing through him like a drug. Dean couldn't split his brain power between watching his brother pace like a caged animal and figuring out what the hell he was going to do.

"I know, I just….I need a minute, okay?"

He just needed half a second to think.

"What do you mean, you need a minute? That woman might be in danger, Dean. I mean, this might be the Yellow Eyed Demon, the thing that killed mom!"

Dean couldn't breathe. He didn't want to go home; he didn't want to see Mary's ghost, didn't want to see his mom again, just as he remembered her – his last memory of her – only to lose her once more. Didn't want to see her on fire, burning. He just needed a minute to figure out how to breathe again.

Sam dropped his arms, staring at his brother in disappointment and irritation. His teeth ground against each other as he looked away, hurt flaring into indignation. "You know what? You can do whatever you want. I'm going back to Lawrence and I'm saving those people."

He grabbed his jacket on his way out, throwing the door open and not bothering to shut it.

Dean swore, taking half a moment to throw a hissy fit before he scrambled off the bed and after his brother. Damn it, what the hell had crawled up Sammy's ass that he couldn't give him five minutes to think through just hopping in the car and driving back to the one place he had no intention of ever returning.

Sam was almost past the Impala by the time Dean caught up to him and made a grab for his arm. The taller man spun and Dean, instincts screaming, immediately let go and took a step back. Sam was half a move away from punching him, body language screaming the hit was incoming. He kept himself in check but just barely, and Dean raised his hands in a truce.

“I’m not gonna stop you, Sam. But can we at least pack up the damn car first?”

Sam glanced at the Impala, to the boxers and t-shirt his brother was clad in, to the hotel room door still open behind them. Shame at his impulsive behavior tinted his cheeks red. He looked away, still angry as hell, but a little guilt-ridden too.

“Yeah, alright.”

“Okay.” Dean dropped his hands and his brother pushed past him to re-enter the motel in the early morning light. The older Winchester let out a rough sigh, tugging at his hair.

‘Guess you get your wish, Cas. Guess some things are staying the same.’

-o-o-o-o-

In the car on their way to Kansas, in a silence that had reached the peak of tension between the two brothers, Dean finally cleared his throat. “It’s not ‘cuz of your visions.”

Sam had been waiting and immediately snapped in response, “I know that I don’t have them as often as you do, but that doesn’t mean they’re not important – that they don’t mean something.”

The way he spat it out made Dean’s stomach turn. Because that was his little brother, hurting and angry that Dean was treating him like a kid. Hurting because he felt like his brother didn’t take him seriously.

Hurting because he wasn’t as *good* as Dean.

The older brother had seen it over the years, when Sam struggled to pick up target shooting as well as Dean had. When John would take Dean on a hunt and leave Sam behind because he wasn’t ready yet.

When John gave Dean the Impala.

It had taken him years – roughly another four from this point in the timeline – to realize that his brother was often jealous of him and hurting that, in a family of hunters, he just didn’t belong. It had been baffling when he’d finally seen it (when Bobby had finally hit him over the head with it, really). Because Sam was amazing. He was a genius, and kind, and good. And Dean…God, Dean wasn’t any of those things.

He was nothing to be jealous of.

Sammy wasn't supposed to *want* visions. And he certainly wasn't supposed to be jealous of Dean having them too. Damn it, lying about having psychic dreams was supposed to make things better, not worse!

Sometimes he wondered if Time was just standing aside, watching Dean shoot himself in the foot repeatedly and getting a kick out of it.

"That- that's not- Sam, I know they're important! And the people you see, we're going to save every one of them. It wasn't…It wasn't the visions." Dean swallowed. He chanced a glance at his brother, who was watching him intensely. "I don't want to go back. I promised myself I'd never go back."

In a moment, Sam deflated. He was still angry, and that wasn't likely to change anytime soon, but his older brother rarely sounded so vulnerable. So honest. "We have to save that family."

"I know." Dean nodded firmly, fingers tight on the steering wheel as he watched the road pass by. "And we will. Just…give me a break, alright?"

Sam didn't answer, but he didn't argue either.

-o-o-o-

They got into Lawrence too late to knock on Jenny Richardson's door – on *their* door. So the two hunters found a motel on the outskirts of town to bunker down and catch some sleep for the night.

Sam was on the bed with his laptop out, watching his brother triple check their arsenal with the efficiency of a hunter dreading the hunt.

"You haven't seen anything, have you?"

Dean paused in his dismantling of his Remington 0870 sawed-off to look over nonchalantly. "Nah, nothing recently."

Sam saw his brother's arm move towards his chest, only to stop as the man noticed what he was doing and resume his maintenance of the gun. He wondered if Dean realized it was a tell.

"When are you going to stop lying to me, man?"

His brother sent him an offended glare. "I'm not lying to you,

Sammy."

"It's Sam. And yes, you are. You're not even good at it!" He swung his legs over the bed, sitting up and setting his computer aside. "I'm not stupid, Dean. You're different; you have been since Jericho. If you saw something-"

"I didn't see anything, Sam. And I am not different."

Sam's face twitched in a humorous smile. "Where's your necklace?"

Dean froze, and Sam could see him swallow from across the room. "What?"

"The amulet I gave you the Christmas you told me the truth." The younger Winchester's gaze bore straight through every lie his brother hid behind. "It's never *not* been on your neck for fourteen years, Dean. So where is it?"

Damn. Dean had hoped Sammy wouldn't notice. He should have known better. But the minute he'd seen in, that first night at Sam and Jess's apartment….he hadn't been able to stomach the sight of it. Of what it represented. Of the god it would never find, who didn't give a crap when they tried. The dead beat dad who abandoned his kids and called it a lesson

Just didn't feel right on his skin anymore.

So he'd stashed it in his go-bag and hadn't thought of it since.

"I've done every test imaginable to make sure you're you. But you're not *you*." Sam stood from the bed, but didn't approach his brother, who was refusing to look at him. "I can't help if you won't talk to me!"

The older hunter opened and closed his mouth half a dozen times, but the truth was he had no clue what to say. God, he wanted to share the load. Doing this alone was killing him. He needed someone to talk to. He needed his brother.

But he couldn't.

Some things had to stay the same.

"Fine." Sam let out a huff and shook his head. He turned in for the night and the tension between the brothers got worse.

-o-o-o-

The Impala sat outside the old Winchester house.

Sam glanced at his brother, at the tense hands still wrapped on the steering wheel despite the cooling engine. At the tense posture and the occasional, harried glances at the house through the corner of the windshield.

“Dean-”

“Don’t, Sammy.” Dean swallowed heavily and shook his head. “I can’t. So just don’t.”

“…You gonna be okay, man?”

It was an olive branch. Dean reached for the door handle and forced himself out of the car.

“Ask me again when this is over.” He slammed Baby’s door harder than he meant to, and gave her a brief brush of his fingertips in apology before crossing the street with his brother and heading for the house where everything in their lives had first gone wrong.

-o-o-o-

Jenny was just as warm and friendly as he remembered. And just as hurting, stressed, and scared by the thing plaguing her house.

Sam took them through the motions, and Dean didn’t say much until the woman mentioned the clogged sink.

“Don’t call a plumber.”

Jenny blinked, and both she and his brother looked at him questioningly. He cleared his throat.

“Uh, don’t call a plumber. We’ll- we’ll take care of the sink for you.”

Sam’s eyebrows reached for his hairline, but Dean shook his head. They had a lot better chance of not losing an arm than the guy she’d call in.

And he sort of recalled a liability battle the poor woman had to fight, so they might as well save her from that as well.

-o-o-o-

“You hate handy work,” Sam said as they left the house much later that day than they had first time around. Dean was wearing someone else’s dress shirt that didn’t fit him, which Jenny had handed over with a look of such heartbreak that the hunter almost told her wearing his soaking wet one would be fine. “And where did *you* learn how to fix a sink?”

Oh, sometime during the year he’d spent playing house with an incredibly patient woman and her awesome kid in an attempt at an apple pie life he could never really have.

“Shut up,” he grumbled as he opened the door to the impala. “There’s a poltergeist in the house. Really don’t think we should introduce *more* civilians for it to eat. Do you?”

Sam stopped, staring at his brother from across the hood of the car. “Poltergeist?”

Dean stared hard at his brother. God, he was tired of lying, he was tired of having to worry about lying, and he was tired of slipping up all the damn time and trying to back pedal out of it. He was just tired.

“Sari said it was on fire. A figure on fire, Dean. That doesn’t sound like a poltergeist.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t sound like a demon, either. And that’s what killed mom.” He opened the door and slid into the car. End of conversation, check please!

Sam didn’t have a response to that, so he climbed inside the car after his brother. “We need to get them out of that house.”

“We will.”

“No, now, Dean!”

The older hunter closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the Déjà vu added to his irritation. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t even know what he wanted to do, let alone what he could do. Because so far, all the normal cases had been pretty easy. Either suck it up and bide his time, or start changing things.

This wasn’t a normal case, he had no idea what he would even change – what he should change – if he could change anything at all. It sucked so badly.

“What would we do if it was a normal case?” He asked the question aloud, but he was asking himself more than anything.

Sam stared at him like he was crazy for a moment, before he sagged. “We’d work it, dig into the history of the house. Find out what happened.”

Dean nodded, turning the key in the engine. “Then that’s where we start.”

His little brother was quiet as they pulled away from their old house. But he looked at his older brother and softly asked, “Does this feel like a normal case to you?”

He was so sick of hearing questions he’d heard before. Like a broken record on repeat, with ten year skips. Unsure of what he said the first time around, he didn’t say anything at all. It was becoming his new default response.

-o-o-o-

They stopped at a gas station to use a phone book to find the garage their dad used to work at. Dean remembered he’d been a mechanic, but he couldn’t recall the name of the shop.

Sam left him to it, telling him he needed to make a bathroom run.

As he rounded the corner of the gas station towards the bathrooms on the side of the building, he pulled out his cell phone and hit the second speed dial. He checked over his shoulder to make sure Dean was still at the phone booth.

“Dad?” He faltered slightly, realizing he had no clue what to say. He was sort of winging it, here. “Dad, it’s Sam. I’m with Dean and we’re in Lawrence, back…back home. I think there’s something in our old house, and I think it has something to do with Mom’s death. If, uh…If you get this, get here. Dean could really use you, Dad. He’s taking it pretty rough...”

He hung up and headed back before his brother suspected anything.

-o-o-o-

“A palm reader? Do you know which one?”

Dean was trying really hard not to swear up and down like a sailor as

his brother talked with their dad's old shop partner. Because shit if he knew what he was going to do about Missouri Moseley. He'd be lucky if that hellfire of a woman didn't oust him on the spot.

But some things had to stay the fucking same, didn't they?

Especially since the second he suggested he not tag along with Sam, that maybe he go check out other leads, he got the angry, don't-you-dare version of Bitchface #12.

God, he hated that face.

-o-o-o-

Dean shoved everything he was thinking deep, deep down in his head when Missouri came into the sitting room that served as the little foyer for her business.

She grabbed Sam's hand, and the sasquatch listened in amazement as she asked about their missing father and expressed her condolences for his recent breakup. She turned to Dean next, and he withdrew physically as well as mentally, letting no part of himself within reach of the psychic.

Missouri narrowed her eyes at him, regarding him curiously. "What is it you don't want me to know, Dean?"

Sam's expression flattened and Dean stubbornly refused to look at him. "Can we just get on with what we came for?"

"What did you come for?"

Dean glared at the woman. He'd never liked Missouri, mostly because she didn't like him and he took some offense to that. Yeah, he knew he was fucked up and anyone with access to his head probably wouldn't like him very much either. But she didn't have to take it out on him as publically or humiliatingly as possible.

"You're the psychic, aren't you?"

Missouri's eyes narrowed dangerously and she took a step forward, forcing Dean back like a terrified colt. "Boy, you see me sawin' some bony tramp in half? You think I'm a magician? I may be able to read thoughts and sense energies but I can't just pull facts outta thin air!"

Dean reared back. How the hell had he stepped in that one *twice*?

The plump woman turned back to Sam, smiling gently. "So, you're father's missing and there's something in your old house?"

Dean gave up entirely when he got yelled at for *not* putting his feet on the coffee table *again*.

-o-o-o-

Standing in the destroyed kitchen, holes punched through walls, knives sticking out of cabinet doors, and a heavy silence reigning over the household, Sam turned to Missouri and asked her if it was over. If she was sure. There was worry etched on his features, alongside something else. Dean had seen that expression before, so when Missouri said she was sure, Dean already knew she was wrong. And when his brother expressed doubt, he agreed with him this time.

It changed nothing.

Jenny came back with the kids and kicked them out of her trashed house as politely as possible, Missouri headed home, and Sam and Dean still ended up camped outside the house in the Impala to wait for the worst so they could break into the house without scaring the crap out of the woman or having her call the cops.

"Did you feel it too?"

Dean glanced at his brother, who was watching the house intently. "No. But I trust you, Sammy."

Sam met his gaze, saw the same olive branch he'd offered that morning now handed back to him. He gave a small nod, and they were good.

Not great, but good.

Then Jenny was at the window, banging on the glass and screaming for help.

-o-o-o-

Sam went after the kids and Dean went to get Jenny out of her locked room. He could smell smoke and fire, and he feared the worst. But he still grabbed the panicking woman around her middle and hauled her downstairs, trusting his brother to get her kids.

He stopped at the threshold of the front door, remembering taking an

ax to it a lifetime ago. Remembering it as a barrier between him and his brother; a barrier he'd rather be on the other side of this time around. Jenny turned to him, panic warring with fear.

"Go! Jenny, go!" Dean pushed her through the doorway and turned back into the house as Sam came down the stairs. He was setting the kids down and looking behind him.

Sari grabbed her little brother and ran even as Sam's legs went out from under him and he hit the floor hard.

"Sammy!" Dean dove past the kids, grabbing at his brother. He missed by inches as Sam was dragged away from him, pulled by an invisible force. "Shit!"

The older Winchester scrambled to his feet, only to have a force like a sledgehammer hit him square in the stomach. He flew backwards with a pained grunt, straight through the front door. It slammed shut as he hit the concrete below the front steps.

But never let it be said Dean Winchester didn't roll with the punches. He was up and on his feet, using the momentum of the toss to make the whole thing look like one badass *Assassins Creed* move, running full speed for the trunk. That's where they kept the ax.

Sammy'll be fine. We all lived through this last time. He's fine. He's fine.

It was an ongoing mantra in his head as he took the stairs two at a time, launching the heavy weapon at the door with the last stride.

He's fine.

Swing. Crash. Splinter.

He was fine last time.

Swing, crash. Kick, splinter. He reached through to try the lock and went back to hacking away at the door when the dead bolt made no difference.

Time wants to stay the fucking same.

Still gripping the ax, he barreled through the barely intact door, screaming his brother's name as he headed for the kitchen on instinct.

You better be fine, Sammy.

His brother was pinned to the cabinets. He knew, despite seeing it many times in many different places held by so many different things, that he had seen exactly this before and almost sagged in relief.

Sammy was fine. He'd be fine. Because some things wouldn't change.

Dean took a chair to the head before he'd finished the thought. Splintered wood rained over him as he crashed into the cabinet beside his brother. Dean slid to the ground, dazed. Sam tried to call his name, choking on the pressure pressing down on him.

Well. He was pretty sure that was new.

The hunter let out a surprised cry as something wrapped around his legs and pulled him from the kitchen, down the hall and back towards the damaged front door. Oh hell no, he was not taking that stair case in a flying leap again. He knew how freaking lucky he had been not to break something the first time, *Assassin* or not.

Dean raised the ax with a struggle, slamming it into the ground with as mighty a swing as he could manage while being dragged across the hallway on his stomach. The blade dug deep and he held on for dear life as the Poltergeist tried to dislocate his legs at the sudden stop.

Light lit up the side of his vision, and he turned his head. The force holding him dropped, and his bottom half hit the ground with a thud. He could see fire in the next room, flickering just beyond his line of vision.

Mom.

Dean scrambled up, struggling for a moment to free the ax from the half foot drag-line he'd buried it in. Jenny wasn't going to have much of a house left when they were done. He slid into the kitchen as his brother cried out, "Wait! I know who it is…I can see her now."

His face was lit with the flickering light of her flames.

Green eyes slid to the figure even as the fire raged and warped and swirled itself out of existence, leaving only Mary Winchester in her nightgown, staring at her boys. Dean swallowed past the lump in his throat.

Ten years hadn't healed a damn thing that twenty-two hadn't already tried and failed.

“Mom,” Sam whispered, watching her in awe and amazement even as he remained trapped, crushed against the wall.

She smiled gently at him, pride and happiness fading into sadness, into regret. “I’m sorry.”

Dean couldn’t breathe. Because this time, this time he knew what she was apologizing for. For making the deal, for selling her child to a demon to save her husband, to get her apple pie life. For not protecting him that night, for not stopping Azazel. For leaving them. For starting everything to come that even she did not know.

Mary turned her back to her boys, standing protectively in front of them.

“No, mom, don’t,” Dean whispered, taking a step towards the ghost. Because there had to be a way to kill the poltergeist and still save their mom. She shouldn’t have to sacrifice herself for them. Not again.

May looked at Dean over her shoulder and smiled so sweetly at him, so happy to see him grown and safe and good. “I love you.” Her gaze flickered to Sammy. “I love you both.”

She turned back around, flames engulfing her as she told the thing threatening her boys to get out of her house. The fire flared, licking at the ceiling before encapsulating it and burning out to nothing.

The house was silent, the poltergeist and Mary Winchester both gone.

Dean slid to the ground as Sammy collapsed, heaving for breath now that his lungs could fully expand. He looked at his older brother, but neither knew what to say.

-o-o-o-

Sam sat on the front steps, watching Dean assure poor Jenny that it was really over. Despite their reassurances, he was pretty sure she’d be selling the house and moving as soon as possible. Rough re-start.

Missouri sat down beside him with a deep sigh.

“What did you sense from my brother?” The questions wasn’t unexpected, at least not for the psychic. The tension between the two of them didn’t require supernatural powers to detect.

“I don’t know,” she answered softly, her face thoughtful. “He is hiding something – something awful big.”

She sensed the anger building in the man beside her, both physically and psychically. “Oh, honey.” Missouri raised a hand to lie on the young man’s shoulder, but hesitated at the last second. “Whatever it is, he’s trying to protect you from it.”

“I don’t need protection!” he burst, but quickly reigned himself back in. He was a good boy, she knew, and he didn’t mean to take it out on her. “I need answers. But he won’t talk to me.”

The Kansas-raised woman lowered her hand back into her lap, unsure how much she should say. In the end, she already knew she would tell him. She supposed she’d known for a while now.

“All I got was a flash. He’s scared of something, and it’s…nasty. Nothing like the spirit we saw back there,” she glanced back at the house, Sam following her gaze.

“Do you have any idea what it is?”

She gave a thoughtful hum and looked back at Dean. He was watching them, but immediately turned back to Jenny as soon as their eyes met.

“There was a man, with…with black hair. And his eyes…”

Sam straightened beside her, gaze intense. “They were yellow?”

She shook her head. What she’d seen hadn’t been the thing that killed their mom. It had been far, far worse.

“They were blue. The bluest eyes I ever seen.”

-o-o-o-

Sam started a new document, still mislabeled so Dean wouldn’t find it should he go looking. But despite the misnaming, its real title was ‘Cass’.

He copied every scrap of information and lore he could find on the internet relating to any one or thing that could be shortened to the name his brother kept muttering in his sleep. Anything that had blue eyes. But eventually, he hit a wall and the black-hole-powered magic that was the internet could take him no further.

“Yeah, *Cass*. No, I don’t know how to spell it. Best guess is C-A-S-S. Black hair, blue eyes. Yeah, okay, thanks Bobby.” He shifted the phone to his other ear as he grabbed a second cup and slid it into the gas station coffee machine. Sam sent a quick glance over his shoulder, through the store windows to his brother drumming out a beat on the roof of the Impala as he gassed her up.

“I’m still here,” he answered into the phone as he pulled his French Vanilla Caramel Café Delight away from the spout and capped it with a lid. He grabbed Dean’s black sludge and headed for the front counter. “I know it’s not a lot to go on. Just anything you can find.”

There was a muffled answer of pure gruff down the line.

“Focus on demons, then,” the younger Winchester said quietly just before he approached the bored teenager manning the register. The kid probably wouldn’t notice a bomb going off in his own store, if the smell coming off him was any indication of just how high he was.

But Sam didn’t want to admit his suspicions out loud, no matter the mental state of the audience. The niggling idea started on day one and hadn’t left him alone since; that Dean was somehow consorting with a demon, or some other creature, to know what he knew.

Sam wasn’t an idiot. The demon that killed their mom hadn’t come back into their lives until he started having visions. Now Dean was having them as well and a mysterious name Sam had never heard before kept popping up. Either some demon was after his brother like Azazel was after him, or Dean had done something….something to get an edge up on Hell and whatever the Yellow Eyed Demon had planned.

He didn’t want it to be true, but if it helped them find the thing…

“Start with Cassius Longinus. Yeah, the Roman general. There’s enough lore out there about him turning in Hell after Caesar’s assassination that it’s worth checking.” Sam gave a flat smile to the stoner who raised an eyebrow at the conversation even as he rang up his coffees and packaged donuts. “History paper.”

“Uh-huh.”

Sam’s smile turned even flatter. He took his receipt and breakfast, and pushed his way out the doors of the gas station. “Thanks for doing this, Bobby.”

He got called an idjit before the line cut out.

-o-o-o-

Missouri set her purse down on her front entrance table with a world weary sigh. That had been a long, hard day. Physically and mentally.

"That boy," she said with a shake of her head. "How he could sense all that, but not his own father, I have no idea."

John Winchester sat in her living room, running his hands over a tired, aging face. He was sitting right where his boys had been, less than a day ago now. Right where he had sat, at the start of it all, almost twenty-two years past. When he glanced at her, there was real pain in his eyes. So similar to that day. He worried at the wedding band still securely wrapped around his finger.

"Do you think Mary's spirit really saved the boys?"

He looked exhausted. She had not seen those dark circles beneath his eyes since the beginning. This was more than the world-weary state of a hunter. John's thoughts were far from her, something she had not before felt from the man or the hunter.

Missouri watched him from the doorway, concern sparking deep within her chest. There was something truly dark surrounding these poor boys. All three of 'em.

"John, you sleepin' alright?"

-o-o-o-

Dean laid his head down on the lumpy pillow and stared up at the popcorn ceiling of their latest fleabag 'home'. Sam was snoring in the bed next to him, and the older hunter longed to join him in passed out oblivion.

Only he couldn't. He couldn't get the image of Mary Winchester burning up and onto the ceiling out of his mind. Dean hadn't saved her. He hadn't changed anything.

How the hell was he supposed to save Sammy this time around, if he couldn't even save the ghost of their mother?

Aside from Jess, everything was still happening *the exact same*.

'Castiel.' The prayer slipped out before he could stop himself.

Reaching out to the angel that way had become natural over the years. Especially when he needed someone to talk to.

Dean had found himself doing it long after Cas stopped answering. After Van Nuys. At Lisa's. After the reservoir. And even longer still once the angel lost his ability to hear prayer anymore. It was something Dean just did. Sometimes to make himself feel better, sometimes to be less alone in the universe.

And he was so damn alone right now.

'Cas, please.' Dean closed his eyes and his palm found its way to his sternum, pressing down against the imagined warmth of an undamaged soul. At the whole-ness that meant no angel had saved him, no winged warrior of God had pulled his bleeding, broken spirit from the pit and stitched him back together.

No Castiel, no handprint, no profound bond.

'If you're there, man, I need to talk to you. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm not-' Tears pricked at his eyes and he shut them all the tighter to keep them out. To keep it all out. *'I'm not changing anything, Cas. I don't know how to do this.'*

There was nothing but silence. There hadn't been anything more than that for years.

'I need you to tell me what to do. I'm drowning here.'

Eventually, he did slip into oblivion. Try as he might, he did not dream, of angels or otherwise. When he woke the next morning to the same silence he'd found himself in for months, Dean told himself that being disappointed at a lost cause was pathetic. That being angry because he'd let himself hope in the first place was a waste.

The warmth in his chest, the mountain lake he secretly loved and Dream-Cas showing up just when he needed him… They had never been anything more than a broken man imagining away his loneliness. Silence was all he would ever get when he was done dreaming.

Typical.

-o-o-o-

Very, very far away, in a kingdom of light and color, one angel out of thousands paused in his heavenly duties, tilting his head to the side as

he listened to a voice call out for him again in prayer.

Chapter End Notes

Mary: This chapter was written well into season 12, and it was with so much regret I couldn't include Dean knowing his mother!

Updates: Just a heads up that updates will be slow this weekend. I'll try to get a few more chapters posted today and tomorrow, but starting Sunday I'm off on a ski trip until Tuesday, so there probably won't be anything for a couple days. I'll try to make up for it as soon as I'm back in town.

Cheers and I hope you're all enjoying the story!

Chapter 14: Season 1: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Meg's topside once more, we've got a Fugly Pagan in an Orchard to deal with, and Sam's starting to put two and two together.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 13

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam woke groggily to the sound of ringing. It took him a moment to parse the sound as a cell phone. His brother's cell phone, specifically.

"Dean."

The ringing continued and the haphazardly sprawled lump in the bed next to him didn't move.

"Dean."

With a tired sigh, Sam slung his hand over the nightstand, fumbling around for the device. He didn't bother looking at the ID. There were only, like, ten people total who had Dean's number. And nine of them were Bobby.

"Hello?"

"Sam, is that you?"

The younger Winchester sat upright slowly, eyes open and wide awake. "Dad?" He took a deep breath. When was the last time he'd heard John's voice? But if he was calling… "Are you hurt?"

There was a light huff down the line and he could hear the smile in his dad's voice. "I'm fine."

Something in Sam's stomach twisted. John didn't sound fine, and the audible amusement didn't cancel out the exhaustion and worry in his father's voice. John Winchester didn't worry. John Winchester was a rock.

“We’ve been trying to get a hold of you.” His brother was sitting up now, staring at him. “The thing that killed mom-“

“It’s a demon, Sam.”

That tripped him up for a moment, and he looked down at the bedding. So their dad had known more about Yellow Eyes than he’d told his boys. Sam was getting pretty sick of Dean being right all the time. “You knew?”

John was silent for a moment, and his son couldn’t tell if it was born from guilt or anger. “For a little while.”

“Did you know about Jess?”

Dean gestured for the phone, but Sam pulled away. He was having this conversation, whether his brother wanted him to or not. His dad let out a bone-tired sigh down the line.

“No. I swear to you, Sammy. I’d have done anything to spare you that.” There was shifting and the sound of metal shaking in an enclosed space. His dad was calling from a phone booth. “I’m just glad you boys stopped it. That’s gotta be a hell of a story; you’ll have to tell it to me sometime.”

“Why not now?” Sam frowned, fingers tightening on the phone. “Where are you?”

“I can’t tell you that, son.”

“Dad.”

“Sam, give me the phone.”

“I need you to take down these names, Sam.”

“No, Dad, we can help you.”

“Sammy, give me the damn phone.”

The mobile was pulled from his ear forcefully and he bit his tongue hard, fists clenching as he turned to his brother. Dean was straightening in his seat, eyes darting back and forth as he listened to their father. Sam knew the second he heard John’s voice that his brother would fall right back into soldier mode and that would be that. They’d never know where John was.

"Yes, sir."

Sam looked back up at his brother. There was something different in his voice. Something new, like everything else these days. Dean met his gaze, and there was anger there, but also something else. "But you sound like crap. What's going on, Dad?"

It irked him to not be able to hear the other side of the conversation.

"You don't sound fine." Dean rubbed at his forehead but nodded. "Yeah, I'm taking them down."

Sam moved to grab his brother the motel pad of paper and pen, but he just shook his head.

"Yeah, we got it, Dad. Alright. Take care of yourself."

Dean snapped the phone shut, and Sam opened his mouth to…he didn't know. Scream, shout, rant, argue, rebel, ask what the hell happened to the brother he used to know, and how the hell he could let this go just to take orders from a man who would barely talk to them. But whatever he was going to say, Dean beat him to it.

"Dad's in trouble."

-o-o-o-

"Alright, walk me through it again. Because I think I'm missing something." They were in the Impala once more, less than an hour after their dad had called, heading to Indiana of all places. While John was back in California. Sacramento, if Sam knew his area codes (which he did, and he'd double checked on the crappy motel wifi anyway).

Sam was still trying to wrap his head around whatever the hell was going on. Like the way his brother had told him, out of nowhere, that John needed help, but they couldn't go to him.

At least not both of them.

"You're going to go to some backwater town in the middle of *nowhere* because Dad gave you the names of six missing persons who have *no* connection to the place at all. And I'm going to hitchhike to California?"

Dean rolled his eyes as he urged the Impala to go faster. There was

something close to panic eating at the edges of his gut. John had made that same call once before, and while he couldn't remember the details he knew he would have picked up on his dad sounding like death warmed over.

Which meant he hadn't sounded like he was about to drop last time around.

"The Stepford Couples of Burkittsville, Indiana are sacrificing people – a boy and girl – to a pagan god once a year to keep their perfect little town perfect." Another time, he'd have had a million good jokes for that one. A thousand different perfect movie references. Maybe even a book or two. But right now, he was worried about John. "Dad figured out the pattern. The couples are going missing in the second week of April."

"*This* is the second week of April," Sam muttered, catching Dean's drift and not liking it one bit.

"Bingo." The man from the future winced. There were times the déjà vu felt like vertigo it was so spot on. He hated the fact that he was still that predictable ten years later.

"Dean, dad isn't going to hang around Sacramento for a week!"

"I know. That's why you're going to California." Dean pulled the car off the interstate an hour outside Springfield, Illinois. The same bus station Sam had ended up at the first time, which Dean had spent a painstaking hour that morning trying to remember. Well…he was pretty sure it was the same one. Okay, so it ended up being a best guess thing more than actually remembering.

A turn and two streets later, they were parked outside the greyhound depot. "Two people are going to die if we don't do something, Sam. It'll take too long for another hunter to get here. I need a day, tops, to make it to Indiana and burn the tree. Then I'll catch up."

Sam was staring at him like he didn't recognize the man next to him. Which, okay, kind of fair. Dean was probably the last person that would ever suggest his family split ways. But he already knew Sam was going after John and that nothing was going to stop him except his brother being tied up and offered as a sacrifice to a fugly scarecrow god.

Better they just circumvent that entirely this time around.

Plus, unlike last time, John might really need help, even if he couldn't ask for it. If Sam didn't have to go back to save Dean, maybe they'd catch up to him this time. He really hadn't liked the way his dad sounded over the phone.

Something had changed, and they needed to know what.

"I thought you said you didn't have a vision." Sam was staring at him harshly, hand on the door but not quite ready to let this drop.

"I didn't. This was all dad."

"Right," his brother scoffed. "You just happen to know about a pagan god in Indiana, tied to a tree, because Dad gave you six names."

Dean shut his mouth. Shit, he hadn't meant to give that much away. Had he really given that much away? He probably should have kept the pagan bit to himself. And definitely the tree. Damn it, he really had said all that, hadn't he?

It was only further confirmation for Sam.

"You didn't get all this from a vision, did you?"

His older brother physically flinched and refused to look at him. Missouri had been right. Whatever had a hold of his brother had him *scared*.

"Did '*Cass'* tell you?"

That got a reaction out of the older Winchester. His head whipped around to stare at Sammy with wide eyes.

Son of a bitch. Should have known he wouldn't forget.

Sam took his shocked expression as confession. With a look surpassing anger and approaching terrifyingly blank, he spat out, "You talk in your sleep."

His brother paled and he turned his head away, eyes sliding closed. When he chanced a glance back, Sam didn't know what to make of the expression there. Pain, for sure, which fueled his anger.

If Dean was in this much trouble, Sam needed to know, damn it. Why was it his brother couldn't just trust him?

"Wh-" Dean cleared his throat. "What did I say?"

Sam's eyes narrowed as his anger hit a boiling point and his forehead smoothed out in a blank expression. Unbelievable. Caught red-handed, his brother still wasn't going to come clean. He knew how Dean worked – knew the game of letting the person fill in the blanks so you could agree with them, making them think that you were the one filling in the blanks. He was just about done being his brother's con.

"You tell me."

Dean searched his eyes before turning to the windshield. "Cas isn't… He's not a problem, Sam. He's not even on the board."

"But he will be, right?" The younger hunter leaned forward. "He's coming? Dean, what does he want with you? Is he like the Yellow Eyed Demon? Did he have something to do with Mom's death?"

Green eyes locked back on his, once more wide in confusion and surprise. "What? No! I told you, Sammy, he's not a part of this."

Sam laughed, but there was nothing remotely funny about this. The noise was angry and incredulous, and so damn fed up. He opened the passenger door. "I'm so sick of you lying to me, man. Do whatever you want; I'm going to go find Dad."

Sam climbed out of the Impala and Dean, cursing, followed suit. This was way too similar to how it had gone down last time and, damn it, he thought he'd been doing it better. He watched across the hood of the Impala as his brother stalked towards the Bus Depot

"Just keep your phone on you, alright? I'll catch up to you tomorrow."

Sam spun around, backpack slung over his shoulder and arms held out in frustrated resignation. "Right. After you hunt whatever *Cass* tells you to hunt." The younger man shook his head, looking away as he bit at his tongue to keep from lashing out any further. He finally looked back at his brother with hurting, angry eyes. "I knew that gun was too good to be true. What the hell did you do, Dean? And what happens when you don't do what he says? Does he send demons after Jess? After Dad?"

He turned his back on his older brother and stormed into the building. Dean closed his eyes and slammed his fist down on the hood of the Impala.

-o-o-o-

He beat the steering wheel harder than Baby deserved as he pulled out his phone. Damn it, why couldn't things ever just *go right*.

"Dad?" Dean swallowed heavily past the lump in his throat. John hadn't answered – he hadn't expected him to – but just hearing the voicemail, hearing his voice that morning, was enough to hurt him somewhere deep where he was still a son whose mom had died tragically and whose dad was everything to him. "It's Dean. I'm- I'm heading to Indiana, but….damn it, I know you're not okay. Call me. Sam's on his way to you and we can help."

He snapped the phone shut and threw it to the other side of the car harder than it deserved, too.

-o-o-o-

Sam stared at the woman behind the glass with an expression bordering on rude. "Five pm. Seriously? There isn't any other bus that leaves earlier?"

"Unless you want to go to Miami, you can sit tight and wait just like everyone else."

His jaw clenched at the bitchiness, but he supposed that would be how this day would go. With an utterly unappreciative smile, Sam grabbed his bag and went off in search of a seat. He apparently had quite the wait in front of him.

The crappy Depot didn't even have wifi. Lucky for him, the bar next door did, and it reached where he was sitting with enough reliability to get some research done. There had to be some record somewhere of what color eyes Cassius Longinus had when he was alive.

-o-o-o-

He didn't stop in town or bother looking around. Dean drove straight through, the sight of the classic muscle car calling attention (and suspicion) from the townsfolk, but he didn't care. He'd be long gone before they even smelled the smoke.

The sooner he could meet up with Sam, the sooner he could tell him that Cas wasn't a demon. He didn't know what he was going to tell him after he got that part out, but he figured he'd start there.

Remembering exactly where the sacred tree was in the orchard was a long shot, but he figured the direction his gut liked best would have to do. He was pretty sure he'd recognize it when he saw it; they had the first time, after all. Grabbing the full gallon of gas they always kept on hand and checking his jacket pocket for his trusty lighter, Dean closed the trunk and stalked off into the trees.

-o-o-o-

It was three hours into his wait when she walked in.

She had short cropped hair and a cute punk look that, when coupled with the backpacking pack, completed the runaway persona. Sam wasn't really paying attention to who came and went in the Depot, and he wasn't the type to stare at a girl either (he left that to Dean), but she made such a ruckus at the front desk that when she plopped down beside him, it was kind of hard to ignore.

"What kind of crap town only has three busses the whole damn day?"

The young hunter glanced over at her only to confirm that she was, in fact, talking to him. She'd slung her bag in the seat next to her, sprawled across the plastic, and perched her leg atop the pack, swinging it back and forth distractedly. He was temporarily at a loss of words, if only because he was mentally waist-deep in the personal writings of a 1st century Greek Philosopher who participated in the assignation of Julius Caesar and was close friends with one, Cassius.

"Uh….the kind of town that's in nowhere, Illinois?"

She chuckle and started tapping her heel against her backpack as she surveyed the bus depot. He gave it a moment more to see if she planned to interrupt him further, before going back to his computer.

"So where are you headed?"

Sam resisted the urge to sigh. She was just being friendly. Or… forward. He wasn't sure which. But he gave her a harried smile and answered nonetheless, "California."

"Oh." She looked off again, and Sam went back to his philosopher. "That's nice. Beaches. Surfing."

He took a deep breath and decided he wasn't getting anywhere anyway. Closing his laptop, he gave his full attention to the woman in the leather jacket. "Yeah. I'm not really going for vacation."

“Yeah? Me neither.”

Sam waited half a beat for her to continue. He honestly couldn’t tell if she was just an idle talker with no focus, or if she was waiting for him to ask.

“Where are you going?”

The woman turned to him with a raised brow and he immediately got the impression he was on the wrong side of a joke. “I’m not telling you.” She smirked slightly, looking up at him through long eyelashes and thick kohl liner. “You could be some sort of freak.”

He pulled his head back with a scoff. “You asked me.”

“Yeah,” she answered with a shrug. “But I’m trustworthy.”

The wink she sent his way was doing its best to turn irritation into amusement. “Ah, right,” he pursed his lips in a tight smile, “you’ve definitely got that vibe about you.”

She suddenly stood, all in one motion. “You hungry?”

“Uh…” Sam looked around at the empty depot with its solo half-empty vending machine. “For what? Potato chips and Life Savers?”

“I saw a bar on my way in.” She picked up her backpack, heaving it up on her shoulders once more. “My bus doesn’t leave till five, and I’d rather pass the time with a beer.”

Sam glanced at the bus schedule behind the ticket counter. There really were only three busses that day, and only one leaving at five pm.

“You coming?”

She was smirking at him again, fully aware of what he was staring at. He shook his head, putting his laptop into his bag and following after her. “Yeah. Definitely the trustworthy type.”

The woman just laughed as she pushed open the door.

-o-o-o-

The tree was burning steady within the hour. Fugly stayed stuck up on his perch, and when Dean passed by it on the way back to the car, there was nothing left but a smoldering cross and a pile of ash.

Dean made it all the way to the next town before he stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop.

-o-o-o-

"I'm Meg, by the way." They had a good sprawl of beers and nachos and chips and salsa. Not Sam's usual fair, but Meg spared no expense when she was craving bar food. And come on, everybody loved nachos.

"Sam." He took a sip of his beer, taking it a little easier than she was, on her forth already.

"Sam, huh? So, *Sam*, what are you running away from?"

He gave her a look that was starting to feel pretty permanent on his face. It was something between irritation and amusement, which was usually reserved only for Dean or sometimes Jess when she was in a particularly playful mood.

The youngest Winchester didn't really enjoy being on the tail end of the joke. "Who says I'm running from anything?"

The blonde rolled her eyes at him, the grin ever present in her those big doe eyes. "Please. You have the lost groupie look down even better than me." She leaned in conspiratorially. "And I have a leather jacket."

He laughed around the neck of his beer, managing not to choke on a mouthful. "I'm not running. There's just something I have to find."

"And it's in California?"

Sam shrugged, looking down at the label on his drink. "It was. Who knows by the time I get there."

She was sympathetically quiet for a moment, possible lamenting her own grievances at the Illinois Greyhound company and its sad excuse of a bus schedule. "Is this a something, or a someone?"

He gave her a grim smile. "It's my dad."

Her eyes widened and she reached over to set her hand on his arm, only to think better of it at the last moment. He was grateful for the aborted move, but could appreciate the attempted sentiment. "Is he in trouble?"

Sam thought about the way John's voice had sounded on the phone. He'd sounded so damn tired. Dead on his feet. And Sam had only ever heard him like that when he came back from the really bad hunts.

"I think so, but he wouldn't tell me. So I'm going to go to find him."

He looked up from his beer to find her staring at him. Her eyes were so intense that he fought the urge to fidget under the contemplative stare. "California's kind of a big place. You know where he is?"

"I've got an area code. I'll start there." He cleared his throat and opted for a change of topic, unsure why she was making him uncomfortable. "How about you? What are you 'running' from?"

Meg heaved a sigh and launched into a tale of controlling parents with dreams for their child. Dreams their child didn't particularly want. Sam could relate – he'd been in the same exact place four years ago. Sitting in a bus stop with everything he owned in a bag, waiting for the ride that would take him away to college, away from a family that wanted everything he didn't.

She stared at him somewhat expectantly at the end of her story, but he wasn't sure what she wanted him to say. "I've been there. It used to be the same for me."

"Yeah?" Meg blinked those almond eyes at him. "But not anymore?"

He gave a soft smile, picking at the edge of the beer label. "Not for a while. I left my family for school, and, uh, didn't turn back."

She tilted her head. "Only you're running back to them now."

Sam set the empty bottle down on the table. "Yeah. Well….they're my family."

Meg kept watching him with intense eyes he didn't fully understand.

-o-o-o-

Dean called Sam once he was safely back on the interstate.

"Yeah, piece of cake. I'm on my way back now. Where are you?" He turned up the volume dial on the stereo and tapped his head to the classic music. "You're still at the depot? Jesus, Sammy, I figured you'd be halfway to the coast by now."

His brother bitched at him down the line and he grinned. "Yeah, yeah, sounds like excuses to me. I'll be there in a couple hours and you can ride in true style to California."

He could practically hear Sammy rolling his eyes. But then he was asking if he'd figured out what type of pagan the scarecrow had been and Dean's mind ground to a halt, mouth poised open, but lips frozen in an 'o' shape.

Son of a bitch, what was the thing called?"

"Uh, yeah. Course. Something with a V. Varin. Verif. It was Norse, I couldn't pronounce it."

Sammy's less than enthusiastic answer left him feeling like he'd once again lied to his brother's face and been caught right in the act.

-o-o-o-

Sam lowered his phone with something between a growl and a sigh. Damn it, when was this going to stop? Because, to be honest, he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep traveling with his brother if the lies didn't stop.

"Everything okay?"

He sat back down across the floor from his new runaway friend. They were camped out in the bus station once more by the far wall of chairs, a card game stretched between them that he had stepped away from when his phone rang. They had two hours left to go, but at this point Dean would be back to pick him up before the bus left. And Dean would drive way faster anyway.

"Just my brother."

Meg raised her eyebrows at him over the top of her hand as she drew a card. "He hear anything from your dad?"

Sam shook his head, looking down at the phone in his hand before tucking it back into his bag and picking up his abandoned cards. Meg discarded the four of Diamonds and he picked it up to slide into his hand. "No. He called about something else. But he's on his way here."

The woman shifted, uncrossing one leg to tuck the other instead. Sam didn't pick up on the subtle change of body language, mind focused

on his brother. "You don't sound too happy about that."

The hunter sighed, discarding a Queen of Spades and putting his hand back down. He didn't feel much like games right now. "Have you ever known someone who just, one day, became a totally different person?"

Meg straightened up a little, those full eyes regarding him with her complete attention. "What do you mean?"

"It's just…" Sam sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I've known my brother my whole life. The guy practically raised me. And suddenly, one night he isn't…him anymore. It's still him – same stupid movie references and bad jokes and martyr complex. But…. I don't know. He's just….heavier. Keeping secrets."

She watched him for a moment after he trailed off, no longer sure how to put into words what was going through his head. She picked up the Queen of Spades and slid it into her hand. "Sounds like he got some bad news."

Sam blew out a puff of air and picked his cards back up. "Yeah, from who?"

-o-o-o-

They gave up cards after Meg mopped the floor with him four to one. She complimented his half-assed attempt, and he laughed off the sarcasm. Yeah, his head hadn't really been in it. Though the woman had a hell of a poker face.

Sam rubbed at his forehead, the beginnings of a headache banging against his skull. He was ready to be out of this bus depot, even if his escape was an equally cramped car with his cagey brother.

His phone rang at ten to five, and he glanced down at Dean's name across the screen. "Hey. Yeah, I'll be right out."

He stood from the hard plastic chair, scooping up his bag. His headache spiked with the sudden movement but he pushed through it. Meg was watching him with those intense eyes of hers and he chuckled when she didn't move from her sprawled position over the seat and her bag.

"You could come with me," he offered as he slung his duffle strap over his body. "Dean won't mind."

“I’m not getting in a car with your brother.” She smirked up at him, once more through those long eyelashes. “He could be some kind of freak.”

Sam laughed, shaking his head at her. “Good luck with your parents and your trip.”

She smiled, and he realized the woman was never *not* smirking. “You too. Hope you find your dad.”

His smile was grim but appreciative. He turned for the depot entrance and stumbled as the pain in his head flared.

“Sam?”

Shaking his head, he tried to wave Meg off, but then he was on the floor, his head *pounding* between his hands like a pick ax working on a nail. He gasped as his vision flickered between flashes of white and empty black.

He could still hear Meg calling his name, her arms wrapped around his shoulders. He could hear someone yelling for help. But through all of that, he wasn’t in the bus station anymore.

It was dark all around him, but he could tell the space was huge by the way the silence echoed. A flash of white had him gasping, and his dad was standing in front of him, his back turned but paused mid step, as though about to look over his shoulder to his son. He seemed somehow far away. Unreachable.

“Dad?”

John’s head moved to the side, but he wasn’t looking at Sam. The youngest Winchester followed his father’s gaze through the throbbing in his skull.

There, in the dark, so deep in the black haze that he could barely make it out, was a pair of eyes. Cold, piercing, so dark amber they seemed inflamed. Inhuman. Sam took a shaky step back as something moved forward in the inky darkness. Something heavy slid across the floor, tensing in preparation for the pounce, and those eyes never blinked, locked on John Winchester.

“Run, Sammy.”

The young hunter turned back at the sound of his dad’s voice. John

Winchester was facing him, arms held out to the side. Sam caught tired – *exhausted* – eyes pleading for him to get away. There was movement to his left and he tensed, prepared to push his dad out of the way, to do *something* before the thing attacked.

He was back in the bus depot as suddenly as he had left it.

"Sam!" Meg was holding him upright, pretty much the only reason he wasn't face first on the filthy tile floor. "Get an ambulance!"

"No," he mumbled, struggling to find his muscles on this plane of existence once more as he tried to push himself off the floor. It wasn't graceful, but he managed. "I'm okay."

"Sam, you went catatonic," Meg argued, looking up at him as he managed to stand, only slightly listing to the side as his head began to clear. "You had some kind of fit."

"I'm alright," he repeated, rubbing at his forehead. "I get these, uh, fainting spells. But I'm okay."

Meg climbed to her feet as the small crowd that had gathered began to disperse as he insisted he was fine, that he didn't need medical assistance. His bus buddy looked less then sure, as if she might need to catch him at any moment should he swoon like a damsel again.

"I'm really okay," he hissed through the last spike of pain, but grabbed his bag once more. He needed to tell Dean what he saw. Dad *was* in trouble. "I should get out to my brother."

"What you should get to is a hospital."

He shrugged off her concern. "It happens all the time. Really, I'm alright. You sure you don't want to come with us?"

Meg eyed him with worry and no subtle about of skepticism, and he glanced at the front doors. Dean was probably wondering what was taking him so long.

"Think I'll stick with the bus."

He shook his head again, still somehow amused at this woman, before realizing what a bad move that was as he swayed in the sudden lack of balance. She moved to steady him, but the hunter waved her off. "Alright, well, good luck."

He was halfway out the doors when he heard her answer from behind.

“See you around, Sam.”

-o-o-o

Dean pushed the passenger door open for his brother as the kid jogged over to the Impala. He was rubbing his head.

“Dude, what took so long? You stop for pie?” Sam slid into the car with a wince and Dean waited stared expectantly. “No, seriously, you got pie? I’m starving.”

“Shut up, Dean,” his brother answered with equal parts exasperated affection and pained annoyance. “I had a vision.”

Pie, and all food, was suddenly the furthest thing from Dean Winchester’s mind.

-o-o-o-

Meg waited until the Impala pulled out of the bus depot before she went outside, watching the sleek muscle car disappear down the road, headed west. She flagged down the first car to pass by – a shady guy in a white van that had seen better days.

That would do.

The guy grinned nervously at her, failing to hide all manner of sin behind his smile. “Looking to go somewhere, pretty lady?”

“Just need a ride.” She smiled at him, even as she pulled open the driver door. He looked confused for all of a second before he was on the ground, nursing an aching arm as he stared up at the crazy chick climbing into his van.

“Hey!” He struggled to sit back up, clutching at his shoulder where he’d landed harshly on the concrete. The woman paused with one leg on the cab step before she turned back to him. The driver shrank back on himself, the look in her eye telling him he’d made a terrible mistake.

“I have to make a call,” she said as if it was some sort of explanation, jumping back down and slinging her pack off her back.

“I-I…uh…I have a cell phone.”

She smiled sweetly at him, even as she pulled a silver chalice from her bag. “It’s not that kind of call.”

In a single, deadly swipe that he never saw coming, she slit his throat and held the goblet to collect his spilling blood.

The driver was dead before she finished.

“Thanks for the ride.” Meg climbed into the van, balancing the goblet of liquid carefully, and headed down the road after the Winchesters.

Chapter 15: Season 1: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: None that we haven't already seen before: swearing, brotherly angst, and a heck of a cliffhanger ;)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 14

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The car flew past fields and telephone posts as the sun began to set on Midwestern USA. Sam had a pad of paper in his lap and was sketching near fanatically with a pen they had likely stolen from a motel somewhere along the line. Dean was starting to get annoyed with his brother's lack of attention to his questions of fair incredulity.

"Tell it to me again, cuz you're not making any sense."

"It was a vision, Dean."

"Yeah, I got that part, Professor X. I mean the part where you know the thing that's after dad."

His younger brother rubbed at his forehead, annoyed. The headache was still eating away at the inside of his skull, despite the couple of aspirin he popped as soon as he got in the car. "I don't know what it is. I just….recognized its eyes."

Dean frowned over at him before refocusing on the road. "Like you've seen it before?"

"No." Sam shook his head and stared past aching eyeballs at the sketch in front of him. It wasn't great; he was no artist, but he was sure he'd seen that gaze before. "Not the monster, just the eyes."

"Uh-huh." Dean sounded so skeptical that Sam's indignation flared without his consent, and he found himself a hell of a lot angrier than his brother's usual cavalier attitude called for. But Dean caught the look sent his way and had the decency to at least look sheepish. He cleared his throat. "So what else did you see?"

Sam clenched his jaw, but answered all the same as he tucked the

sketchbook against the door and rummaged through the bag at his feet for his laptop. "It was dark, and the space was big. Really big. Like a cave."

Dean had to bite his tongue. Hard. "So…Dad's in a cave. He went from Sacramento, California to the world's largest cave?"

Sam's bitchface bordered on the more dangerous end of the Official Bitchface Scale, and Dean told himself to bite harder next time.

"Okay. We'll start looking for caves."

Sam wasn't anything close to appeased, but he didn't argue it any further. Instead, he opened his laptop, determined to prove to his brother that he did recognize those eyes and his vision could lead them to Dad. He knew it could.

-o-o-o-

"Do you remember that zoo we went to in Arkansas?"

Dean glanced over with raised eyebrows, but it was a short-lived look overrun by the smile that spread across his face at the memory. Yeah, he remembered that trip. They'd blown all three weeks of food and hotel allowance John had left them, but it had been worth it. He'd never seen Sammy so excited about anything.

"Man, your face when you saw the giraffes." He laughed, chest tightening with warmth at the memory. "Makes sense, given you're a cousin of theirs."

"Shut up," Sam rolled his eyes, but it was good natured.

"So what about it?"

The younger Winchester stared at his computer screen displaying the Little Rock Zoo website as he scrolled through their collection of animals. "I know I've seen those eyes before, and I keep thinking back to that trip."

Dean gave a cursory glance at the computer, trying to keep the skepticism out of his gaze, and left his brother to it.

-o-o-o-

The older Winchester let more miles pass than he should have before he finally opened his mouth to talk to his brother. Except, he had no

idea what to say, and every line that popped into his head made him instantly want to retract his tongue like a tortoise in a shell. He glanced at his brother. Sam was busy typing away, digging into whatever this new vision of his had shown them.

It was a perfect opportunity to let the whole Cas thing go.

Knee-deep in a new lead on Dad, Sammy wasn't likely to remember their last argument for some time, or bring it up again until after they'd found John. It was the perfect time to just drop it.

The older Winchester's knee bounced up and down in a beat of anxiety and he glanced at his brother again. He shouldn't let it go, he knew that. Hell, he'd had enough hands on experience letting shit slide that shouldn't be slid to know how often it came back to trample his ass in a landslide of *'told you so.'*

But he still had no clue what to tell his brother.

Cas isn't a demon.

But what was he? It wasn't like he could come out and tell Sam about angels. Right? The idea of letting Sam think Cas was a demon didn't sit right in his chest, though. Sure, the guy was barely an angel anymore, but he knew how Cas would feel letting the younger Winchester think he was evil.

Not that his Cas would ever know, but that still rang a little too close to home for all of them.

I didn't make a deal.

But what had he done? Time travel was definitely off the conversational table. That wasn't something you just tossed out there. Sammy already thought he was lying enough as is; he didn't need to add something truly unbelievable to the mix.

I'm still your brother.

Was he? He certainly wasn't the brother Sam knew.

The never-to-be Stanford lawyer was going to ask all the questions Dean didn't have answers to and press buttons he didn't know if he could tolerate being pushed.

They had other things to worry about. He could bring it up another

time.

So Dean tightened his grip on the steering wheel, forced his leg to stop its nervous bouncing, and didn't say a word. Sam was too wrapped up in his search for amber eyes to notice.

-o-o-o-

"That's it." Sam stared at his screen in surprise, hands on the sides to tilt it back so he could stare into the soft red-brown irises looking back at him. "Those are the eyes I saw."

His brother glanced over as he flipped the laptop around. Dean immediately switched his gaze to his brother's face, disbelief painting his own.

"You're kidding, right?"

The look Sam sent him told him he wasn't, and he glanced back at the screen again.

"So…a rhinoceros is hunting dad?" Dean looked away from the image of an African White Rhino, specifically a close-up photo of its eye. He gave a half shrug, which was only seventy-five percent sarcastic. "Well, it's got a certain irony to it, I'll give you that."

"Dean, I'm serious." Sam furled his brow, angry at the brush off, and turned the computer back around. "It wasn't a rhino. It just had those eyes."

His brother, wisely, said nothing. Although he did let out a rather skeptical hum. Lucky for him, Sam was busy staring at the image of the rhinoceros, mind desperately trying to re-pierce the darkness of his vision for the beast that lay beyond.

"They were angrier and there….there wasn't a horn." He closed his eyes to better recall the images he'd seen, disjointed and confusing as they had been. His head spiked with pain and he grimaced, but pushed through. "Maybe…tusks?"

"Awesome," Dean said, sounding anything but. "A Rhino-Mammoth. And it's after dad."

Sam clenched his jaw against his brother's flippancy and went back to his search for creatures fitting that description, no matter what his ass of an older brother thought.

-o-o-o-

They arrived at the location of the payphone – outside a warehouse north of the city – late on the third morning after John had called. The brothers stood around the empty booth, Dean leaning against the side of the Impala as Sam investigated the interior.

"What now?"

The younger Winchester looked over at his shoulder, loss, disappointment, and worry warring on his face. "I don't know."

Dean frowned, uncrossing his arms as he pushed off the car. "What, did you think he was just gonna be hanging out in the phone booth?"

He hadn't meant it to sound cold or accusing. Honestly, he was just surprised that Always-Have-A-Backup-Backup-Plan-Sam didn't have a friggin' backup plan.

His brother still sent him a dirty, slightly hurt look. Sam didn't want to admit that he'd half expected they'd find their Dad's body there. Instead, he shrugged defensively as he stepped out of the booth and looked around the relatively empty Californian street. "We treat it like a case. Knock on doors, ask around. Someone had to see where he went."

Dean watched him for a moment, weighing their options and where his brother's head was at, before conceding with a nod. "Alright, we'll start with the gas station across the street."

Although it looked pretty deserted with not a ton of traffic driving through his part of town, Dean started that way and his brother fell in to step worriedly beside him. He spared him a glance, before hardening his own resolve, if only for the sake of his family. "We'll find him, Sammy."

Despite the olive branch, the younger Winchester answered back, "It's Sam."

-o-o-o-

They didn't find him. They ran down every lead they could, but it looked like John Winchester did nothing more in Sacramento than stop to make a phone call. And that was more than possible; it was likely, even. The man was a highly trained marine followed up by twenty-two years of hunting paranoia. He knew how to disappear, he

knew how to not be found, and he knew how to stay that way for months.

They were as good as screwed.

-o-o-o-

The two stopped in a diner on the outskirts of Sacramento that evening, Dean practically dragging his little brother in by the arm for all his whining and bitching about not stopping until they found Dad. But Dean already knew they wouldn't find him, and not just because of future knowledge. He knew the man better than anyone, and if he didn't want to be found then there would be no finding him. At least, not without help.

"Look," he started, trying to punch down his own irritation at his increasingly snippy brother, "we need to regroup."

"Dad doesn't have time for us to 'regroup', Dean. He's being hunted!"

The older of the two pushed on, despite the fierce bitchface and fisting grip on the tabletop that his brother presented him with. "We're no good to him if we can't *find* him, Sammy. And we're not finding him here! Let's head to Bobby's. Maybe he has some ideas, a tracking spell, something we can use."

Sam didn't look nearly assuaged, but he sat back in the booth and stopped arguing. Dean let out a ragged sigh, running a hand through his hair. Their waitress popped up shortly afterward, chipper smile oblivious to the tension between the two.

"I'm Christie, I'll be getting you two anything you need today." She sent a wink Sam's direction, and the sasquatch put at least some effort into smiling back. It wasn't like his missing, injured Dad or unyielding, uncooperative older brother was her fault. "Can I get you started with something to drink? Our lemonade is sublime if you're looking for something sweet."

Dean tuned the girl out, not interested in the potential jailbait like he may have once been. Instead, he placed a quick order somewhat coldly (getting a disparaging look from the bubbly waitress) and waited for her to leave before trying once more to reach his brother.

"We'll find him, Sam, alright? I'm not giving up. But you know the man as much as I do – if he's gone to ground, we aren't finding him. At least not with neighborhood canvasing and phony FBI badges."

Sam spared him a glance and offered a half shrug. Not acquiescence, more like pouting actually, but at least it had a lot less snippiness than the last couple of hours. The older of the two gave himself a minute of reprieve, staring out the window of the diner. He watched cars come and go in the parking lot with disinterest as he steeled himself for continuing the conversation with his irate brother. After a mini pep-talk, he told himself to man up and turned back to Sam.

"This thing, the monster with the Rhino eyes," Dean went for a change in topics as his newest peace offering, "maybe it doesn't have anything to do with Yellow-Eyes. Demons don't usually tangle with the other shit that goes bump in the night. So maybe it's a normal hunt gone bad."

Sam straightened a little, the strong set of his shoulders changing from anger and tension to possibility. "If that's it, then we should be looking at cases in the area."

"Nah, if Dad's on the run, we can't limit the search to just here. We should check further out."

His younger brother nodded, already pulling out his phone and typing away. "I'll look for news down the whole coast."

Christie stopped to drop off Sam's water with a friendly smile and Dean's coffee with a scowl.

Sam had just pulled up the local news for states west of California when he glanced up to say something to Dean and stopped. The doorbell above the diner chimed with the entrance of a new customer, and Sam froze as Meg Masters walked in.

"No way," he muttered, staring in surprise as the woman looked around the shop for a moment before spotting him. She waved with a grin and headed their way.

Dean, noticing his brother's stare, glanced over his shoulder and immediately stiffened. *Son of a bitch. When the hell did Meg 1.0 join the playing field?* With a sharp swear, he spun back around and Sam saw his hand go for the gun tucked in his waistband.

"We need to get out of here, *now*," Dean hissed, casting a quick glance around even as he made for the edge of the booth.

"Now, now, no need to run off just yet, boys." Meg slid into Sam's booth before the younger of the two could climb out. Her body

language was relaxed, like an old friend meeting up for a light lunch. But her eyes and her frozen smile dared the two to make a scene.

The cocking of a gun beneath the table didn't even phase her.

"Dean," she tsk'ed with a tilt of her head and pouty lips, "Is that any way to treat a lady?"

The hunter responded with more of a grimace than anything and held the gun steady. Sam glanced between the two, having pushed himself as far into the booth as possible and away from the woman he had met just yesterday and was suddenly very sure was not human. She spared him a quick glance, winking a very black eye at him.

He pushed further away from her and spared Dean a look. His brother minutely shook his head.

"So. Sam, Dean. We need to talk."

"I really don't think we do."

She clucked her tongue at the older Winchester and opened her mouth to say more when Christie came back by with a wide smile at the new guest. Sam tried to dissuade her, shaking his head, but she either didn't notice, or didn't get the message.

"Hello, there! Can I grab you something? The boys just placed their orders, but I can get a rush job into the kitchen if you'd like."

Meg smiled sickly sweet up at the woman. "That is just so….*sweet* of you. How about you join us instead, hm?"

Christie's eyes widened in confusion as her body stiffened and she found herself all but slamming into the booth next to Dean. Her throat seized up as she tried to speak, tried to move, and she glanced, frightened, at the other men at the table.

Dean sat stiff and rigid, jaw clenched. This was not good.

Meg continued their conversation like they were speaking about the weather wit not so much as an interruption. "We want to know where you're getting your information, Dean." Her head tilted to the side once more, a gesture that might have been cute in Meg Master's body, but certainly lost its appeal when matched with those dangerous eyes.

"The Enquirer," Dean snarked right back, face deadpan serious.

"*Demons and their Bitches*, right next to *Housing and Décor*."

She dropped the smile. Beside him, the waitress made a hiccupping noise and her hand twitched towards her neck. A wide-eyed Dean spared her a worried glance, but immediately refocused on Meg, not trusting that bitch for a second. Sam moved to help, but a wave of Meg's hand and he found himself pressed back against the wall of the booth. Dean's jaw twitched, but he didn't move otherwise.

"Very funny. Let's try again, shall we?"

Christie was crying now, her face turning red and her eyes beginning to bulge in panic.

"Stop!" Sam barked and Meg turned her head sharply to him. "Stop. We'll tell you, just let her go."

The demon loosened her grip on the poor waitress's neck and the girl gasped for breath, tears streaking down her face and a freak-out held at bay only by demonic influence. It was a damn good thing they had chosen a booth near the back out of habit. Not that it mattered, much more and Meg would draw the attention of another half dozen hostages.

"His name is Cass."

"Sam!"

Nothing in the older hunter's face changed to give away his sudden anxiety and tension as he barked his brother's name in warning. Ten years from now Sam could read Dean like a large print book mostly filled with pictures, under a friggin' magnifying glass. But twenty-two year old Sam had been out of the game for four years, and worse, didn't know what was coming.

He trusted his brother, he did. The kid was smart. But Dean gritted his teeth hoping that wasn't a bad call. Because Meg couldn't know about Cas. Hell couldn't know about Cas. Not yet.

Meg was watching the younger of the Winchesters with a sharp, icy smile. "You'll have to do better than that, Sammy."

Christine choked on her sobs as her throat tightened once more.

Sam raised his hands in placation even as he shook his head. "That's all we know, I swear. He's been talking to Dean: Giving him visions,

telling him what to do." He chanced a glance at his brother, whose eyes never left Meg's but whose insides loosened at the falsity. He should have known better – Sam always had been a hell of an actor, even as a kid. "We don't know who – or what – he is."

Meg turned black eyes on Dean and beside him the waitress whimpered. "Is that true, Dean?"

Through gritted teeth, the hunter replied, "You calling my brother a liar?"

The demon rolled her eyes. "I am if he expects me to believe a couple of hunters just decided to listen to the little voice that popped up in their head one day."

Her gaze promised pain for the civilian suffering beside them and Dean clenched his jaw hard enough to make it creak. "He didn't give me much of a choice."

Meg snapped her head to the side, intense eyes regarding the older hunter. "Interesting. So you're just a pawn."

Dean's finger tightened on the trigger, but the demon scoffed and gave him a look that called his bluff. Feeling the need to remind him that lives were at stake, Meg watched Dean Winchester intensely as the little thing beside him hiccupped through another terrifying throat squeeze.

She could see the rage and the hatred in the hunter's eyes, and she wondered where his little helper was now.

"Why don't you ask your boss, the Yellow Eyed Demon?" Sam cut in and she turned back to face his irate expression. "He sent you, didn't he? Why don't you interrogate him about the thing using my brother."

Meg smiled sweetly at his ignorance, but declined to respond. Instead, she turned her head sharply to Dean and Christie let out a hiccup as the demon's power tightened around her throat once more.

"Where's John?"

"We don't know," Dean supplied immediately, perhaps a little too quickly for the demon's taste if the sound Christie made was anything to go by. "He wasn't here when we got here."

Meg gave him a look that clearly expressed her skepticism. Beside her, Sam stressed, "He *wasn't*."

The demon shifted slightly, crossing her arms on the tabletop almost methodically as she regarded the two boys. "Alright, then, here's how this is going down."

She reached over and Sam immediately drew back to press himself against the wall once more. Meg smiled lewdly up at him through those thick lashes as she slipped her hand into his front pocket. He made a grab for her wrist, but quickly found his arms pinned back to his sides. With a leer and a lot more wiggling than necessary, Meg withdrew his phone with a clicking of her tongue and Sam wanted to throw up.

Honestly, he was sort of surprised Dean hadn't shot her, useless as it would be or not. He was glad for his brother's restraint, which looked to be in ever dwindling supply if his purpling face and jumping neck veins were any indication.

Meg sent his phone careening across the counter and Dean slammed his free hand down atop it to keep the device from sliding into his lap.

"You're going to call dear Daddy, and make him tell you where he is."

Dean leaned forward and slid the phone back. Meg caught it, eyes narrowing.

"I don't think so," the older Winchester sneered with the sort of confidence born from being one of the best hunters on the planet.

All mirth, however humorless and cold it had been, disappeared from the demon's face. "Well. That just sucks for little Mary Sue here."

All sounds cut from the poor waitress, whose eyes went wide as he opened and closed her mouth uselessly. Nothing, not sound or air or panic, was getting in or out. She looked desperately at the other two as tears streamed down her reddening cheeks.

Dean, refusing to so much as look at the civilian which could very well blow his play sky-high, leaned forward and regarded the demon with equally dangerous seriousness. "See, you can kill every person in this diner, but at the end of the day you'll still be dead. And since killing demons is part of the job description, I'm going to call that a win."

He tapped the barrel of the gun against the bottom of the table, and Meg's eyes darted down, the first strands of uncertainty filtering through her eyes.

"You're not seriously stupid enough to walk in here knowing I've got the Colt, are you?"

Meg regarded him with slivered eyes. Christie was starting to go dangerously purple, surpassing panic, but those at the table were paying her little attention. The humans couldn't afford to, and the demon had already forgotten her existence other than a means to an end.

"You're bluffing," she finally concluded, though her gaze did not lighten with the assuredness that filled her voice. "You wouldn't bring it here, where you can't keep it safe."

Dean shrugged a shoulder. "Probably wouldn't have," he conceded, "if you hadn't been following us since the bus station."

Meg sneered, physically rolling her eyes as she leaned back in the seat. "Bullshit. You didn't spot me."

"White van, Nebraska license plates. Want the number?" Dean's gaze was ice cold, and Sam glanced at him, barely managing to hide his own surprise. His brother hadn't said a word. Then again, this frigid, hard-edged man across the booth from him was hardly his brother.

Meg paled, and her eyes darted to the tabletop once more. It was obvious she wanted more than anything to check under the table, but Dean made it pretty clear the first thing he'd do if she moved was shoot her.

The hunter made a sudden aborted movement forward, and the demon smoked out of Meg Master's faster than a one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest.

Christie started screaming.

The older hunter swore as he pushed her out of the booth rather roughly. She stumbled, managing to catch herself on one of the counter booths a few feet away. But by then they had the attention of the entire diner. Christie was hysterical, as she had every right to be, and the civilians of Sacramento, good people that they were, came to her aid. One of the patrons was yelling, another had her phone out and was clearly calling the cops. The cook was rounding the corner

with a meat-cleaver in hand.

“Grab her!” Dean hissed at his brother with a frantic head gesture at the ailing Meg Masters, even as he clawed his way out of the booth. Sam, who had been justifiably taking a moment to gather himself, pushed at the stunned, confused woman even as Dean pulled at her from the other side.

The human that was Meg Masters was almost boneless, having not had control of her own body for weeks. As soon as she was out of the booth, supported by his brother, Sam was following and all but scooped her up and into his arms.

Dean rounded his gun on the approaching chef and Sam blinked at the .45 caliber, ivory inlaid weapon that was definitely *not* the Colt.

Son of a bitch, and that wasn’t even his line.

The two booked it out of the diner, Dean holding anyone who tried to stop them at gunpoint, as they essentially kidnapped the stunned Meg Masters and hauled ass out of Sacramento.

-o-o-o-

When Sam asked him why he hadn’t actually brought the Colt in if he knew they were being followed (and the sarcastic, ‘*Thanks for the heads up on that by the way’* had paired well with one of the more pissy bitchfaces), the older Winchester had to admit his bluff. He’d seen the van pull into the parking lot a few minutes before Meg had shown up. Sure, he’d immediately recognized the state plates from force of habit and years on the road, but she had parked out of view from the window bordering their booth.

And it wasn’t like he’d actually be paying it enough attention to memorize the license plate. If Meg had called his bluff, things would have ended very, very differently for them.

Luckily, time and time again proved that demons were self-preservationists first and evil second.

-o-o-o-

Dean kept glancing at the back seat, where a quiet post-possession Meg was still processing what was going on. They were on their way to the hospital, only a couple blocks away, to drop the girl off.

He couldn't believe she was alive. They'd saved her this time around. He would never have to look into the angry, aching eyes of her ghost as she blamed him for her death.

Sam was carefully drawing the anti-possession tattoo they would leave her with, because Meg was absolutely the type of demonic bitch to re-possess the same human, just for cruelty's sake.

They dropped her off at the emergency entrance with a yell for help, and apology for leaving, and a drawing clenched tightly in her shaking hand.

-o-o-o-

"We need to go back," the younger Winchester announced before they'd even made it out of the county. Dean was a tense mess, checking the review mirror for more than just cops. "The girl could know something."

"Sammy, come on. She's traumatized. She's going to be lucky to remember her own name after something like that." Dean rapped on the steering wheel as he guided the Impala to the highway. Back roads would be safer, but they didn't have time. They honestly needed to get out of the state before the people in that diner could get the cops looking for them.

He was going to have to change the plates on the Impala, just to be safe.

"She could have information on the Yellow-Eyed-Demon!" Sam argued. "Meg was in her head, man. She has to know something."

Dean finally spared an incredulous look at his brother, who was usually the sympathetic, not to mention smarter, of the two. "Sam. Everyone in that diner thinks we just *kidnapped* a woman at gunpoint! We're gonna be lucky to get out of the state without being arrested!"

Sam grit his teeth hard enough that Dean could hear the creaking. His brother knew he wasn't wrong, but he could see it in Sam's eyes: the desperation for information.

He'd seen it before, after all.

"Look, I swear to you. We will figure this out. But right now, we need to get the hell out of here while we still can."

Sam settled in his seat, seeing reason but completely unhappy about it.

-o-o-o-

They made the news that evening, even as far away as the boarder of Wyoming, where they stopped for the night. The police had rough sketches of them, though luckily no cameras had been present in the diner.

The news caster seemed a bit baffled by the story, which was contradicted by eye witness accounts. The majority of those present in the diner called it a kidnapping, but the waitress was labeled as an unreliable witness due to trauma, and the woman they had, in fact, kidnapped showed up at the hospital less than an hour later claiming they had actually saved her.

All in all, the police didn't know what to make of it. But official reports on the two were filed, though largely left blank, and tossed into a pile the Sacramento PD jokingly called 'The Weird Ones'.

It would be six months before those files, significantly thicker by then, would land on the desk of an FBI agent.

-o-o-o-

Sam waited until he was sure his older brother was asleep before quietly slipping from his bed and into the motel bathroom. They were still half a day's drive from Sioux Falls, but convincing Dean to call it for the night had been relatively easy. Despite taking a fair share of the driving recently, Sam knew his brother didn't like relinquishing the wheel, and he was pretty exhausted after the last few days.

Reassured by the soft snores coming from Dean's bed, Sam shut the door with a soft click. He turned around to the sink and old mirror, yellowing along its edges. Gripping the sides of the porcelain surface, he stared into his own reflection, looking for whatever it was that lay beneath the surface.

He knew he could find John. He could almost taste the vision, the edges of it that had been shrouded in darkness, hidden from him. He knew they were there, that the answers were just beyond what he could reach. If only he could push it a little further. If only he could see clearly, like Dean could.

Sam felt the first drops of blood drip from his nose, but he didn't stop.

His gaze was lost to the darkness, to those cold amber eyes and John's desperate plea for him to run.

He heard the distant plop of liquid falling in the sink. Distantly, he knew when the drip become a flow. Felt his fingers dig into the sink until his nails screamed. Felt his head pound higher and higher, faster and deeper with every heaved breath he took in the dream. Every inch of light he gained on the beast that was chasing his father. He felt the burning in his legs and lungs as both gave out.

But he never felt the floor hit.

-o-o-o-

Dean woke to a thud. He was upright and stumbling out of the bed before he registered what woke him. But when he did, his first glance was to Sam's empty mattress.

"Sam?"

Silence was the only answer, and he spun in the hotel room, now wide awake. The bathroom door was closed, and a sliver of yellow light gave him some immediate relief. The fact that the sliver only reached half the width of the door, blocked by something on the other side, lessened that relief significantly.

"Sam?" He gave a quick rap on the wood and then tried to push it open. Locked.

Really, Sammy?

He gave the door a bodily shove with his shoulder. The cheap lock gave almost immediately, but the wood bounced back heavily, blocked by something on the other side. Something he was growing increasingly worried was his younger brother.

"Sam!" He pushed on the door forcefully, grunting with the effort of moving his brother's dead weight as he got the door cracked open just enough to slip into the bathroom. "Shit, Sam!"

The younger hunter was lying unconscious on the tile, blood freely flowing from his nose and eyelids fluttering nonstop in a near seizure of movement beneath. Landing hastily on his knees, Dean scooped his brother's torso into his lap, cradling his head as he tapped at his cheek.

“Sam!” He shook his brother, mindful of the injuries he couldn’t find. “God damn it!”

The younger Winchester jerked with a groan, eyes finally opening and stilling their near crazed flickering. The blood was still flowing as Dean pulled Sammy’s shirt up and pressed it to his nose in an attempt to staunch the flow.

“D’n?” Sam sounded exhausted, barely awake. His hand flopped uselessly, trying to remove the thing over his face. Dean pushed the appendage away, keeping the cotton pressed firmly to his brother’s nose. Damn, the blood wasn’t slowing.

“What the hell did you do?”

Sam blinked hazily, hand once again making a half-assed, aborted move. “T-tried to make ‘em str’ng’r. Like yurs.”

Dean blinked harshly down at his brother, who was deteriorating fast. Shit, whatever was happening, it wasn’t getting better. “What?”

“V’zns,” Sam muttered, eyes rolling back in his head as he went limp in his brother’s arms.

Chapter 16: Season 1: Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Prepare for some Brotherly Angst as only the Winchesters can provide! Sammy's not out of the game yet, but we're going to see just how many options we can cross off the list before we, of course, save our favorite Moose.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 15

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean's leg kept a constant beat against the sterile, vinyl flooring of the hospital waiting room. It may have started as a Metallica song, but had deteriorated into nothing more than anxious tapping occasionally dipping back into something almost recognizable as *Enter Sandman*.

It had been three hours and fifty six minutes since they'd taken Sam away, after a frantic drive from the motel into the town of Evanston and the nearest emergency room.

Dean was losing his mind.

Something was wrong with Sammy, something that hadn't happened originally. Which meant Dean had no guarantee he was going to be okay. Because he had no idea what had happened, what had changed to cause it. And that was on him. Whatever changes were happening and the consequences of those differences, they were all on him.

The crutch of knowing what came next, which fights they survived and others to avoid, was crippling now that it was gone. Dean had come to rely too heavily on knowing when they were good and when to panic.

But Sammy had to be fine. He had to. Heaven and Hell weren't going to lose this race before it even got started. It was hardly comforting, but Dean tried to find confidence in the bigger picture, something the Winchesters were famously crappy at.

The only thing he had to go on, as a doctor had yet to come and inform him of his brother's condition, was that Sam had been having a vision. It must have been one he hadn't had the last time around,

which meant it was probably about dad again.

Though the image of his brother on the floor, blood running down his nose, was only drawing parallels to a much darker, hungrier Sam. A Sam that killed demons with his mind and took on Famine with blood smeared across his face like a feral grin. A Sam that Dean would absolutely not let into existence this time.

So far, his efforts were going swimmingly.

The double doors to the waiting room swung open and a harried nurse and far too grim doctor emerged. Dean was on his feet before they'd even called the fake name listed on his brother's insurance. The look on the doctor's face was not encouraging.

"We've stopped the bleeding, and your brother is stable for now."

Dean let out a breath he'd been holding since the motel bathroom and his brother's growing puddle of blood.

"There are still tests we need to run but…I'm afraid it's not good, son."

"What do you mean 'not good'?" the older Winchester asked tightly, clenching his fists at his side to keep himself from throwing a punch at the guy who was only doing his job. "What does that even mean?"

The doctor's eyes crinkled in sympathy and Dean really did want to hit him. It was the look that every person used when the outcome was inevitably death. Dean shook his head, he wouldn't accept that. He wouldn't.

"There was bleeding in his brain, and the damage is… extensive."

Cold flooded his body. Not Sammy. Not his genius kid brother who constantly amazed him with his utter nerdiness and brilliance. Not his brother. Brain damage wasn't an option.

"Right now there's a lot of swelling and pressure, and we can't find the cause. You don't usually see this kind of strain in someone so young."

The nurse put her hand on Dean's arm, and he realized he was shaking.

"There are still tests to run, as I said." The doctor sighed, and Dean

knew what was coming, even if he denied it with every fiber of his being. Even if Time and Fate themselves were telling him it shouldn't be happening. Wouldn't happen. Hadn't happened. Ergo, *not happening*. "But damage that severe….I'm sorry, Mr. Burkovitz. It's not repairable."

"What?"

"Your brother has a couple of weeks. Maybe a month at best."

"No." Dean blinked away the water filling his eyes. He stumbled a step back, body numb even as he shook his head again. "No."

The doc was speaking but he wasn't listening. His brain held rational thought for all of about thirty seconds before Dean was slamming the doctor into the wall. The nurse screamed for security even as the hunter shook the man by the lapels of his coat.

"This isn't how it's supposed to happen! Do you hear me? You fix him!" The doctor, shocked, grabbed at his wrists, but the man from the future was running on adrenaline and borrowed time, and nothing was going to stop him from saving his brother. Not this time around. "You have to fix him! This is not where my brother dies!"

Security arrived and pulled him away from the doctor. Dean hit the floor on his knees, struggling to breath as all the oxygen and fight left his body and the last six months caught up to him.

-o-o-o-

The hospital staff was exceptionally reasonable about his outburst. Apparently, he wasn't the first. According to the nurse, he'd hardly be the last.

He apologized to the doc in Dean Winchester style, which was not really apologizing at all. But the man nodded and started going over Sam's options once it was clear the hunter had regained his calm and was unlikely to attack him again.

They eventually left him in his brother's hospital room, alone with an unconscious Sam and the steady beat of a weak heartbeat. Dean sunk, lost, into the chair by his brother's bedside. The kid was hooked up to all sorts of wires and tubes, something Dean had seen more times than he'd ever be comfortable with.

But this time the kid was positively ashen, with dark circles under his

eyes and a looseness to his skin that left him looking dead already.

Dean wanted to hit something again or cry. And since the first would only end up with him permanently kicked out and the second wasn't an option at all, he sat numbly in the chair and watched his kid brother sleep.

-o-o-o-

They kicked him out again in relatively short order to let Sam get some rest. Dean spent the last of the early hours of morning packing up their hotel room and finding accommodation closer to the hospital in town. Visiting hours didn't begin until eight, so he spent the last two hours brainstorming and researching every possible way out of death the two had ever used or heard of.

A deal was out of the question, as all it would achieve was starting the apocalypse a resounding two years early. Which was pretty much the dictionary-definition antonym of what Dean had come back from the future to do.

Heaven was out too. Any angel but Castiel would probably walk Dean straight to the nearest crossroads and hand deliver him into a deal. Any angel sympathetic to his cause would likely fall in line as soon as a superior's demanded it. And fuck all if Zachariah or any of the archangels would get them out of this.

Dean had given Gabriel more than a moment's thought when his mind stumbled over Michael, as briefly as he had. But it had taken them almost a year to talk the celestial runaway onto their side, and even then it hadn't been about saving humanity but his pagan friends. Dean had no leverage to offer and nothing to convince Gabriel that it wasn't time for the apocalypse yet.

So he let Loki go from his mind and focused on their other options.

Dean had already prayed his mental voice hoarse calling out to Castiel. If the angel had made it back from the future with him (and after the last lake-side chat he honestly didn't know anymore) then he wasn't answering.

The hunter tried not to blame him viciously for it in his panic-stricken grief. If Cas was there and not answering, then the reason was he simply couldn't. Despite their tumultuous past, Dean knew that the angel come for Sam if he could.

Which left Present-Day Cas. Dean had tried praying to that angel too, unsure of himself on what to even say as that version of his best friend wouldn't know who he was.

If that angel got the stumbling, desperate prayer, he wasn't answering either.

Dean didn't bother holding back his anger at that version of Cas, cursing him out in his head. So called angels, protectors of 'God's greatest creation' his ass. Couldn't even spare a moment to heal the fucking savior of the planet.

Of course, this timeline-Castiel may not be open to the idea of the Boy with the Demon Blood being a savior, or worth saving for that matter.

Bag of dicks, the lot of them.

So he moved on. Heaven was out. Hell wasn't an option, at least not yet. (*Never,* he told himself. But he knew it was a lie even before he thought it.) Death was sealed up tight and would be forever more as long as Lucifer didn't pop the box. That left the pagans and witchcraft.

God, he hated witches. They were just…so skeevy.

There were a couple of them he could think of that might have enough juice for the job and had the extra benefit of not making his skin completely crawl. Rowena had the ability, for sure, but there was no way he was adding her to this clusterfuck. She'd probably find a way to release Lucifer all on her own, while body-switching the brothers and locking Heaven's doors up in one stupid ass spell that they would have to blackmail Crowley into conniving, killing, and kidnapping until it was reversed.

There was a long list of people he never wanted to see again in this timeline, and Rowena ranked pretty far up on that list. Plus, he had no idea where she was in 2006, and it wasn't like his brother had the time for a witch hunt.

So he wrote down the few other witches he thought might be up for the job, along with a couple medicine men they'd run into in the past.

The pagans would be harder to work with, but more likely successful in the end goal. Especially if he could find one of the ones that would protest the apocalypse in years to come. If he could convince them that saving Sam would help stave off the End, he was more likely to

gain their help (and be able to afford whatever payment they demanded in return).

He jotted down the couple he could recall from that hotel horror scene with Lucifer, and a few more off the top of his head that weren't completely against humans in general. Or had any sort of appetite for them.

Armed with a small list and a dozen calls to make, he headed to the hospital.

-o-o-o-

Sam was pretty weak. He nodded along with all of Dean's plans, but the hunter could see he wasn't holding out much hope, and it irked him to his soul.

Unfortunately, calling him out on it only triggered a fight about Dean needing to let Sam go, which was absolutely not happening. In turn, Sam's stats sky-rocketed as the fight got vocal and the nurses had to shove Dean out the room to calm his ailing brother back down before he gave himself an aneurysm and kicked the bucket an extra couple of weeks early.

-o-o-o-

They had Sammy doped up pretty heavily the next time they allowed Dean in his room with the very stern warning that if he started anything again he would be banned from the hospital completely. The hunter, while agitated and guilt-ridden, was sincere in his promise to be good.

Sitting in the chair in the corner of the room, Dean stared at his phone and the speed dial he'd almost called a dozen times while reaching out to other contacts. Finally, he hit the number and pressed the phone to his ear.

Unsurprisingly, it was voicemail that picked up.

"Dad." Dean's voice broke and he bowed his head as tears threatened once more. He rubbed at his forehead, forcing words passed the sharp tightness in his throat. "Dad, pick up. I could- I could really use your help right now."

He was barely holding it together as he left a message for his not-dead Dad, who was being hunted by who knows what, to tell him that his

baby brother and the sole purpose John Winchester had ever instilled in his oldest son, was lying near death in a hospital bed. And all of it was his fault.

Why did he ever think he could change the future for the better? Dean Winchester only ever made things worse. Dean Winchester broke the world, over and over again, and never did better than duct tape and Band-Aids when it came time for cleanup.

If he couldn't fix his brother…. He already knew he'd break it all over again at the first crossroads he came to.

"Dad, please. It's Sammy, he's….It's bad." Green eyes slid closed as tears hit the tiles below as silence reigned down the line. God damn it. He hung his head, suddenly drowning in the despair that had been building for months now. "Why am I even bothering?"

He slid the phone down from his cheek and flipped it shut.

-o-o-o-

The next time Sam woke, his older brother was asleep in the chair in the corner, tucked out of the way so nurses could come and go as they needed. Dean's eyes, though closed, were ringed red and puffy and his brother's obvious pain and distress stabbed at the young hunter's heart. He continued to watch him groggily for a while, working the haze of the drugs out of his system.

He was going to die, and soon.

The doctors had talked to him the first time he woke, before they let Dean into the room. They'd tossed some ideas around and offered a few meager platitudes of hope, but Sam could see in it in their eyes and hear it in their tones.

There was nothing to be done.

Sam stared up at the ceiling tiles, blankly contemplating what would be the last few weeks of his life. His head ached, like he'd gone a round with a baseball bat after a sinus infection. All stuffed attic interiors and hot air balloons amid a buzzing drumbeat and the pulse of muscle cramps in his shoulders and neck.

He'd pushed too far.

And for what? What had he gotten for his efforts? For his life, as it

turned out? He still didn't know where their dad was. He just couldn't see it like Dean did.

Sam turned his head to the side, neck muscles straining against the ache of illness and death. His phone was lying among his other personal effects on the table beside his hospital bed.

Perhaps it hadn't been completely worthless.

It took a couple of tries to get his boneless, exhausted limbs to cooperate and his fingers to grip the smooth plastic, but eventually he got a good hold on his phone and brought it to his chest.

The simple move alone had been exhausting and he lay there panting.

He took a moment to breathe deep breaths and relax the tense, cramping muscles in his shoulders and the base of his neck. When he was ready, he powered on his phone and pulled up the web application.

Sam could make the last of his life mean something. He could make that much of a difference: give his brother and dad a fighting chance against the looming horizon. Because he had seen something in his vision, something he'd seen the first time but couldn't parse through the confusion and haze.

A beast hidden in the darkness, with the body of a lion, the head of an elephant, and the eyes of a rhinoceros.

-o-o-o-

"It's a Baku."

Dean was still shaking the sleep from his eyes when he looked up and realized Sam was awake. More than awake, he was holding his phone out towards his older brother, an internet article pulled up.

The hunter surged up from his chair, rubbing the grit from his eyes as he crossed the hospital room to take the phone. "What?"

"The thing hunting dad. It's a Baku." Sam sounded exhausted, but even as he blinked tired eyes, they were lit with determination and the last of the life he had to give.

That gaze broke Dean somewhere deep inside.

He read quickly through the words on his brother's cell. A creature of

Japanese origin that ate nightmares and could be summoned to devour bad dreams. Supposedly, it was made of leftover animal parts after the gods had finished with all other creatures.

Awesome.

"Some of them get greedy," Sam whispered hoarsely, gesturing weakly at the article with his hand. "They go after more than nightmares. They start in on hopes and dreams."

Dean glanced up from the phone with a raised brow, a question he didn't need to voice.

"I saw it. Lion's body, tusks, trunk. It makes sense, Dean. It's why dad sounded so tired." Sam struggled to sit up and his brother immediately went to assist him. Once he was upright and leaning back against an abundance of pillows, Dean handed his phone back. "He knows it's hunting him in his sleep."

Dean nodded, scratching at his short hair as his mind spun. "Alright. Alright, we'll call him, leave him a message."

"No." Sam gave him a look he couldn't meet head on. "He needs help. You need to find him."

"As soon as we get you fixed."

"I'm not getting fixed, Dean!"

A passing nurse stopped in the hallway to give the brothers a warning look. Sam's stats were still in the green, but could easily jump into yellow if they didn't keep it down. Dean gestured placating to his brother and the kid sunk back into the pillows.

"Even if I knew where Dad was, there is no way in hell I'd leave you here, Sammy."

"It's Sam, and I'm not your kid brother anymore!"

The sharpness in those words, the anger and bitterness in his tone cut the older of the two brothers to his core.

"Is that what this is about?" He stared down at Sam in no shortage of shock and hurt. How was it he could travel through time to a life he'd already lived, and yet still be surprised by his little brother? "Is that why you pushed until you damn near killed yourself? Because I call

you Sammy and act like your big brother? Newsflash, I *am* your big brother!"

He grabbed the edge railing of his brother's bed, holding Sam's gaze with the fierce promise of his own. "God damn it, Sam, you will always be my kid brother. Ten years from now or forty, if we somehow live that long, you will still be my snot-nosed little brother."

Vaguely, he was aware this was likely on the list of things he'd never admit to saying on pain of death, but he didn't have the time to care. Once the dam was broken, it was near impossible to seal back up. The part of him that wasn't a repressed child in a man's body knew – had really known for a so time now – that his brother needed to hear it. Deserved to hear it. And Dean needed to hear it too. Had needed to say if for a good ten years now.

"It doesn't mean you're weak, or that I think you can't take care of yourself. You're one of the strongest men I know, Sammy. *Sam*." He gave a small concessionary nod at the correction, which he swore he'd start working on if the kid really wanted him to. "You've got nothing – *nothing* – to prove to me."

His brother watched him with watery eyes even as Dean pulled back. Finally, Sam nodded with a solemnity that told Dean he still expected and accepted his impending death, but that the two would greet that end on better terms than they'd been on for months.

It pissed him off, but he'd take every little victory he could.

-o-o-o-

As soon as the hospital room door closed behind him, Dean tugged at his hair before running his hands punishingly across his scalp. Tears bit at his eyes and anger ate at his heart, but he refused to give in.

He collapsed in the cheap plastic seats that lined the hallway and let out a broken exhale.

His contacts had gotten back to him over the last couple hours and prospects weren't looking good. Some of the witches couldn't be located – one had been taken out by a hunter last year, another by a bad deal just a few months ago. The medicine men were notoriously hard to get a hold of, and a few of his hunter buddies were still on it, but they'd made it pretty clear not to expect anything soon.

And Sammy needed soon. He didn't have time for anything else.

Which left the pagans. Dean had kind of hoped to avoid them if possible, if only because they were unpredictable in their willingness to help, and a hell of a lot harder to pin down.

He looked down at his cell phone, held tightly enough that he was pretty lucky he hadn't broken it yet.

Damn it, he needed to talk to someone about this. Anyone. He couldn't keep doing this alone, couldn't keep it up. Especially not if Sammy…

"Excuse me." Dean looked up to see a nurse standing in front of him, looking uncomfortable as she held a brightly colored paper between her hands. The woman fidgeted and hesitated, glanced down at the flier and then back to Dean. She reached up to fiddle with the delicate gold cross hanging from her neck on a small chain. "I…I don't usually do this but…"

The nurse looked over her shoulder towards Sammy's room and Dean straightened, voice and eyes hardening. "Do what?"

She blushed. "It's….It's just that you seem really down on your luck and it's so hard to see loved ones…" She thrust the paper out at him. "He's the real thing, I've seen him work. I-I know it probably sounds crazy, and I don't usually-"

The nurse abruptly cut herself off with flushed cheeks. She gave up her stumbling explanation as Dean took the paper. The flustered woman made a hurried exit down the hall and when the hunter glanced down at the blocky text, he understood why.

It was a flier for a faith healer, one Reverend Roy Le Grange.

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

Chapter 17: Season 1: Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dean faces quite the moral dilemma, Sam doesn't see how this is up for debate, and the reaper isn't the only thing to worry about at the Reverend's church.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 16

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

They were getting Sam into a wheelchair when Dean came back into the room, having left to pull the Impala up outside the hospital. It had taken extensive negotiating with the doctors to release his brother into his care. It wasn't like keeping him in the hospital was saving him anything; they were just postponing the inevitable, as the doctors kept reminding him. Dean was pretty sure all that had won him that argument in the end was the doc remembering Dean's temper and ultimately, though unhappily, acquiescing to save face. Literally.

So there they were, helping Sam into a wheelchair to get him out of the hospital and onto the road. Getting the sasquatch into the Impala would be a challenge of itself, but the brother's would manage. They always did.

Now all that was left was for Dean to figure out what the hell he was going to do.

Could he trade innocent life for his brother's?

Yes. Yes he could. And yeah, he was friggin' torn up about it and he knew Sam would never forgive him. But when it came down to it, time and time again had proved there was little in this life Dean wouldn't do to keep Sam safe.

Was he *going* to trade an innocent life for his brother's?

Dean had no friggin' clue. Either way, someone had to take care of the pastor's wife and break her hold on the reaper. So they might as well start there, and he could figure the rest of it out on the way.

"Where are we going?" Sam asked with genuine curiosity once he'd

recovered his breath and his head had stopped pounding. Well, it never stopped, but it did lessen to the point where he could actually hear his brother's response over the drumming.

The nurse behind his wheelchair gave Dean a nasty look at the obvious exhaustion and pain her patient was in. The hunter didn't care. Yeah, his brother looked like shit and it was obvious he should be in a hospital bed, not checking out AMA, but it didn't matter. A reaper in Nebraska had a hell of a better chance of fixing Sammy than staying there did.

Ignoring the woman and focusing back on his brother's question, Dean contemplated what to say. He couldn't tell Sammy the plan – not yet. One: because he didn't actually *have* a plan. And B: the kid would never get in the car if he knew Dean was considering trading someone else's life for his.

What had Sam lied his ass off calling it?

"We're going to a specialist."

-o-o-o-

They were outside the motel Dean had spent the night in - a crap-ass, rundown place that was within manageable distance to the hospital in case of emergency but far enough away for a reduced police presence. They had just kidnapped a girl three states over, after all. Dean was throwing the last of his bags and all of the research he'd hastily packed back into the trunk while Sam dozed lightly in the front seat in the late morning sun. Not only was the kid not up for any sort of physical activity, including something as limited as walking, but they weren't getting him out of the car if they didn't have to.

Managing to get his weak butt into the low-riding muscle car had been a comedy skit in the making.

Dean grabbed their duffle full of sawed-offs and handguns, intending to toss it further into the trunk until he had time to put everything back in its proper place beneath the hidden panel, when he knocked his go-bag off of its current spot propped on the spare gas tank and canisters of holy water. The contents toppled out of his bag almost lazily, taunting him for not taking the time to close the damn zipper before he'd shoved the thing in the trunk with their other bags.

The hunter moved to toss everything back inside, annoyed and already at his tension limit for the week, when a glint of gold caught

his eye. The amulet Sam had given him fourteen years ago stared up at him from the floor of the trunk, right beneath his outstretched hand.

The man from the future stared at the little horned head and sightless eyes perfectly propped between a Black Sabbath shirt and his FBI badge. Raising his head with a discretion that was wholly unnecessary, the hunter peaked between the raised trunk and windshield to stare at the back of his brother's head.

Dean Winchester didn't believe in signs and he believed even less in the God that would be sending this one. But as he stared at the one thing in life he did have faith in, and always would, he made a decision to listen, just this once.

Scooping the amulet up, he shoved his clothes to the side, threw the duffel of weapons on top, and shut the trunk. Time would tell if it was as dumb-ass a decision as he suspected.

Sam opened his eyes as Dean climbed into the driver's seat. His brother was looping something around the rear view mirror, catching Sam's attention. He sat up a little more, blinking the exhaustion from his eyes, and stared at the amulet dangling just beneath the mirror.

Dean chanced a glance his way, then cleared his throat at the surprise and muddled emotion there. Ignoring the utter chick-flick moment that a high school playwright would surely swoon over in years to come, the older Winchester put the car in drive and headed for Ford City, Nebraska.

-o-o-o-

They called John from the road.

It, of course, went to voicemail. Neither were surprised. They left the message about the Baku and hung up.

There wasn't much point in saying anything else.

-o-o-o-

"You are such a liar."

Sam laughed weakly in the front seat, somehow amused by all of this despite the fact that he was definitely a shade more grey than he had been at the hospital. He stared out the rain-speckled window at the

white tent and large sign proclaiming the True Believers Revival Church.

“Shaddup,” Dean muttered, turning off the engine and leaning over to look out Sam’s window as well.

“Dean, no way you believe this crap. So what are we doing here?”

His brother spared him a look that said he really, really didn’t want to answer. “You don’t think he’s the real deal?”

Sam let out another laugh, though it dipped into a cough at the end that had Dean digging into the pharmacy bag for his meds and handing one of the muscle relaxers over. The younger hunter looked loathe to take it, but did so anyway.

“Sure, he could be. I believe there’s just as much *good* in this world as evil.” He swallowed down the pill and leaned his head back against the leather, still watching his brother. He looked completely wiped out. “But I know you don’t. So what’s really going on?”

His older brother hesitated before bobbing his head in that way of his that said he wasn’t going to lie but he wasn’t going to give a straight answer either. “The pastor’s wife hooked a reaper.”

Sam blinked at him slowly, and it was a testament to the damage in his system that it took him a comically long time to parse Dean’s meaning. When he did, his eyes widened and he immediately sat up, triggering another coughing spell. Dean was ready for it, already pushing him back into the seat with a gentle hand and an offered water bottle.

The young Winchester tried to talk twice before he was ready, finally having to concede the battle and slow down enough to drink the water.

“Dean, no.” He shook his head minuscule as soon as he was able, afraid to trigger another bout of pounding pain. “You are not trading my life for someone else’s.”

“Yeah, thanks for that Spock. I’m aware.” He looked back out the front window and added on, muttered slow lowly that Sam almost didn’t catch it, “If that was the plan, I wouldn’t have told it to you first.”

The look Sam gave his brother was not a kind one. And maybe if he

didn't think he'd be dead in a week, he'd have raised hell about his brother even considering going behind his back about something like that.

"If the reaper is killing people, even to save lives, we have to stop it."

"I know, Sammy. Damnit, I mean *Sam*." Dean sighed raggedly and pinched the bridge of his nose. But he went for the door handle all the same, pushing open the driver's side. "And there's no *we* in this one. You sit your ass there and rest. I'll take care of it."

"Dean?" His brother stopped moving, one foot out of the car and his hand on the steering wheel. He looked over his shoulder at him and it was obvious to the younger hunter how hard his brother was trying to hide the fear in his eyes. "Sammy's fine."

Green eyes stared at him, incredulous at first before they hardened into something almost dangerous. Certainly angry. He climbed back fully in the car, pulling the door shut with a harsh sound. "Don't you dare. Don't you start making speeches."

"I'm not-"

"You're *not* dying, Sam. I won't let you. So don't start with the goodbye concessions."

Sam stared at his brother, gaze sympathetic. Dean hated it. They weren't having this conversation again. He went for the door handle when a knock startled both of them.

A young, cute blonde stood on the other side of Sam's window. She was smiling gently at them, a stern-faced woman with an umbrella standing just behind her, looking both impatient and concerned all in one, constipated expression. Sam took great effort to roll the window down, wheezing once he'd finished.

"Are you going to sit out here all day, or come in?"

Dean remembered Layla Rourke's smile like it was yesterday and his heart contracted so strongly in his chest that he suddenly couldn't breathe.

My god. He was going to kill this woman *twice.*

Sam grinned up at her, both playful and sincere in only the way Sam Winchester could be. "My brother doesn't believe in faith healers."

Layla's smile grew wider and more than a little playful as she winked at the ailing hunter. "Well, lucky for you, he doesn't look like the one in need of healing."

She opened Sammy's door and carefully stepped back in the mud. "Come on, I'll walk you in."

Sam gave his brother a look like '*You coming?'* as he took Layla's hand and let her help him out of the Impala.

Dean, halfway to telling his brother to get his broken, dying ass back into the car and rest while he go ganked a reaper, instead scrubbed a hand roughly through his hair to avoid punching the steering wheel out of sheer stress. He threw open his door and followed after the pair with utterly no clue what he was going to do when they got inside.

-o-o-o-

The next morning, Sam weakly passed his laptop over to Dean, an article pulled up about a local woman who had died the day before, complications from a stroke the article said. Only she was twenty-four, had no prior history of medical problems, and ran a local abortion clinic that was currently in a rather nasty feud with a particularly conservative church less than a city block away.

"You were right."

Dean didn't need to read the article. Roy had cured an older man last night, suffering from debilitating and ultimately fatal complications of a massive stroke.

"I know."

"Then why didn't you stop it?" The anger in Sam's voice didn't surprise him, but the strength of it did. He scrubbed a hand down his face and got up from the small table, pacing the room. Sam watched his every move. "You didn't stop it because you still haven't decided if you're going to use it. Dean, you are not trading my life for some innocent person's!"

"I know, Sammy!" The haggard hunter spun around and he looked so, so very tired. He threw his arms out, defeat in every line of his body. "I know, okay? Living with that would kill you. Believe me, I get it, better than anybody!"

Because he still carried that guilt himself, to this day, for a teacher in another life who had died so he could live. He slumped down on the bed. “But I’m not losing you.”

Sam watched his brother falling apart before his eyes and swallowed past the growing lump in his throat caused by more than just his failing body. He knew that Dean had abandonment issues, and he knew he’d only reinforced those time and time again throughout their childhood. But his brother was a rock, strong in ways Sam couldn’t even begin to match.

He wrongly assumed Dean would be fine without him.

“Okay,” he whispered, causing his older brother to look up, already fighting to hide the water in his green eyes because heaven forbid he should shed an unmanly tear while talking about the inevitable death of his own brother. “I believe you, Dean. You’ll find a way to save me. But this isn't it.”

-o-o-o-

The afternoon service was about to start and Dean still hadn’t gotten out of the car. Sam was watching him, caught somewhere between a lecture and a laugh. He rarely ever saw his older brother hesitate, and it was clear Dean was fighting himself and getting nowhere.

Sam had made his wishes crystal clear that morning; they would find another way.

“What are you going to do?” He settled on a neutral question. No need to spark Dean’s temper or current anxieties.

“Hell if I know,” his brother muttered back, but it got him opening the Impala door. “Just stay in the car this time, alright?”

Sam answered by leaning his head against the back of the seat and watching his brother struggle his way through the mud and into the tent.

-o-o-o-

As the minutes ticked by, he stared at the roof of the Impala and contemplated calling Jess.

They’d been e-mailing back and forth pretty regularly, and he sometimes snuck away at night to sit in the Impala and just listen to

her voice as she talked about her day, or her parents, or how good it was to spend some time back in her hometown.

In some ways, it was the best part of Sam's day. In others, it was an awkward dance that he knew would half to end eventually. Sam would never lie to her, but Jess would want to know how he was doing and he couldn't really answer without telling her more of the truths and horrors in his life than he wanted to. On the rare occasions he did breakdown discuss a hunt, or their search for their father, or the yellow-eyed demon, he could hear the uncertainty in her voice as she tried to support and care for him from afar. She didn't know how to broach the supernatural aspect of Sam's life, and he didn't want to involve her in it anyway.

Still, he loved hearing how she was doing, back in a world without monsters and demons. Back in a life he used to have.

He should probably call her.

Jess expressed her fear pretty early on in his road trip that one day she would just stop hearing from him. That she would never know what happened, only that he was likely dead.

Sam had made Dean swear, on pain of being haunted for the rest of his life by an irate ghost, to tell Jess should anything like that happen. The older Winchester waved it off with a 'nothing will, relax', but eventually Sam got him to promise all the same.

And something like it did happen, in the end.

The youngest Winchester sighed and closed his eyes. He should call her. He didn't have much hope in any of Dean's backup plans, though for the sake of his brother he would give each of them the chance Dean thought they deserved. Maybe he could hold off calling Jess for a little while longer. Just in case his brother did pull a miracle out of nowhere.

-0-0-0-

He was almost asleep, lulled by the warmth of the sun and the safe cocoon of the Impala's interior, when a knock on glass startled him awake. Sam sat up, looking to the driver's side window and expecting to see his temperamental brother climbing into the car, or perhaps the young woman from yesterday come to fetch him again.

The person who did climb into the car had Sam startled all the way off

the seat, out of the vehicle, and stumbling through the mud.

"Now, now," Yellow Eyes held out his hands in placation, a look of mock worry on his face as he leaned over into the passenger's side of Impala so he could look up at Sam through his still open door. "Easy there, son. We wouldn't want you keeling over before it's time."

Sam couldn't tell if his struggle to breathe came from the pounding in his heart or in his head. He clenched at his shirt as he bent near-over trying to catch a wisp of air and not pass out from the rushing in his brain. The demon sat patiently in the car, watching him with an idyllic look on his borrowed face.

Damn it, he had nothing. No weapons, no holy water. He'd mistakenly assumed the Impala was safe. The colt was in the devil-trapped trunk, and even as his eyes darted too it, Yellow Eyes tsk'ed.

"Lot of innocents around, Sammy." He smiled up at the ailing man as the hunter straightened, shoving his hurts away by sheer force of will. "We wouldn't want things to get messy, now would we?"

Sam clenched his fists by his sides and, wheezing, bit out, "Only my brother calls me that."

The demon was climbing out of the car with the energy of a kid seeing the circus for the first time and the hunter stumbled back through the muddy ground to keep his distance. Yellow Eyes turned raised his hands in a truce.

"I'm not here to cause trouble. I'm actually here to help."

"I doubt that," the hunter shot back.

Yellow Eyes didn't seem phased by his vitriol in the slightest. He just kept grinning at the hunter. "Pushing your powers. Now that's something else, tiger. I knew I was picking the right horse when I bet on you."

Sam swayed slightly, but held his ground against his waning strength. "Bet on me for *what*?"

"Big things, Sammy."

"I told you, only my brother gets to call me that."

"Yes. Your brother." The demon's eyes shifted over Sam's shoulder to

the tent behind him and the hunter stiffened. "The last minute entry in all this. He's got us quite abuzz downstairs."

He fluttered his fingers in a jazz hands motion and Sam frowned at the theatrics. Whatever the demon wanted, he sure was taking his sweet time getting to it. The hunter wondered what the odds were of him passing out before the murderer got to his point.

The demon seemed to notice his fading attention span and clasped his hands together like a businessman about to make a deal. Dread pooled in Sam's gut, but there was little he could do about it.

"Do you know who it is talking to him, kiddo? We'd really like to know. We denizens of Hell frown on cheating when we're not the ones doing it."

Sam pulled a face that clearly expressed his answer.

"Like hell you aren't. One of you is 'betting' on Dean just like you are with me." The hunter held his arms out in a move of self-deprecation. "Guess what, you picked the wrong horse."

Yellow Eyes tilted his head and a flicker of confusion turned quickly into curiosity
"Oh, kiddo. Dean's not in this race."

Sam dropped his arms. "What?"

The demon leaned back against the Impala, watching the kid with amusement. "He may be a contender for the Triple Crown, but we're not there yet. Hell, we're haven't even made it to the Kentucky Derby. And unlike you, your brother's not one of my entries."

The hunter scrambled to follow the stupid metaphor. "One?"

The demon grinned, shoving off the car towards him. Sam stumbled back for every step he took forward, but the human lost ground easily. "That's right. My special kids. You're on of 'em, Sammy, but I gotta admit: you're my favorite. Because you *push*. You've got a drive the others don't. And it's going to serve you well."

Sam snorted, and winced at the spike of pain it sent through his head. "Yeah, it's serving me great right now."

Yellow Eyes suddenly split into a 100-watt smile and reached behind his back. Sam raised his arms, prepared to fight by hand if he had to.

When the demon pulled back, he was holding a large mason jar filled with a thick, dark liquid, and nothing more. The hunter stared at it dubiously as Yellow Eyes raised it up to eye level like a prized jewel.

"You just pushed yourself a little further than you're ready for." The demon bounced the jar up and down, and the liquid within sloshed along the sides, painting the glass crimson red. "But I can help fix that. No reaper needed, no innocent life lost for little ole you."

Sam took a step back, staring at the jar with a growing sense of trepidation. "What is that?"

"What does it look like, kiddo?"

The hunter stared at the liquid, then the demon. He squared his shoulders, keeping a defiant chin and a strong stance, despite feeling anything but. "It looks like blood."

"Bullseye! Shooting straight down the center, Sam. That's what I like about you." Yellow Eyes jiggled the container playfully. "This here is demon blood. A pint of yours truly."

Sam took another step back, eyes widening. Crap. Blood had been bad enough, but whatever the demon planned to do with that much of his own blood was probably a lot worse. Yellow Eyes let him gain the distance without closing in on him.

"See, the reason you're sick is because you're overdue for an oil change. Just need more of what you've already got in you."

The youngest Winchester paled as his injured brain registered the creature's meaning. The dread in his stomach solidified to a concrete slab, sinking deep within his bones. "Wh-what?"

"That night in the nursery. The night I killed your mommy," the demon winked his way and Sam's anger spiked through his fear and revulsion for a moment of crystal clarity. "I gave you your first taste. Bled in your mouth, tiger, and now you've got super powers! Not a bad trade, right?"

"You're crazy." Sam shook his head. "I'm not drinking that, even if what you say is true. *Especially* if what you say is true."

The demon tsk'ed, looking down at the container of blood. "Come on now, kiddo. You're not the martyr of the family. That's your brother's job. You want to go back to your nine-to-five life and that

pretty gal o' yours? Can't live happily ever after if you're dead."

"I can't play your sick game if I'm dead either."

Yellow Eyes sucked air through his teeth as he kept the smile up, but it turned a touch more dangerous.

"Sam?" Both hunter and demon turned at the soft, uncertain voice coming from behind him. Layla was standing just a few feet away, having come out of the tent looking for the ailing boy missing from the service. Her eyes darted between the two men. "Is…Is everything okay?"

"Yes," Sam answered hastily, holding his hand out to keep her from coming any closer. "Everything is fine, Layla. Go back inside."

God, if the demon attacked her, there was nothing Sam could do. He glanced back at Yellow Eyes with a warning, but the demon just raised his eyebrows and looked wounded at the accusation in those brown eyes.

He turned his gaze to the woman, and got a thrill of enjoyment at the way Sam tensed and slid a step over to stand between them.

"My dear, perhaps you can help us. I'm trying to convince Sam here that I've got the miracle cure he needs."

"Right." The blonde rolled her eyes at him before focusing back on the hunter. "Sam, why don't you walk me back inside?"

Yellow Eyes laughed, and it was not a pleasant sound. "Such cynicism from the follower of a faith healer!"

Layla lost her false calm and sweet smile, staring at the demon with a fierceness Sam found remarkable. "I've seen what Roy can do. His healing is real."

She held her hand out once more for Sam, but the yellow-eyed demon wasn't done yet.

"Oh, if it's a demonstration that you need, please; allow me to prove myself."

The two humans turned slowly back to the demon. His tone was not a request and Layla glanced at Sam nervously. Courageous as she may, she could sense the danger coming off the man in waves.

He held the jar out towards the hunter, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Come on, tiger. Let's show Layla here what a real miracle looks like."

The hunter heard the threat and closed his eyes. Damn it, the demon would kill her in a heartbeat if Sam refused. And the boy wasn't about to stand by while another innocent woman suffered from just knowing him, just from being brave and facing down danger to stand beside him.

No, he wasn't letting it happen again.

"Heal her first." He opened his eyes and locked a fierce, challenging gaze on the demon. "She has a brain tumor. Get rid of it and I'll do it."

"Done." The demon smiled widely and turned to Layla. "Run along now, your part here is over."

She glanced between the very dangerous thing standing feet from her and the sweet boy she'd come outside to get because she believed he deserved healing as much as she did. "Sam-"

He gave her a soft nod. "Go, Layla."

It was the urgency in his voice that finally did it. She turned and started towards the tent at as fast a pace as she dared. By the time she hit the opening she was running.

Sam turned back to the yellow-eyed demon only to find him standing right in front of him, jar of blood held out. The hunter stumbled back a step by instinct, but steeled himself as he found his balance.

He had made a deal, and Layla's life was worth it.

The youngest Winchester took the container, stomach revolting at the cold touch of glass with a hint of warmth running under the surface. The demon stood, observant as Sam unscrewed the lid and, watching those yellow irises, raised it to his lips.

His stomach nearly upended that morning's meager breakfast at the first metallic gulp that slid down his throat like oil sludge. He coughed, pulling the jar away and gasping down the urge to vomit.

"All of it, Sammy. Or you won't grow big and strong."

The hunter glared at the demon, but took a deep breath tossed back the rest of the jar.

The empty glass sank into the mud as he fell to his knees. He heard Dean screaming his name from across the parking lot. But it, and everything else around him, was quickly overcome by the pounding of blood through his veins.

Chapter 18: Season 1: Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: The boys get a brief respite to catch their breath before the leap from frying pan to fire.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 17

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The minute he met those pale yellow irises, Azazel was gone.

Dean took off across the parking lot all the same, hard and fast as his feet could carry him over the wet ground towards his collapsed brother. Sam was on his hands and knees in the mud, hacking up what could very well be his lungs at this point.

“Sammy!”

Layla had come running into the tent, lungs gasping for breath and fear in her eyes. Lucky for him, he’d been making a hasty retreat towards the exit before the whole congregation figured out Roy wasn’t healing anyone anymore, or before Sue Ann made a bigger scene than she already had behind the make-shift church as she tried to gather the shattered remains of her Coptic cross.

Now, Layla was hot on his heels as they raced through the mud.

“Where did that man go?” She huffed from behind him, worry still coloring the edges of her voice with fear.

Dean didn’t bother answering. He had more important things on his mind; mainly, his brother currently spitting up blood and dry heaving in the mud. The hunter fell to his knees beside his brother, grabbing him by the shoulders. “Sam!”

“I-I’m okay,” his brother managed to wheeze between heaves and gasps. He wiped clumsily at his mouth but his hands were filthy and did nothing but smear mud across his face.

“What did he do to you? Where are you hurt?” Dean frantically felt his brother for injuries, for whatever was causing the bleeding. He

checked his face and his unfocused gaze before Sam finally pushed him away.

"I'm fine," he insisted, and when Dean took a moment to really see him, he looked it. Color had returned to his cheeks and he didn't look nearly as sallow or pale as he had when Dean left him in the car fifteen minutes ago. "I feel….Okay. I-I feel good."

"What?" Confused, Dean glanced around, mainly out of the hunter-trained habit of ensuring they were not in any immediate danger. His eyes stopped on the empty jar lying beside his brother in the mud. The mud-covered glass was ringed in still dripping red and Dean's stomach tightened as he picked it up and a coppery scent tainted the air.

"Sam….What is this?" He held it up to his brother, grip threatening to break the glass. "What was in here?"

Brown eyes locked on the jar and Dean had his answer in the fear and revulsion in his brother's face. His hands shook as he tried once more to sit upright on unsteady limbs. Layla offered a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Sam?"

"Bl-Blood."

Behind them, Layla hid her gaps behind her hands, staring between the two boys in horror. Sam lowered his gaze, looking ready to throw up as he wiped again at his mouth and throat. Dean could see the red dripping down his chin, mixing with the mud and he dropped the jar.

Numbness overtook the man from the future as Sam continued to insist he felt fine. Better, even, than he had since the hospital.

-o-o-o-

"There's no evidence of any damage," the doctor announced with a smile as she handed over the MRI results. Sam took them, still staring in disbelief. She patted his shoulder. "Try not to worry so much. A man of your age, in your physical condition? You've nothing to worry about."

He looked to his brother, but Dean was staring at the wall, jaw clenched and shoulders taut. Something dark sat heavy in Dean's eyes, but Sam didn't know what it was, and his brother was barely

talking to him.

-o-o-o-

They sat in the Impala, parked outside their motel. They'd been sitting there for several minutes, neither of the brothers moving to get out of the car. Sam was having trouble shaking off the events of the last twenty four hours. Or the truths that he'd learned.

Dean…Dean didn't know what to think. What to do. Demon blood hadn't even been on the list of things to fix Sammy. Hell, if it had been, it would have been at the damn bottom, below selling his soul and summoning fucking Gabriel in a ring of Holy Oil.

And what now? Jesus, were they looking at blood addiction again? Last time it had been gradual. Ruby started him off slow and built up his intake over months and months. What was going to happen with a friggin pint chug?

Dean scrubbed at his scalp and face, his chest constricted and head pounding in despair. Jesus Christ, he really was making everything so much worse and he had no idea how to stop it.

"Did you take care of the reaper?"

The question was as bland as the rest of his brother, who sat numbly in the passenger seat, staring at a blank world outside their car and seeing none of it.

"Yeah," Dean mumbled in reply. "Released the hold the wife had on him. Pretty sure he took care of her himself."

Sam nodded, not seeming the least bit regretful of the human life lost. Not that he necessarily should. Sue Ann brought it on herself, playing God and deciding who lived and who died based on her own warped sense of morality.

"Why would you drink it?" The words were out of Dean's mouth before he could think them through. Yeah, sure, that was a question he wanted answers to. Right along with *Are you sure you're alright? Not feeling any murderous, blood-sucking cravings, are you? Do I need to drive us straight to Bobby's and lock you in the panic room?*

Of everything he could ask though, choosing the one that absolutely made it sound like this was all Sammy's fault was really, really not what he'd meant to do.

“Layla was there,” Sam bit out defensively, shooting his brother a wounded glare before retuning his gaze to his hands. He didn’t have the energy to fight about this, and it had nothing to do with having been on the brink of death five hours ago. Really, he felt fine now. Better than fine, he felt….strong.

Maybe stronger than before he’d ended up in the hospital. It was hard to tell.

He clenched his hands into fists in his lap. “He would have killed her. I didn’t exactly a choice, Dean.”

Beside him, his brother let out a haggard sigh, slumping in the driver’s seat. “I know.”

The two brothers were silent, but the tension laying thick in the car was no longer between them, so much as around them. Sam took a deep breath.

“He said…he said I needed more of what I already had in me.” The younger hunter chanced a look at his brother, and his gaze was pained and so damn terrified. “That night in the nursery…”

“He said that?” Dean echoed quietly, staring at his kid brother with a pain of his own.

“If Yellow Eyes did that to me as a kid…” Sam trailed off. “He told me he bled in my mouth that night and that’s why I have visions. Mom must have…must have-”

“Don’t.” Dean shook his head violently. “Look at me, Sammy. If Mom saw him that night, she would have fought tooth and nail to save you.”

He thought about the fierce, spitfire hunter that Mary Winchester had been in 1973. Yeah, she would have given Azazel hell for setting foot in her house, let alone threatening her son. He knew she’d look at her life as small change for the fight to keep Sammy safe.

“What happened that night…It wasn’t your fault.”

Sam was staring at him with water gathering in his eyes that he fought back valiantly. He wiped haphazardly at his eyes, and sniffing as he looked away with a nod. “Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

After a moment of silence, he pushed on.

“If Yellow Eyes did that to me…” Sam swallowed and looked at his brother, eyes darting to his chest and then back to his face, “then maybe *Cass* did something to you.”

The hunter was shaking his head before he’d even finished, and Sam clenched his teeth in a flare of anger. He was tired of Dean keeping secrets. He was tired of being lied to. He no longer knew if his brother just couldn’t see it, or if he was in so deep that there was nothing left he could do about it. Either way, it was damn time they talked about it.

“Dean, the visions you’re having, that pain in your chest; maybe this demon is after you like Yellow Eyes is me! He said we were entries in a race. Some sort of…Battle Royale, I don’t know. But if I’m his ‘entry,’ than maybe this Cass-”

“Cas isn’t a demon.” It was out of his mouth before he could stop himself, with such conviction that he knew he couldn’t take it back or bluff his way out of what he’d just said.

Not that he was sure he wanted to. Something sat ugly in his chest every time Sam called Cas a demon. He wasn’t sure if it was how close to the truth that had almost gotten at the end, with Lucifer sitting pretty in a Cas-shaped time-share, or if he just couldn’t stand the thought of Sam thinking he was in bed with a demon.

Sam was just watching him, waiting. Damn that kid, knowing all of Dean’s weaknesses; he’d never been good at silence.

He wrung the leather of Baby’s steering wheel in his hands, staring at the motel door on the other side of the windshield. His gut twisted. He couldn’t believe what he was about to say.

“Look, I got no proof, okay?” He spared Sam a glance. “Nothing to back-up the complete crazy I’m about to tell you. And trust me, it’s going to sound crazy.”

Sam regarded him for a moment before nodding solemnly. His hardened stare turned a little softer. “I believe you, Dean. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

Dean had to swallow several times around the giant lump in his throat. God, he hoped this didn’t fuck up the timeline irreparably.

Of course…could he really make it much worse than it already was?

“Cas- *Castiel* is an angel.”

He waited a beat, the silence in the small space damn near crushing.

“Like, of the Lord.”

Yeah, awesome, that sounded about as convincing as Peewee Herman proclaiming he was a weight-lifting champion. This conversation was going fantastically. Well, the world hadn’t ended yet, so he supposed it could be going worse.

Silence settled in the car like sludge and Dean wrung the wheel again and again until the leather started creaking beneath his grip.

“Okay.”

The older hunter’s head whipped to the side to take in his brother, who looked contemplative and not nearly as skeptical or pissed as he should be.

“What?”

“I believe you.”

“You…What? Just like that?”

Sam gave a half shrug that was way too casual and calm for the bombshell Dean just dropped. “Demons are real. Why wouldn’t angels be?”

“Seriously?!”

His brother spared him a glance that Dean immediately found patronizing. “You sound like *you* don’t believe he’s an angel.”

“Oh, I believe it,” he scoffed. In fact, that was one of the few things in this current Alternate Timeline Clusterfuck that he had any confidence in. And he was totally not clinging to it like a life raft on the titanic, with him as the drowned rat from stowage. Not at all. “I just needed something a little more concrete than his *word*.”

Sam perked up at the muttered admission, eyebrows rising into his hairline. “Like what?”

What would an angel show to prove himself to a paranoid, black and white, distrustful hunter like his brother?

Dean mumbled something, blatantly avoiding eye contact with his brother as his ears flushed red. And God, not even he knew why he was blushing at the memory of that night in the barn, where a pair of shadows had him almost shitting his pants.

Embarrassment at needing a new pair of pants. That was definitely it.

"What was that?"

Dean rolled his eyes and repeated himself, louder than necessary this time. "He showed me his wings, alright?"

Curiosity lit Sam's eyes like a fat kid in a donut shop. "Really? What were they like? Were they…like a bird's? With feathers?"

The man from the future rolled his eyes. Of course his nerd brother would want to play 60 questions about an angel's friggin' wings. He didn't know, he'd never actually asked the guy about them!

"No, I mean- maybe. All I saw were shadows," Dean answered lamely, refusing to look at his brother. Well great, that didn't sound totally made up at all. Shit, if Sam asked for further proof, what the hell was he gonna give him?

"…Did he have a halo?"

He could hear the way Sam was barely holding back a snigger and shot him a dirty glare.

"Alright, shaddup." He pushed open the door of the Impala and declared the conversation over.

-o-o-o-

"You seriously believe me?"

Sam dropped the last of his clothes into the duffel bag on the motel bed. He glanced at his brother. When he saw the look in his eye, like he desperately needed his brother to say yes but couldn't believe it would be the truth, he turned and gave him his full attention.

"Dean, I know you're hiding stuff – *still* hiding stuff," he emphasized, and the hunter across the room decided not to feel gut-crushing guilt at that by sheer force of will, "but I trust you. If you're sure it's an angel talking to you, then okay."

Dean didn't respond right away, mulling over the sasquatch's words

before settling on the best response he had that wouldn't push further or start a fight. Well. Much of a fight. "You are such a nerd."

"And you are a jerk," Sam responded in kind, turning back to the last of their packing. They should hit the road and get back to the search for Dad, now that they knew what it was hunting him. "What I'd like to know is why an angel and a demon would bother with us in the first place. That sounds….big, Dean. Like, biblical, ugly big."

Across the room, Dean's hand tightened on the shotgun he was sliding into his duffel.

Oh Sammy, you have no idea.

-o-o-o-

Dean offered to load the bags while Sam jumped in the shower. He had wiped off the mud and changed into a clean set of clothes before they stopped at the hospital, but he still felt dirty. Dean had more than understood and ventured outside to get Baby ready for the road and give his brother some space.

The water fell heavy across Sam's shoulders as he braced himself against the tile wall. He felt heavy and light all in the same breath, and had since the church.

He stared at his hand, spread across the warm tiles. He flexed the tendons in his fingers, watching the flexors slide over his knuckles, like serpents just under his skin. Water slid down the back of his hand in tiny rivulets.

There was something there. Something just beneath the surface. It might have always been there; he couldn't say with certainty that it had. Maybe he'd felt it before. Always. Felt it when he stood beside his brother and his father and hunted things he didn't want to hunt. Faced evil he wasn't always sure was evil. Became a killer when he didn't want to kill.

Maybe he'd felt it, sitting in a lecture hall with people he would never fit in with, in a world he didn't belong to. Normal kids, who didn't know about the darkness in the world. Who didn't have it in them.

Maybe he'd felt it, lying in bed with Jess curled against his body, his arms wrapped around her as he desperately bathed in her light and love and goodness.

Maybe it had always been there.

His fingers curled against the tile and it creaked and strained beneath his nails. Sam pulled away suddenly, both terrified and thrilled at the micro-fissures running across the smooth surface. The boy turned away from the tiles. They were old and already crumbling, like the rest of the motel. Grabbing the soap, he focused on scrubbing the dirt and past from his skin and forced himself to stop thinking. To stop looking.

Because whether or not it had been there before, something was there now. Just beneath the surface.

Sam had always been fit. But now….now he could feel the strength, pulsing with the flow of his blood. It called to him as much as it scared him, and he couldn't help but wonder which side of that war was going to win.

-o-o-o-

Layla Rourke caught them on their way out of the motel, and Dean looked between her and his brother, confused. This had happened last time, he remembered, but they'd spent far fewer time with her this go around. His heart ached at the idea of having another conversation of faith with the dying woman, especially knowing God as he did now, and where faith got you in this world.

"Hey," she greeted them softly, looking more uncertain than Dean ever remembered seeing her. She smiled at them, but with a tremor of something in the expression that he didn't know what to do with. Layla was hardly afraid of them, but there was fear in the way she played with her hands and couldn't quite settle her eyes anywhere. "Sam called me. I hope that's alright."

"Of course," Dean answered, setting the last bag he was carrying onto the trunk of the Impala. Sam offered her a quick hug in greeting. She looked like she needed the physical reassurance.

"I suppose this is goodbye…" Layla pulled away from Sam after a moment, glancing between the two of them hesitantly. "Mom and I went to the doctor. She- I….I haven't run like I did back there in….in years."

Dean glanced at Sam, confusion sparking in his green eyes. His brother just looked regretful, but there was a vein of strength – relief – in the line of his shoulders.

“The tumor is…it’s gone.”

The older of the two stared at her, slack-jawed. She gave him a weak smile but turned to Sam, the expression becoming far more brittle. “That man-”

“Don’t, Layla,” the taller man answered softly. He offered a grim smile of his own. “You’re better off not knowing. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

She stared up at him, tears in her eyes but her nod was firm. “And Sue Ann? Did you hear what happened to…. R-Roy can’t…Oh God, poor Roy.”

Dean took an aborted step forward, then stopped, and finally followed through to wrap the shaking woman in a gentle hug. “He’ll be alright, Layla. Roy’s a good man. He- he didn’t deserve what happened.”

Sam was staring at him, brow furled. Dean shook his head minutely. Later.

Her arms came up around his back as she leaned into his supportive weight. She hardly knew this man, either of these men, and yet… She was sure that they had somehow saved her life, in ways that Roy never could have.

-o-o-o-

Sam sat in the Impala, staring out the windshield as Layla and Dean talked quietly a few feet away. She had asked for a moment alone with the older Winchester, so Sam gave her a farewell hug and ducked inside the car to give them some semblance of privacy.

Keeping half an eye on his brother, Sam pulled a small notebook out the bag stuffed in the footwell of the Impala and dug around for a pen. Dean glanced to him a couple times as he mumbled replies to Layla’s questions on faith, and what happened now.

Sam may be healed, however miraculously (or otherwise), but that only seemed to triple Dean’s protective, paranoid mother-henning. Being fixed up by a demon free of charge in exchange for chugging blood probably warranted some of that concern.

Knowing Dean wouldn’t leave him unattended for long, the young hunter uncapped the pen, flipped to a random page, and quickly jotted down a note so he wouldn’t forget to follow up on his

suspicions.

Castiel = Angel

Angels = Good?

He shoved the notebook back into his bag without further detail as Dean hugged Layla goodbye and headed for the driver side door.

-o-o-o-

As Dean climbed into the Impala, he held out his phone to his brother. As soon as Sam had accepted the device with a curious look, he put the car in drive and pulled out of the motel parking lot.

There was an article pulled up on the web app for a local newspaper in Utah. Six people all in the same small town had slipped into comas over the last month. Doctors were baffled. The author noted that the CDC had been notified and an investigation could be the next logical step.

Sam raised an eyebrow at his brother. Dean had clearly been busy with more than just the car while he was in the shower.

"Could be a Baku," Dean offered with a shrug as he pulled the car onto the interstate, headed west. Every nerve ending in his body twitched to take Sam straight to the panic room, but almost twenty-four hours later and he wasn't showing any signs of withdrawal. "Might be the one dad's after."

The younger Winchester studied the phone with a grim face. "Then let's go get it."

Dean revved the engine and they merged onto the highway taking them west.

-o-o-o-

They'd just crossed the Colorado border when Dean cleared his throat. "I need you to promise me you won't do that again."

Sam stared at him, confusion waring with irritation. "Dean, he would have killed Layla. I told you, it wasn't a choice."

"No, not that," Dean supplied quickly. Although, yeah, now that they were on that topic, a discussion of 'no demon deals, ever, period' followed immediately after by 'no more demon blood, exclamation

mark' was going to have to happen soon too. "Don't push again, alright?"

His younger brother furled his brow at him.

"Your powers – these visions. They're…God, Sam, you can't- we can't…." He made a frustrated noise at his ever-awesome powers of speech. "Just promise me you won't try that again."

Sam swallowed thickly through the sudden lump in his throat. He turned his gaze to the asphalt sliding by beneath them in a race of yellow lines and white stripes. Yeah, that hadn't been his best move. Although, to be fair, he had no idea it would be so damaging.

Honestly, he'd thought, worst case, nothing would happen.

Twenty-four hours ago, sickly and convinced he'd be dead within the month, he would have agreed in a heartbeat. And not because he wasn't going to live long enough to ever try that trick again, but because Dean was right. Even if he couldn't articulate it, Sam's powers were clearly dangerous.

At least, they had been. Because now….

Sam looked down at his hand, flexing his fingers.

Now, he knew that if he tried again, he would be successful. He *knew*, somehow, just beneath the surface, that he had the power to do it again and succeed this time. The only thing holding him back was fear of where that power came from, flowing in tune with his own blood. And how his brother would look at him if he tried.

"Sammy, I'm serious."

"Okay," he answered softly, releasing the tension in his hand. "No pushing. I promise."

He was pretty sure it wouldn't require much pushing anyhow. Not anymore.

-o-o-o-

A few miles down the road, Sam shifted in his seat. "Sam."

Dean arched a brow at him. "Uh…Dean. Now that introductions are out of the way…"

The younger Winchester rolled his eyes. "It's Sam, not Sammy."

There was a beat of silence.

"Oh, no. No, no, nope." Dean popped the final letter with far too much enjoyment. Brown eyes met green, and his big brother was grinning like an idiot. "You said Sammy was fine."

"I was *dying*, Dean."

"You still said it."

Sam shook his head and his brother kept grinning like an idiot. He supposed *Sammy* wasn't the end of the world.

-o-o-o-

They tried calling John again. The search for the coma patients in Fort Duchesne was slow. There wasn't a lot of information accessible by internet alone. They'd need to get there and start asking questions themselves.

Neither man was surprised when their call went to voicemail.

They were a little more surprised when the phone started ringing before Sam had even set it down. He shot his brother a look as he pressed the device to his ear.

"Dad?"

"Not exactly." Dean could hear Bobby's gruff voice down the line and tried not to let the tension leaking off him form into disappointment that it wasn't John calling them back. "How quick can you boys get here?"

Sam frowned over at his brother, receiving the same look in return. He switched the phone to speaker mode. "A couple hours. We just hit Colorado on the seventy-six, heading for Utah."

"Well, you better turn around." The rough voice had a tinge of regret running through it. But more than that, there was worry in his voice.

"What's going on, Bobby?" Dean glanced at the phone in his brother's hand before refocusing on the road. He flipped Baby's blinker on, pulling off on the first exit they came to with an on ramp in the opposite direction.

“It’s your daddy.” Sam’s gaze locked on Dean’s. “He’s here and…he ain’t waking up.”

Chapter 19: Season 1: Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Chronological Error: There is a mistake timeline-wise in this chapter. After speaking with reviewers over on ff.net at the time of posting, I decided to leave it in for the sake of story flow. You may spot it when it occurs. See end notes for further details!

Chapter Warnings: Tertiary character death (okay, I'm actually sorry about this one...), demonic bitchiness, and a little bit of African Dream Root.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 18

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

-Twenty Four Hours Earlier-

Bobby stared at the man standing at the bottom of his front porch steps. John looked like crap. The older hunter's grip tightened on the shotgun in his hands, though the barrel remained aimed off to the side. They both knew he wouldn't use it. Probably.

John stared up at his friend through squinted, aching eyes. His whole body was bone-weary and he was pretty sure he was only standing through sheer force of will. Not that he'd ever admit it. Knowing the silence would just keep stretching between the two, he caved with a low growl. "I just need it for a couple hours."

"Don't see why I should let you," the older hunter growled back with narrowed eyes. "You called those boys of yours yet?"

"They don't need to be involved in this." John shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

"What's that make me?" Bobby huffed. "Chopped liver?"

The hunter rolled his eyes. The damn old man knew what he meant. "You can take care of yourself."

Bobby eyed him for a long moment before he finally lowered the shotgun and stepped aside. "So can those boys."

John didn't bother responding, but he did give a grateful nod as he passed the hunter and entered the Singer home. The two old friends hadn't always been on the best of terms. Hell, they were rarely on good terms. But Bobby always pulled through for him, especially when he showed up unannounced at his front door.

Usually with two boys in tow.

"I just need to get a couple hours sleep where this thing can't reach me." John set his duffel down, the clack of metal barrels within a surefire tell of what the canvas bag was full of. "Then I'll be out of your hair."

"If I got any hair left by the time you and your boys are done runnin' through here," Bobby muttered even as he set the shotgun down on hgis desk and headed for the basement door. "The panic room ain't gonna do much good against a dream walker, you know."

Shaking his head, the tired hunter headed past him and down the stairs. "It's not a walker. It's the demon."

Tensing, Bobby glanced at the shotgun before he descended after the younger man. It wouldn't do much good against a demon anyway.

"You're not bringing that thing down on my house, are you?" It wouldn't be the first time John had disregarded friends to catch his prey. The hunter had a reputation of doing whatever it took. Which was why most of the hunting community stayed the hell away from the Winchesters.

John cast him an annoyed glance as he pulled open the door to the panic room. "It can't find me. It's why I know it's him."

At Bobby's frown, he explained, "I keep dreaming of people: Mary, the boys, civilians from old cases. They keep asking me where I am. Over and over again, every night." He shook his head as he pulled off his jacket and climbed onto the cot in the corner, not bothering with the sheet or blanket. "It's how I knew something was wrong. Luckily, I haven't given any of them an answer."

Something about that seemed…off to Bobby. Demons weren't known for entering dreams. At least, none that he'd ever heard. But then again, given the shit Sam and Dean were currently swimming through,

what did he know?

He was only the most researched expert on the supernatural this side of the Atlantic and Pacific.

-o-o-o-

He rubbed his eyes as he closed the last book he had on demons. Nothing in that one either about yellow eyes or dream walking. Not that he hadn't damn well searched every book he owned the first time John came to him asking about yellowed-eyed creatures.

He'd thought maybe the dream walking would present a new clue.

The old hunter glanced at the clock on the book shelf behind him. It'd been nearly nine hours, and John hadn't re-surfaced. He needed the rest, that was for sure. Bobby wouldn't expect anyone else to be up and about after four days of no sleep for another six hours, at least.

But this was John Winchester they were talking about. He should have been back on his feet being a pain in Bobby's ass after about four.

He climbed to his feet, groaning at the creak in his bones and the several pops that ran down his spine as he stretched. Damn, he was getting too old for this crap.

Bobby downed the last of his glass of whiskey and headed for the basement stairs, which his old knees were already complaining about. He hobbled his way down them, grumbling under his breath about unthankful house guests, multi-level homes, and retirement on a beach in Guam.

Pulling open the panic room door didn't wake up John like he expected it to, nor did calling his name. Bobby crossed the room with some trepidation and stared down at the hunter with a growing sense of concern.

The cell phone on the shelf beside the cot started vibrating, lighting up with Sam's name. John didn't even twitch.

Well, hopefully the guy didn't sleep with a knife or a gun under his pillow, Bobby groused, not really feeling like getting stabbed today. Yeah, right. What hunter didn't?

He reached out somewhat cautiously, making sure to keep outta arms reach (and knife reach too) should John rouse disoriented. He shook

the hunter's shoulder, frowning when he still didn't wake. Several hard slaps later, Bobby knew he'd have to call the boys.

They were gonna be pissed.

Balls.

-o-o-o-

-Present-

Dual doors slammed shut as the two hunters flew out of the Impala, parked haphazardly across Bobby's dirt drive. The screen door flew open as Dean called out the old hunter's name, moving through the house.

"Down here," came the call and the two turned to the basement door, taking the stairs down two at a time.

Bobby was waiting for them at the bottom, ball cap in hand and hair mussed from a recent run through. He hadn't been joking with John. He'd have no hair left by the time this damn nightmare was over.

"Where is he?" Dean didn't stop for the answer, already headed for the panic room even before Bobby nodded that way. Sam gave their adopted father a quick hand to the shoulder as he followed after his brother.

John was lying on the cot along the circular wall of the iron-cased panic room. He didn't look so bad, and could almost pass for asleep if it wasn't for the tight pinch in his brow and the way his hands twitched along the stiff mattress.

"Dad?" The two boys stopped by the side, Dean reaching out to check his father for injuries, feeling along his neck for a pulse too fast for his liking. Sam was kneeling next to him, trying to wake John as he called his name several times.

"Dad!" Dean barked, giving the hunter a firm slap.

"Gee, why didn't I think of that," Bobby groused from the doorway, arms crossed as he leaned against the entrance of the side. Dean spared him a glower.

"Why the hell didn't you call us when he showed up?"

"Dean." Sam sent his brother a warning glance even as he pulled away.

John wasn't waking up by conventional means, and arguing and pointing fingers wasn't going to help him.

Bobby actually looked contrite, glancing away from them for a moment before tilting his chin up. "He asked me not to. Don't know why I bothered listening…"

"Why's he in the panic room?" Sam asked, glancing around them for anything stronger they could use to wake John up.

"He thought it was the demon." Bobby pulled his cap off and ran a hand through his hair again. Yup. Gonna be bald, only a matter of time. He replaced his hat. "Said he kept dreaming of people – Mary, you boys – always asking where he was."

Dean swore, glancing back at their dad.

"He figured its influence couldn't reach him in here." Bobby cast his eyes around the iron walls and up to the pentagram shadowed fan. "Lot of good it did him. I gave him a couple hours, figured he'd need it, before I tried to get him back up."

"It's the Baku," Sam explained, eyes trained on his dad as his mind flew through the material he'd read on the beast.

By the door, Bobby straightened, eyes wide. "A Baku?"

"We're pretty sure he was hunting one. I saw it in a vision," the taller of the brothers supplied.

"No, Sam." Dean kicked the edge of the cot angrily. His father's body jerked, but he didn't so much as twitch. "Bakus feed on dreams, not bodies. Why would one care where dad was?"

"But I saw it…" Sam trailed off and away from the immediate defensiveness that his brother questioning his visions always brought to the surface. Brown eyes grew wide as he parsed Dean's words. "You mean…. Shit."

"What?" Bobby asked as he strode into the room. "What the hell is goin' on, boys?"

"The Yellow Eyed Demon," Dean muttered angrily. "He's using a Baku to find dad."

Bobby swore as well. He gestured irately around the room with a roll

of his eyes. "Well, no wonder the panic room did shit."

"We've gotta wake him up." Sam grabbed their dad's shoulders again, giving him a good shake even though he knew it was fruitless. "Before he tells the thing where we are."

"Do I need to worry about a demon showing up here?" Bobby asked gruffly, body rigid. He looked twitchy to get upstairs and prep the house for a friggin' war.

"He'll hold on," Dean answered with a shake of his head. "He's a tough son of a bitch. But we gotta get him away from it."

"I've got some African Dream Root." The two brothers turned surprised eyes to Bobby, who gave a little shrug. "Only time we ever got close to fighting off a Baku, Rufus and I had to tackle it on its own turf."

Dean pulled his head back. "When did you take on a Baku?"

Bobby gave him a look that clearly said what he thought of Dean acting like he knew everything the far older hunter had ever done. "Couple years back, in Alaska."

That really tripped the kid up and he stared at his surrogate father figure. "What the hell were you doing in Alaska?"

The hunter shrugged. "I was on vacation."

"In Alaska?" Dean stared at him like he was crazy. And then he looked at him again like he was far past that. "With *Rufus*?"

Sam broke the exchange up with a rather forceful clearing of his throat. "Can we focus? We need to wake Dad up, and if African Dream Root's the way to go…" He raised his hands out in exasperation.

"Come on, it's in the study," Bobby huffed, turning and heading out of the panic room and up the basement stairs with the boys right behind.

-o-o-o-

They went for Bobby's spell component cabinet right off the bat. It was a haphazard nightstand of a thing, partially leaning to the side due to a busted leg from years before. Actually, he wasn't convinced he hadn't bought it that way. The poor, ailing cabinet was shoved between two bookshelves, partially to keep it upright, despite the way it wobbled anytime you pulled open the squeaky door, and partially

because he'd had to move it to the other side of the room after a particularly bad night when he mixed it up with the alcohol cabinet while on one hell of a bender. He kept nightshade in there, for Pete's sake.

Since then, it had been located as far away as possible from the equally wobbly liquor cabinet.

When they didn't find any Dream Root, the three divided up and started searching the rest of the study. The old hunter was fairly certain he had a leftover store from the last Baku. But that had been ages ago, and while it was surely in the house, there was no limit to the nooks and crannies available for hiding or misplacing things.

As they searched, Sam questioned Bobby on the last time he'd faced a Baku so they'd know what they were headed in for.

"How'd you deal with the last one? I couldn't find anything solid about killing them," the younger brother was pulling books off the shelves in consecutive order, carefully replacing them once they'd checked behind the tomes. He'd found all sorts of interesting things, including several other rare spell ingredients. Being the neat, organized person he was, he pulled them out and placed them in a pile to go back into the spell cabinet.

Dean was doing no such thing, and grinned widely at his brother when Bobby grumbled that now he'd never be able to find anything with Sam moving 'em all around.

"We didn't," Bobby answered, and found both boys looking at him questioningly. "Far as Rufus and I could figure, you *can't* kill a Baku. They're damn near impossible to pin down, mostly 'cuz they don't got bodies on this plane."

The two Winchesters exchanged a look, and Dean seemed to lose whatever silent battle they were waging. "Then what did you do?"

The older hunter leveled a 'watch it, boy' look at slight accusation in his tone. "Scared it off, which is about as good as you *can* do. They don't care much for bright light or loud sounds."

That sounded familiar, and Sam straightened at the revelation. "Fireworks."

Dean shot him a look. "What?"

"There's some speculation, granted it's sketchy at best, that the Baku was born from a Chinese legend and isn't Japanese at all." Sam crossed the room to pull out one of Bobby's less-worn books and he started flipping through it. "I read a story about a beast that always attacked villages on the New Year, that they think may have been the first siting of a Baku before they became well known in Japan."

The kid tossed the book on the desk between them, and the other two leaned in to read the page.

"The Nian Shao was said to attack children. A village sage eventually purified it and convinced it to eat only evil." Sam shrugged as he tapped the illustration of a creature formed together from bits and pieces of other animals. It sure has hell looked like a Baku. "Before that, the villagers were able to chase it off using fireworks. Hence their traditional usage on the Chinese New Year."

"Huh." Dean looked up at Bobby, who gave a shrug. "So…Any ideas on how to get fireworks into Dad's head?"

-o-o-o-

Turned out, the last of Bobby's African Dream Root supply was in the back of a desk drawer in a small glass jar. And there was barely any of it left.

"That's not enough to send all of us in," Bobby grumbled, pulling out one of the several books he had on African Dream Root preparation. He vaguely recalled how disgusting the drink had turned out in Alaska, and thought maybe he'd try adding some honey this time. They'd need some of John's hair as well. "Don't know if it's enough for both o' you, either."

"I'll go in," Dean announced with a firm nod and a tone they all knew well. It was one he picked right up from John and, just like the marine, it booked no argument.

Not that that ever stopped a Winchester.

"Not without me," Sam argued right back. "I'm the one who's been having visions of the Baku, Dean. I should go."

The older Winchester was silent for a moment, staring hard at his brother in a way that was more contemplative than pissed. Sam law-trained mind was already rallying all the reasons why he should join his brother, and preparing counter-arguments for all of Dean's, when

the older hunter gave a firm nod.

"Alright."

Shocked silence reigned in the house, though Dean didn't seem to notice. Instead, he was moving into the kitchen, grabbing honey out of the cabinet and putting the kettle on. Bobby glanced at Sam, who was staring at him with wide, flabbergasted eyes. The old hunter had nothing, and shrugged helplessly.

"Alright?" Sam parroted as the two filed into the kitchen as well, staring at the back of the man they hardly recognized at the moment. Dean didn't notice, liberally coating a mug with honey. Then, recalling exactly how gross the root was they were about to boil and drink, coated it again with even more honey.

When he turned back around, he held it out to Bobby, who stared at it and then the hunter. With a *'what else we gonna do'* look at Sam, he dropped the handful of dried twigs into it. Dean added a few hairs he'd snagged off their dad on the way out of the panic room. Then he handed the whole thing to his brother. All that was left was the water to boil.

Sam stared at him, still shocked. Dean finally seemed to notice the silence.

"You're right, Sammy, you should be the one to go. Just…bring him back."

Sam was still staring.

"What?"

He opened his mouth, then glanced at Bobby, and then just finally blew out a huff of air. "We go in together."

Dean pulled a face. "There isn't enough for both of us."

Sam glanced at Bobby for confirmation, and the hunter rolled his shoulder. "There's enough, but it won't last long."

The older of the two was already opening his mouth to argue. Again, how weird was it that Dean was defending letting his kid brother go off without him? Who was this guy, and what had happened to his ridiculously over protective, distrustful brother? The ping-pong game of personality switching was dizzying at best. Not to mention deeply

worrying and confusing as hell.

Sam cut him off before he could get started. "It'll be enough."

The kettle started whistling, and he reached over to turn it off. He poured the water quickly and handed his big brother back the mug. "Wherever dad is, it's big. Cave, remember? We'll have more luck with two of us searching."

Now it was the older Winchester's turn to glance between the two with narrowed eyes. He had a feeling he just missed something and, deciding that it was most likely a chick moment, dropped it faster than a hot potato.

Instead, he turned to Bobby. "Think you can rustle up some more, if this isn't enough?"

The old hunter looked particularly imposed upon by the question. "What, you think Dream Root grows on trees?"

Dean opened his mouth to answer, but Sam was definitely shaking his head and making a subtle kill motion with his hand. Right, rhetorical. 'Root' was in the title.

Instead, he started through a mental list of people nearby that might have a stash lying around, or access to one.

"What about Garth?" he asked, checking off hunters in his head that were less than a day away. Dream Root wasn't an easy thing to find, he remembered. The Men of Letters had a supply, but that wasn't going to help them here. And he knew Bela was still alive in 2006 and could get her hands on almost anything they needed, but fuck that option. She'd stolen the Colt the last time they'd reached out to her for that particular ingredient.

Changes or not, he was *not* tempting Time and/or Fate by introducing her and the gun into the exact same scenario twice.

Garth could have some or know a hunter with some, and he was only a couple hours away from Sioux Falls.

"What is it?" Sam's worried voice brought Dean back from his thoughts and clued him in that something was wrong. Bobby was looking between the two of them, eyes wide.

"You boys haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Garth's dead."

Sam's face fell even as Dean's body went rigid.

"That's not possible."

Bobby shrugged helplessly at Dean's adamant refusal, shoulders weighted with grief. "I got the call yesterday. Something attacked him in his own home; his mom found him."

The three held a silent moment in respect and grief and shock. Well, two hunters held the silence. Dean was shaking his head, mind spinning. That wasn't possible. Garth was still alive in 2016; sure he was a werewolf but he was an *alive* werewolf. Dean hadn't changed anything that would affect anyone else! And especially not Garth. Kid hadn't even been a part of the apocalypse.

"It's. Not. Possible," he repeated firmly, fist clenching by his side as he dared Bobby to challenge it. Because he knew it wasn't possible. Nothing had happened to bring the young hunter into the fold earlier this time around. He probably just tripped and shot himself in the foot, ended up unconscious in a ditch, and would turn up in three days with everyone thinking he'd gotten himself killed. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Look, he was a good kid. Nobody saying he wasn't," Bobby took off his cap in respect and ran a hand through his hair again. "But as far as hunters went…"

He shrugged and no one in the room could deny that they had all suspected Garth would get himself killed on a hunt somewhere down the line.

Only he *hadn't*.

Nothing had changed.

Except….

Cold flooded Dean like a bucket of ice water in the middle of the Arctic. In a flurry of movement that had both brother and father figure staring at him worriedly, he dug into his back pocket and pull out wrinkled, worn sheets of paper along with his cell. Even as he started scrolling through contacts, he flipped through the pages in his

hands.

Sam couldn't read whatever it was written on them, but the stains and worn corners suggested his brother had been holding onto them for a while now. Dean stopped on one page, eyes roving over the scribbles again and again.

"Fuck!" He shoved the notes back into his pocket and devoted almost frenzied attention to his phone.

"Dean, what's going on?"

"Meg." That was the only answer Dean gave as he pressed a button on his phone and pressed it up to his ear, tapping his knuckles in a rapid beat on the back of the kitchen chair. Sam's eyes widened at the name, and Bobby looked at him for explanation. He hadn't gotten further than 'demon' when a click signaled someone had answered down the line.

"Caleb, listen to me-"

"Dean Winchester."

Dean froze, body going rigid as he slowly straightened. He turned sharply to Sam and Bobby. Green eyes darted over his brother's face even as his expression fell into something dark. Something *bloody*. Dean didn't recognize the female voice filtering through the phone, but he knew the tone. He could hear the smirk.

"Meg. You son of a bitch."

"You started a war, Dean. And war has casualties." He heard Caleb protest bravely down the line, silenced quickly with a pained grunt. Dean's eyes slid closed against the knowledge of what came next: what he had no way of stopping. *"I want to know who you're getting your information from."*

Dean didn't answer, but the phone shook dangerously in his hand and he knew he was close to breaking it. He didn't know what to say that to save Caleb's life. Because he already knew nothing would. Damn it, he had known Meg would go after their friends for the Colt. He'd written the damn thing down so he wouldn't forget. Why hadn't he called Pastor Jim and Caleb the second he'd gotten that damn gun?

Not that it would have saved Garth.

Because Meg had targeted *John's* friends last time. But John wasn't the one with the Colt right now.

"Fine."

He stiffened and yelled down the line, "No, don't!"

Caleb shouted out, but the sound was quickly swallowed in gurgling and Dean ran a hand viciously over his scalp, tugging at the roots of his hair as he listened to his friend die again. His eyes darted frantically around Bobby's kitchen and took in nothing. His jaw ached from how tightly he clenched his teeth and the device pressed to his ear gave an ominous crack as the plastic along the side finally gave.

"I am going to *kill* you, you hear me!" he spat into the phone, but Meg only laughed. There was a soft thud down the line as Caleb's body hit the floor.

"Come and get me, Dean. In the meantime, I'm going to gut each and every one of your friends. Anyone you've ever cared about, anyone you've ever saved. You'll get to listen to them choke on their own blood, unless you tell me who is helping you and give me the damn Colt!"

Dean met his brother's eyes, searching through the pain and grief. He and Bobby stood, looking equally lost and angry, but with nothing to channel that into. "Alright."

"What was that?"

"I said alright," he growled dangerously. He ran another hand through his hair again, mind racing. "But I need a day."

Her high-pitched laugh grated on the next-to-nothing that was left of his nerves. *"Do you think I'm stupid?"*

"I'm nowhere near Caleb's, okay? I need time."

There was silence on the other end and Dean did his best to wait it out.

"I'll tell you what. I'll meet you at Bobby Singer's house." Dean glanced at the older hunter, who looked as on edge as Sam and ready for instruction. But there was nothing any of them could do in this situation. *"If you get to him before me, the old man lives. But no more games, Dean. If you're not there, with the Colt…well. I don't think I have to tell you what happens."*

He could still hear the echoes of Caleb choking on his own blood. Yeah, he got the gist.

"See you soon."

The hunter snapped the phone shut and it broke straight in two. With a furious howl he launched it across the room, shattering what was left of it against the wall to the study. Both Sam and Bobby were on him in a second, but he shook his head. They didn't have time for a chat.

"If we're saving Dad, we have to do it right now." He turned to Bobby. "Is the house still demon-proofed?"

Sam snapped his mouth closed in surprise at the shut down and change of topic. Bobby was answering before he had a chance to demand what the hell had just happened.

"Sure," the older hunter gave a thoughtful nod. "Could probably boost it up a bit, if we got the time."

"Don't." Dean grabbed the forgotten mug of Dream Root off the table. "Meg's on her way here, and I need you to take the warding down."

"What?" Bobby barked at the same time Sam demanded, "Dean?"

The younger Winchester took half a step forward, anger filling every line of his body but for his eyes, which held the loss of two friends. "She killed Caleb and Garth, and we're going to….what? Just let her in?"

"We," Dean gestured to his brother and then himself, "are going to save Dad. Bobby is going to set a trap for Meg."

-o-o-o-

The two brothers carried chairs from the kitchen and a mug of disgusting smelling yellow tea down to the basement and into the panic room. Caleb lived in Lincoln, Nebraska: a solid three hours away from Bobby's even if Meg broke all speed limits and killed any cop who pulled her over.

So they had three hours to get into John's head and pull him back out before they had to deal with her.

Bobby had been pretty clear about his opinion of this plan, but it

wasn't like they had a long list of options. John couldn't last forever against the Baku. Eventually, he would tell the thing where he was, and then they'd have a real problem on their hands.

In the meantime, there was always the risk the damn creature was feeding on him. Lucky for John, he was a hunter, which meant an endless damn feast of nightmares to choose from. The sparse good stuff – his hopes and dreams and happy memories – should be safe for at least a while.

Bobby stood in the door to the panic room, watching the two brothers with no small amount of grump, and certainly a fair bit of concern. "Get in and get out quick, you hear?"

Sam nodded to their surrogate father even as the two settled in the chairs and prepared to rescue their biological one. He knocked back half the tea, gagging at the foul taste and handing it over to Dean to equally suffer through.

"Get the house ready," Dean said even as he finished off the dregs of the tea with a grimace. "We'll be back in time."

"Right." Bobby sounded less convinced, but they were out of time to argue as the two succumbed to the sleep drug. He stared at his three house guests drooling in his panic room, before he turned and headed back upstairs to prep for a damn demon waltzing into his house.

He was getting too old for this crap.

Chapter End Notes

CHRONOLOGICAL ERROR: 09/16/2017 Reviews pointed out that the boys did not know Garth pre-apocalypse. This is a chronological misstep on my part that, with reader input, I've decided to leave in the story due to audience impact of his death and story flow. Garth's getting an awesome/geek-tastic cameo I think you'll all love later on in the story as an apology for my sloppy research!

Please continue to point out errors or spot or questions you may have. I definitely miss things, despite the research I put into this beast :P

Bobby in Alaska: Bobby says it on the show in 11.16 Safe House

(the one where Bobby and Rufus work the same case as the boys, only in the past). Rufus is convinced the creature is a Baku (which is what caught my attention, because I've always loved the legend of that creature) and Bobby mentions the one they worked in Alaska. I just blinked and was like...wtf were Rufus and Bobby doing in Alaska? Cuz...I'm willing to bet Alaska, like Canada, has it's own hunters due, if nothing else, to travel constraints. :P

Archive of Our Own Note: I am leaving for a ski trip for the rest of the weekend and early week. I will resume posting on Tuesday. Cheers until then!

Chapter 20: Season 1: Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: You guys ready? You better be. So very many things are about to happen! For everyone requesting various characters to pop up in this story…well, I know it's just a dream, but Dean's subconscious is going to cram in as many opportunities as possible. Prepare for swearing, some pretty angsty callbacks, and grenade launchers. (yep, you read that right)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 19

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean woke to darkness.

Eternal, endless, empty.

Well duh, dumbass. Open your eyes.

He did, blinking several times before he realized that it was the same. Infinite black surrounded him, and it stretched on and on without change. There was solid ground beneath him. He tapped his fingertips against it as he stared up into nothingness. Smooth and hard, with no imperfections; an unnatural surface unlike anything he'd encountered before.

Surprisingly, his muscles didn't ache as he sat upwards and his bones didn't complain about the harsh solidity beneath him. Still, he could see nothing in the world but himself.

Dean wasn't much for the sciences, but he was pretty sure you needed light to see yourself. But there wasn't any, and there was his hand in front of his face, clear as day, sharply defined against a world of black. Look at that, there were even shadows stretched across the skin of his fingers. But if there was a source, he couldn't see it and it didn't touch anything else in this world.

Or there was nothing else to touch.

So this is it. He climbed to his feet and the shuffle of cloth and muted scuff of boots echoed around him. *Amara won and this is life with the Darkness*.

Dean was numbly alright with that. Which he shouldn't be, given he'd spent the last six months fighting with everything he was to change everything that would come.

Six months. The hunter looked around again, the first inklings of confusion and clarity warring with each other to fight through the numbness this blank world wrapped him in. *I was in 2006 for six months.*

Had it been a dream? Had all of it been a pleasant illusion crafted by Amara to keep him comfortable? It sounded like something she would do. He knew that joining her, dying, wouldn't hurt. That she would make it as painless as possible.

Only, it hadn't been painless, nor entirely pleasant. The last six months of struggling alone against Time and a plan written in stone had been, in a hell of a lot of ways, more painful than the first friggin' time around.

It was also a needlessly complicated illusion for Amara, who could have given him the bunker and Sam and Cas and he'd never have bothered waking up.

Alright, maybe Chuck then. 'Needlessly Complicated' was a friggin' tagline for his story-making paradigm.

If this wasn't some illusion suddenly cut short, he was out of ideas. It definitely wasn't heaven. He'd seen enough of that place to know. Same with Purgatory and Hell, loathe as he was to know those places equally well. So if he wasn't in the three big ones, this wasn't Amara, and God was probably involved…

Where the hell was he?

"Dean!"

The hunter spun at the new sound as it echoed around him. But there was no one. He couldn't tell if the blackness around him stretched ten feet or ten thousand.

"Dean, can you hear me?"

He turned more slowly this time. That was Sammy's voice calling out. If he was stuck in here too, maybe he'd have some answers. He was the smart one after all. "Sam?"

"Dean!"

The hunter turned and his brother was suddenly in front of him, despite having definitely not been there a second before. He stumbled back out of surprise, putting a couple feet between him and his kid brother. Jeez, what was this, a friggin' Fun House from Hell?

"What the hell, man?"

Sam was staring at him funny, brown eyes blown wide before they squinted together under a furled brow. His gaze dragged down slowly, then back up. Dean stared at him expectantly, but when his brother didn't answer he gave him an irritated look.

"Dude, my eyes are up here."

Sam immediately scoffed, rolling his eyes. Though he partially turned away, his gaze kept darting back to his brother, like he couldn't help it. Dean watched him through narrowed eyes, getting more than a little testy.

"What, I got something on my face?"

Sam dared hold his gaze a little longer before he finally turned away from his brother to survey the landscape, or lack thereof, surrounding them. "Let's just find dad."

Dean blinked. "Dad?"

The hesitancy in Sam's movements and the slight surprise on his face as he turned back to Dean triggered something in the older hunter. Dad. Dad was alive.

Dad was alive and….with the Darkness?

"We took the Dream Root, remember?" Sam was staring at him full-on again, but the intrigue was replaced with confused worry as his brother seemed to have forgotten what they were doing here. Or where here was at all. "We're in Dad's head; we need to find him."

The man from the future blinked and it all slid back into place. This was a dream. The last six months hadn't been a dream. But *this* was a

dream.

He looked around at the emptiness and balked. "What the hell. This is nothing like the first time."

Sam blinked at him. "First time?"

"That we took Dream Root."

The worry and something else – something vaguely like Bitchface #12 – filtered across his brother's features. He was still staring.

"This is the first time, Dean."

The man from the future stood there, staring at his brother. "What?"

"I've never taken Dream Root before this." The younger Winchester watched him as his concern morphed into something tighter – more controlled. "When did you?"

The hunter slammed his mouth shut so hard there was an audible clack. What the hell. He looked away from his brother as he realized what he'd said, and that suddenly he was having a much harder time clamping down the thoughts filtering through his mind. Specifically the last time they'd taken the root and swam around Bobby's head. Something that hadn't happened yet, and wouldn't for another several years.

It was like he had no ability to stop thinking about it. Worse, he wanted to blurt all of it out. With a hand slapped over his mouth, he immediately slammed a wall around everything labeled 'future' in his mind.

Sam was still staring at him when he turned back. Yeah, maybe not his most subtle slip up, but crap all if he was gonna have another chat about this while inside John Winchester's head.

"Let's go find Dad. We're on a time limit, right?"

"And he's back," Sam muttered under his breath, but it echoed in the cavernous emptiness around them. Dean gave him a funny look, but the younger Winchester just gestured ahead with his hand, and the two started through the emptiness in search of their father.

-o-o-o-

They'd only been walking for about five minutes when Dean really

started looking around. After having made it through Bobby's nightmare of a head the first time they took Dream Root, he'd expected something pretty different than what they were seeing. The old house, old hunts, Mom maybe. Nightmares, or even dreams. But not….nothing.

"What the hell," he finally groused, throwing his arms out. "Why is dad's head…empty?"

Sam cast a cursory glance at their surroundings, but seemed less bothered by them. "He's hiding. Look around: no clues, no visuals. Nothing to show where he was before he went to sleep."

Dean glanced around again before giving his brother a glance. Sam shrugged. "He knew he was being hunted, that something was looking for him."

The older hunter let out a whistle. "Damn. Talk about control. Gotta hand it to the man."

His brother huffed a laugh. "Yeah, but how are we going to find him?"

Dean narrowed his eyes, spinning in a slow circle again. "Well, he's gotta be in here somewhere, right?" He surveyed the darkness around them, trying to think like John.

Beside him, Sam shrugged. "It's his head, so I'd assume so."

His older brother paused, almost tripping over his own feet as he looked at Sam. "It's his head," he repeated. Sam nodded, though he wasn't sure what revelation his brother had stumbled over. "This is *John Winchester's* head."

Again, his brother nodded, but had no clue where Dean was going with it.

"Dad's a hunter," he emphasized. "Sammy, he's hunting this thing as sure as it's hunting him."

Sam's eyes grew wider with understanding and he glanced around again. Right, like their Dad would take *hiding* laying down.

"Okay…but how does that help us find him?" The taller man straightened as it clicked and he fell in sync with his brother's plan. He sucked in a breath as he answered his own question, "We don't. We get the Baku to come to us."

"And Dad will follow." Dean was grinning. "Now….how do we get Chinese Frankenstein to play ball?"

Sam opened his mouth to fix his brother's grossly incorrect analogy, but dropped the subject when the answer to his question popped into his mind instead. "We populate the dream."

Green eyes looked to him beneath raised eyebrows. "What?"

"Bakus feed on dreams and nightmares. We need to give him something to eat." Sam closed his eyes, thinking hard. Even as Dean opened his mouth to ask how the hell they were supposed to do that, a soft voice broke the echoing darkness.

"Sam." The call, light with a smile and endless love, turned both brother's attention to the woman standing just behind them. She had a smurf's sleep shirt on and a pair of boxers she'd stolen from Sam one night and never given back. A small smile spread across flawless skin, dotted with freckles and marks Sam had spent more than a few nights memorizing as she slept beside him.

"Jess," he breathed out. Warmth filled his incorporeal body and the world around them suddenly exploded in color. Light pushed away the darkness in swirls of blue and white, wrapping around Jess and stretching away from the boys for a dozen feet or so. Dean traced the explosion of light and color to its edges, where it danced almost playfully with the jagged edges of the darkness that took on a smoke like appearance now that it had something to contrast against.

Damn, is this what being in his brother's head was like?

He looked back at Jess as the two college kids stood there smiling at each other like the dorks they both were. Dean finally cleared his throat, starting to feel awkward. Sam startled, looking over to him.

"Dude," he admonished, shooing him with his hand, "start bringing stuff in."

The older hunter stared at his brother like he was slightly crazy. As if he spent his evenings practicing dream summoning. Right.

Sam rolled his eyes. "What do you usually dream about?"

The question was one Dean *knew* he shouldn't contemplate the answer to. As immediately as Sam asked it, Dean tried to slam a mental hand down on the response his mind readily jumped to. But like telling

someone not to think of pink elephants, there was no way he could catch his thoughts before they formed.

And it wasn't pink elephants that danced across the surface of his mind.

"Hey." The voice was soft and painfully, heart-achingly familiar. "You gonna sit down?"

Dean turned around to face Lisa Braeden, sitting on a picnic blanket spread over the colorless ground. She smiled up at him, a wine glass in hand, like she had years ago – years from now – in Bobby's head.

"Hi." He all but stumbled over the word even as his chest swelled. Green splashed out from the blanket, splattering the black like freshly spilled paint. It didn't completely banish the darkness like Sam and Jess had, instead the colors mixed and morphed until there were bright patches of green as fresh as grass and others deep and dark, writhing with pain and envy.

Dean didn't let it bother him. He knew this dream was as sad as it was happy.

"Dean!" A weight crashed into his legs and side, and he automatically brought his hand down to rest on Ben's head, wrapping the kid in a hug with his other arm. The boy was grinning up at him with the 100-watt Winchester grin, even if they both knew it wasn't his name. "You came back!"

"Yeah, kiddo," he croaked out, clearing his throat against the tightness there. His whole body thrummed with energy, but he valiantly ignored the swelling joy threatening to beat his heart right out of his chest.

When he looked down at the eleven year old boy wrapped around his waist, he nearly lost it. Fiery orange had spread out around them, pulsing with flickers of yellow that no darkness could possibly compete against and he knew, without a doubt, that this was his happiness.

A happiness he really couldn't watch a Baku devour. He had so little left, he was pretty sure it would be his undoing.

"Sorry, buddy," he whispered, squeezing Ben's shoulders in a half hug against his own body. "I love you, kiddo, but you're not real."

He closed his eyes against the flash of confusion and hurt in the kid's eyes, even as the weight against him disappeared like sand drifting on the wind. Lisa and the colors were gone when he opened his eyes. It was just Sam and Jess, standing in a sunburst of blues and whites. His brother was watching him, and though he clearly didn't know who the two people he just saw were, there was an understanding in his eyes that Dean wouldn't have expected from a Sam ten years younger than he knew.

Clearing his throat, Dean focused on *not Lisa* and *not Ben*, and instead watched as the dream populated with various people they'd saved on hunts, monsters they'd taken to the grave, even Bobby showed up, busy arguing with Rufus. The sight sparked a flare of warmth and amusement in him, but he absolutely refused to acknowledge the bursts of magenta and deep purple that pulsed beneath the older hunter and swirled outward. Too damn girly. He absolutely did not think *pink* when he thought about Bobby Singer.

He was gonna be lucky if he could look the man in the eye when they woke back up. Fucking dream walking, man.

The colors that spread from beneath the others he summoned were dimmed, dull and flickering like they weren't really sure they could take on the darkness they fought against. But Dean didn't feel like he'd be crushed and never recover if the Baku managed to gobble up a couple blotchy memories riddled with as much pain as goodness.

"Alright, that's outta be enough," he muttered and looked back to his brother, who was doing something similar. None of his brother's projections blasted radiant light and color quite like Jess did, and Dean was honestly happy he'd picked up on that.

He was pretty sure his brother didn't want to see friends or family feed a supernatural beasty any more than Dean wanted Lisa or Braeden served up for dessert.

"Do we just wait?" Sam's hand was in Jess's, but Dean got the feeling she would be gone before the action came down on their heads. Until then, he could practically see the warmth and purpose filling his brother and realized just how badly Sam had needed this, needed to see her, to be with her.

He wondered if the kid dreamt of Jess often. Or if he dreaded it, for the very reason that he'd once dreamt her death and it had almost come true. He wondered if Sam closed his eyes every night and prayed

not to have visions of the woman he loved.

Something moved along the edges of the darkness, and both brothers tensed. Sam pushed Jess behind him protectively. The hunters scanned the edges of their projections, where the colors curled against the darkness that pushed and pulsed. They couldn't see the beast, as the Baku kept just enough in the edges of the blackness to remain concealed.

Sam thought he saw a flash of tusk and an amber eye as the thing circled them.

"Well, guess it worked," Dean muttered, right before his dream people closest to the edges of the darkness suddenly blurred. Parts of their incorporeal forms whisked away, like smoke drawn into a vacuum.

Dean let out a gasp, staggering a step forward. Although the dream projections were far away, the hunter felt the tug of their disappearance, the pull of the Baku as it fed on his memories. It pulled at his body and made his chest feel oddly tight. Heavy.

A bright, red light suddenly filled the space like a flare in the darkness of an ocean.

Thunder cracked across the space and Dean started, eyes shooting up to the firework bursting in a shower of red sparkles between them and the Baku. The projections of his dreams suddenly stilled, turning their gazes as one towards the burst of light, and a couple even oohed and awed at the show.

There was a hiss from the darkness and the tugging in his body released its hold as the Baku retreated from the bright light and thunderous explosion that followed. The edges of his projects settled back in place, dimmer than before but still present.

Sam grabbed at his shoulder to help study him, and Dean gave him the standard '*I'm okay'* hunter's nod.

"Good news: firework theory was true," Sam huffed out, eyes straining on the darkness around them.

"Yay for us," Dean breathed out, straightening. He felt infinitely better now that parts of his mind weren't being forcefully torn from him. The Baku was still out there, pacing. They could hear the soft pad of his paws and the drag of his tail across the emptiness. This time, it would approach more carefully. "Hope you got some more of those ready."

Beside him, Sam stood grim but determined. They just had to hold out long enough for John to find them. Luckily, ammo came for free in dreamland.

"Alright," Dean kept turning a slow circle, eyes training for the next attack. "We got him here. What was step two?"

Sam huffed a laugh, fists clenching and wishing he was armed.

A weight fell into his hand, so suddenly that he would have dropped it if not for the comforting feel of the machete handle. Surprised, he lifted the long blade to his face, observing the razor edge and glint of unnatural light along steel.

"Huh." Sam raised his eyes at his brother, who shrugged and closed his eyes in an attempt to summon a weapon of his own.

Sam caught the flash of movement seconds before the Baku leapt from the darkness. "Dean, move!"

He dove for his brother, bodily tackling him across the side and taking both of them to the ground hard. The air drove from his lungs and he heard Dean groan beneath him. The younger hunter didn't waste any time, rolling over to the side and scrambling to his knees.

A gasp tore from his throat as something *else*, something not of the world he was used to, pulled at every inch of his body. He caught himself on his hands as pieces were tugged forcefully away from his very being. Through bleary eyes, he saw the Baku, sucking at the ground several dozen feet away. The colors were melting together like paint, bleeding away to leave darkness once more as they were consumed in the greedy vacuum the beast presented.

Gunfire ripped through the air, the bullet cracking in its release.

The Baku let out a high pitch yelp, turning and baring its teeth in a roar, trunk flailing. The feline body crouched defensively before bounding into the darkness once more.

Dean, sitting upright on the swirled floor, glared at the thing from the sight-line of his ivory-inlaid .45 caliber handgun gripped tightly in a rock-steady hand. So he wasn't a natural at manifesting shit in dreamland, but he pulled through when it counted.

"You okay, Sammy?"

Sam rubbed at his arms, relieved at the solidity of his body beneath his palms. The pull of the Baku's influence had made him feel as incorporeal as smoke, and for a moment he'd irrationally feared he would wisp away into nothingness.

"Yeah, I'm good. About that step two?"

The two hunters climbed to their feet. Dean glanced around them. Half the colors had disappeared, and what was left of their projections congregated around them almost nervously. They moved restlessly, and many of them were so dim they were hardly there at all.

Okay, so baiting the thing had worked. Now how the hell did they kill something that couldn't be killed before it ate them?

"Erm…." Dean glanced at the feeding fest they had offered up around them. Right, time for plan B. "Run."

They took off in a random direction, leaving their projections behind to fade out without their presence to sustain them.

When the wall slammed into existence right in front of them, Dean managed not to crash face first into it with the graceful flair of flying limbs and skidding feet. Beside him, Sam caught himself on the smooth tiles, slamming his full weight into the catch, but managing not to break his face on the very solid wall.

"What the hell?" The taller of the two glanced up the black and white wall only to find a stone ceiling above them. He spun around at the fully enclosed room they suddenly found themselves in. Tile walls and stone pillars surrounded them. A metal staircase led to a second story lined with iron-work railings.

Old machinery, looking like something out of a bad sci-fi film from the fifties lined the walls. Panels dotted with blinking lights and various meters filled half the available wall space, and Sam could see more equipment in the neighboring room. There was a table in the center of this room, lit from beneath the surface and lined with chairs. A couple notepads and books laid open on the surface, which looked like a world map.

"Is the Baku doing this?" he asked as he moved to the table cautiously. The rest of the room opened up into another, that one raised several steps higher and hosting shelves of books and wooden study tables, like a library. There were other hallways branching off of either room, and Sam was both relieved at the number of possible exists and

concerned about the numerous entry points for the beast to attack them from. "I don't recognize this place."

"I do." Dean was staring at the achingly familiar details of the bunker and ignoring the homesickness that curled in his chest. Fucking dreamland. "The baku didn't do this. I think I did."

He'd wanted shelter and someplace safe to regroup. Guess he'd gotten a version of it, at least.

The younger of the two stared questioningly, but Dean shook his head. Instead, he moved for the hallway just off the stairwell that Sam had avoided due to it being tucked away in a far darker part of the room and perfect for an ambush from the Baku. "Come on, this place is a labyrinth. And it's well armed."

Sam followed after into a long hallway with square-arched intersections and high-tiled walls. All of the doors along the hallway they entered were closed and the couple that he tried were solidly locked. Nice, heavy wood structures all labeled with a number and a different set of symbols inlaid within a circle of gold. "What is this place?"

"It's a bunker," Dean answered tightly and Sam's head snapped forward to stare at his brother's back.

Like the bunker you didn't mean to talk about on the Wendigo hunt?

"It was built to ward off supernatural baddies. And it's got a shit-ton of information and supplies."

They hit the end of the corridor and made a left down a secondary hallway that looked exactly like the first. If it weren't for the different numbers on the doors, Sam would have guessed they'd just made an Escher-like loop, which seemed more than possible in dreamland. But the new hall led to a staircase that descended deeper into the bunker. Dean took it without hesitation and they were deposited into another identical hallway. Just how big was this place?

"Where is it?" Sam asked cautiously. Other than 'likely underground' due to a lack of windows, there weren't a lot of clues. North America if the map upstairs was any indication. Most likely the States, since his brother didn't own a passport. The architecture wasn't telling, other than it was old and probably built in the fifties, as the machines upstairs suggested.

He could tell this was an off limit topic, but it wasn't like Dean could pretend he wasn't seeing what he was seeing. It might be wrong to abuse the fact it was easier to pull information from his cagey brother in dreamland, but at this point he no longer cared.

They wasn't going to be much of their brotherhood left if Dean kept up the secrets.

"It's gone." Dean's voice was tight, and Sam wondered what had happened that had bound his nomadic brother so tightly to a place. He could hear the ache in his voice and the anger behind those clenched teeth.

He really hadn't thought so much could happen in four years. In fact, he was starting to suspect it had been a lot longer for one of them.

Dean pushed open one of the many doors they were passing, all similar enough outside of their number that Sam had long ago gotten lost. The younger hunter pulled up short at the sight of a full blown armory within.

"Is that a *shooting range*?"

His brother laughed, beckoning Sam into the room with a sweeping arc of his arm. "Welcome to the bat cave, Sammy."

The lights above them suddenly flickered, the high pitch buzzing of electricity filling the air. A gasp broke the good mood, and Dean pressed a hand to his chest as he staggered against the open door.

"Dean?" Sam went to steady to him, even as his brother regained his balance.

"It's here."

Sam glanced into the armory at the assortment of weapons, some he hadn't even seen before. He gave a stoic nod. "Then let's figure out how to kill the damn thing."

An idea lit up his mind like a lightbulb and his eyes flashed at the memory of those walls lined with books. Dean was already moving into the room to gather up several blades and a gun that was nothing short of an elephant rifle.

"Dean, you said this place had information. Does it have books on supernatural creatures?"

His brother looked at him like he was crazy for a moment, before he caught on. It was almost comical to watch his face morph from confusion, to understanding, to optimism, and finally settling on the misery as the realization of what his brother's question entailed finally hit.

"We're being hunted by a dream eater in dad's head, and you want to *read a book*?"

Sam shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips despite the rather dire situation and the ticking countdown on this little mission of theirs. "We don't know how to kill it, and we've got to do that before we can rescue dad. So…"

"Ugh, fine!" Dean put the grenade launcher back on its designated shelf with more than a little disappointment (and Sam did a double take at the friggin *grenade launcher*)Instead, he grabbed two blades and a gun, tossing them to his brother who caught them expertly and tucked them into his waistline and boot top. "But you're doing the reading. I'm the lookout."

The younger hunter laughed as they headed back up the staircase and long hallway of rooms. Dean stumbled several times, each in tune with the flicker of lights. The last one accompanied a tremor that ran along the walls and shook dust from the ceiling.

"Do you really think it's a good idea to give him so much to feed on?" Sam whispered as they made it back into the first room, with the black and white tiles and iron-laid staircase.

"At least it's not chewing on us," Dean grumbled back, though he knew it wasn't completely true. Luckily, he had plenty of nightmares to throw at the thing to keep it busy.

As if on cue, the sconces around them flickered and then shut off completely. Dean lost his balance at a particularly harsh tug and caught himself on the wall. Emergency red light filled the bunker, painting it with the sickening color of danger and bad news. Unpleasant memories always came with that light.

"Dean?" Sam scanned the room around them for danger as he stood protectively in front of his unsteady brother. He drew up short when he spotted something new in the adjoining room. A body, unmoving on the floor that hadn't been there before. "Dean!"

Leaving his older brother, he took off up the stairs and slid to a halt at

the still form sprawled on the ground beside the long wooden table. Male. Young. Dressed in jeans, a white shirt and tan button up. No obvious wounds or blood. Fingers searched for a pulse before he turned the cold, lifeless body over.

He was just a kid, a couple years younger than Sam. Dark hair, Asian descent, and his eyes….

Sam bit back the bile that threatened to choke him, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth as he stared at the blown out holes that had once been the kid's eyes.

"Kevin…" Sam turned to his brother, standing at the top of the steps as he stared at the body with the eyes of someone who was seeing a ghost. A ghost whose death had been his fault, if the guilt eating at his expression was anything to go by.

"Dean?" Sam stood, taking a step back from the corpse and towards his clearly shaken brother. "It's the Baku. He's fueling your nightmare, giving himself more to eat. Fight it, Dean."

There was a crash in the room to their left and Sam drew his gun, eye trained on any movement. The sound of books hitting the ground in a clatter broke the tense silence a second time. The smell of gasoline was suddenly overwhelming in the windowless room and Sam gagged, pulling up his shirt to cover his nose even as he kept his weapon trained on the next room. He could hear desperate, gasping breaths coming from the room. Someone was injured, pretty gravely going by the wet gurgle of each breath.

He took a step towards the entrance, side stepping Kevin's body. Dean's wrist closed tightly around his, and Sam turned to him in surprise. He hadn't heard him move. In the red light, his brother's skin looked pale and sallow.

"Don't."

The younger of the two glanced at the room again, at the sound of those slow, wet breaths. He wondered if it was his brother lying in that room, struggling through what was probably a collapsed lung and gasoline fumes.

"Dean, we need those books." He twisted his wrist within his brother's grip so he could clamp his own hand around Dean's forearm. "Fight it."

The hunter took a shaky breath under his brother's challenging gaze,

but ended up nodding hastily and closing his eyes. His face evened out in concentration, and the red lights suddenly shut off, switching almost seamlessly back to yellow-white. When he opened his eyes, Kevin's body was gone, and so was the smell of gasoline.

"Okay." Sam released his arm and started for the library. "Let's gank this thing."

Dean still tensed as he entered the room behind his brother. But the books were all tucked away in their proper shelves. The Stynes didn't litter the floor. And a beaten, broken Cas was nowhere to be seen.

He let out a shaky breath. Time to pull it together; they had a job to do.

Sam was pulling out books in rapid succession, scanning along the tombs. Dean left him to it. Even with more familiarity of the bunker than Sam, the kid could be blind and still better at research than he would ever be. Instead, Dean took up his post as watchdog, rifle raised and patrolling the three entrances that led to the library.

Movement to his left caught his eye and he trained in on the small doorway that led back to the dorms. He lifted the gun, trained on the dark corners of the hallway just past the stonework. Sam glanced up from the books, but ducked his head back down and doubled his scanning speed in case they were out of time.

Dean stepped slowly towards the hall, moving around the furniture and pillars with the ease of someone achingly familiar with his surroundings. He hadn't meant to summon the bunker around them, but he wasn't unhappy to see it. This was home turf, and he knew every nook and cranny of the incredibly well-armed labyrinth. No dream walker was taking him down in his own sanctuary.

The hunter whipped around the corner, gun raised only to find an empty hallway.

The click of a hammer cocking and the cold metal of a muzzle pressing to the base of his skull drew him up short. His fingers tightened around the trigger of his own gun, but the person behind him pressed harder into the back of his neck.

Since when did Baku carry guns, or was this another nightmare projection?

"Drop it."

He probably shouldn't have turned around. He probably should have done what the person demanded. In fact, he was lucky he didn't get a bullet in the face for such a stupid move. But he couldn't help it, surprise at the very familiar voice caused his body to turn before thought or survival instinct could stop him.

"Dad?"

Chapter 21: Season 1: Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dream Act II! Let's see, who didn't we sneak in last time? Oh yeah, how about a little Mary and Castiel? Not to mention more Baku action, John trying to kill his sons, and whatever else kinda fuckery we can throw at our poor boys.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 20

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean stared at the face of his father down the barrel of a Colt M1911A1. John looked the same as the last time he had seen him alive, leaning over him in the hospital bed in Sioux Falls. Greying. Maybe a little tired around the eyes. But very much alive, full of vitality and near-righteous anger.

“I said drop it.”

“Dad, it’s me.” Dean didn’t drop the rifle, but he did hold it clearly out to the side. It was no longer a threat to John, but he wasn’t letting it go when the Baku could be nearby.

“Yeah, it always is.” His father’s finger tightened on the trigger and Dean had time to wonder what a bullet through the brain in dreamland would do to his real self before the gun fired with an explosive crack that damn near blew out his ear drums.

The bullet slammed into the stonework over his shoulder as Sam slammed into his father with the entire weight of his body and the velocity of a full-tilt run. The two went down hard. Dean dropped the rifle to draw his handgun as his family grappled on the floor. John had intended to kill him – or what he likely thought was the demon’s illusion of him. Which meant he would be just as willing to kill Sam.

While Sammy was a hell of a hunter and more than proficient at hand-to-hand combat, no one got the upper hand on John Winchester easily.

John pinned Sam to the floor, straddling his chest. He had

relinquished the gun during the scuffle in exchange for his Muela Bowie knife, which he pressed against Sam's throat in a backhanded grip. The kid grasped at his father's wrist, using his forearm to leverage the blade as far from his skin as he could in a losing fight.

Dean didn't hesitate to press his gun to the back of his father's head.

"Drop it." He said in a parody of John's own command.

The hunter tilted his head sharply to the side, eyeing his oldest boy and the weapon that stayed flush against his skull with his every movement. Good boy. He'd almost be proud if Dean wasn't just a construct of his mind.

Green eyes narrowed when the blade remained against his brother's neck. "You gonna kill your own son?"

The words were spat, hurtful and angry and bitter, in a way that made John's heart ache. They only further proved to him that this was a dream of the demon's cruel design. His Dean – the real Dean – couldn't know that these days his darkest thoughts, his worst nightmares, were about having to take the life of his youngest boy with his own hands.

"You're not my sons," he bit out as he kept his eyes on the Dean and his blade pressed to Sam's throat.

"Yes. We are."

"We- We took African Dream Root," Sammy gasped out, straining against his father's strength. "Bobby called us."

John glanced down at his youngest, the first inkling of possibility filtering in. This was the first time a dream construct had suggested where he was, rather than asked. But no. The demon was clever, and anything he could come up with could be used against him here, including spell components and an old friend.

"Good try, but I'm not falling for it."

He moved to swipe the blade across his son's throat when Dean's arm encircled his neck from behind, pulling back his head to expose his throat. The muzzle of his gun jammed under his jaw as his son caught him in a headlock.

"I will risk killing you before I risk you killing him," Dean snarled and

John's eyes darted up into the murderous face of his oldest son.

"Dean!"

Confusion curled across the firing neurons in his brain. If this was a construct of his mind, it was off. It might look just like him, but that wasn't his Dean, that wasn't his good soldier and oldest son. So who – or what – was it?

"Prove it." He didn't lift the blade from Sam's throat, though he knew he no longer had the leverage at this angle to use it against his younger boy's strength. "If you're my son and we're in my head, prove it."

Dean growled low in his throat at the near impossible request. What kind of solution was that? Anything John already knew, a dream walker could just as easily answer. So Dean couldn't prove he was real that way. Anything he came up with that John didn't know would be written off as a lie if their stubborn-ass dad didn't like it as the truth.

How the hell was he supposed to come up with something John Winchester would believe, but didn't already know about?

An idea popped into his mind before he was done internally ranting about how unlikely he was to ever think up something useable and why did his dad have to be such a paranoid, heartless bastard who didn't even flinch at the prospect of taking out his own son, real or not.

Dean tossed the daddy issues to the side, tapping his finger against the side of the gun as he swallowed around the lump in his throat. Damn it. Threatening to kill his father had been easier than confessing something he knew would disappoint the man.

"That time you left me at the boy's home in upstate New York, after I got caught stealing food." Despite the lump in his throat and the telling burn behind his eyeballs, Dean didn't dare take his gaze off his father for a second, despite every emotional instinct to do so. The ex-marine would only need half of that to get the upper hand, and they were lucky he hadn't killed them the first chance he had. "I didn't want to leave. It was the best damn two months of my life. And when you came and got me-"

He choked past the emotion that clogged his throat at the memory. Of Sonny telling him he could stay, being the father he'd never really

had, offering the life he hadn't thought he needed.

"I didn't want to go with you." Dean's hand tightened on the gun, his palm sweaty against the warm metal. John just stared at him, unblinking in the face of his oldest son. "I never told you because it wouldn't have mattered. You'd have hauled my ass out of there either way. So I left with you and Sammy."

On the floor, Sam stared past his father with wide eyes. He remembered Dean disappearing for a couple months back when they were kids. Lost on a hunt, they'd told him. He'd had no idea his older brother had spent the time safe in a home. Apparently, a home he'd liked better than his nomadic life.

If it wasn't so eye-opening and if the pain in his brother's eyes wasn't so real, he'd be giving Dean shit for harking on him all the times he'd ran away or expressed his disinterest in the life. He had always assumed Dean didn't understand – could never understand – and yet here he was. He understood perfectly, he was just able to tuck it all away like it hadn't happened and didn't matter.

The knife slowly pulled away from his throat as John, still staring at his eldest son, relaxed the his murderous stance. Dean kept the gun trained on him as the hunter climbed to his feet and stepped away from the youngest Winchester.

Sam rolled to the side and clambered to his feet to stand beside his brother. Only then did Dean lower his gun and release the hammer.

John stared at his boys and let himself believe it could be them, there in his head to stave off the demon. His boys, who he hadn't seen since Lawrence, and who he hadn't properly seen for almost a year now.

He reached forward, wrapped his arms around the both of them and tugged them to his side.

Dean stiffened under his touch – another oddity that kept John just ever so slightly on edge. But Sam wrapped an arm around him willingly, and soon enough Dean did as well.

"What are you boys doing here?" The soldier asked as he pulled away, father-mode tucked away and game face on.

Sam was blinking away watery eyes as their search for their dad finally came to an end. John didn't make mention of that, for which he was thankful. He really didn't want to start this reunion off with

more of a fight than the standoff already had been. "You weren't waking up, so we had to come get you."

"It's not the demon, Dad," Dean added, looking uncomfortably caught between emotion and aloofness. Well, at least that was still true to the Dean he knew. "It's a Baku. Yellow Eyes is using it to track you."

John frowned, his naturally-inclined hunter's brain rapidly adapting the new information. As loathe as he was to admit he had been wrong, the boys' theory made more sense, and things that hadn't fit before fell into place. Like how persistent and all-encompassing the dreams had been.

"Shit," he finally groused. "Guess that explains why the panic room didn't work."

"We've got to figure out how to break its hold on you." Sam picked up Dean's abandoned rifle, handing it back to his brother. "We were looking for a way to do that when you showed up."

John followed his youngest as he moved over to a table full of books. He chanced a glance around. He hadn't cared much for his surroundings before other than to keep a constant eye out for danger. But he didn't recognize this place, and figured it must be one of his boys generating it. "What is this, anyway?"

"Uh…" Sam glanced at Dean, then back to their dad. "It's a library… of sorts."

John flipped open the cover of a book atop the nearest stack with a non-committal noise. Sam raised his eyebrows at Dean, who subtly shook his head with a grateful look.

"How long do you boys have before the root wears off?"

John closed the book and went back to scanning their surroundings. Beside him, Dean fell in step and re-checked the integrity of the rifle in his hands, given that he had dropped it rather hastily. A jam in their line of work could get you killed.

"It's hard to say." Sam sent another glance at his brother, who was being oddly quiet in the presence of their father. Dean usually chomped at the bit to offer information and suggestions to John. Anything to impress or please the man. "Time isn't easy to keep track of down here. Probably not much longer: an hour at most."

The walls started to tremble again, and all three hunters' heads shot up at the disturbance. Dean met his brother's gaze but shook his head. It wasn't the Baku; it wasn't feeding on him.

Tiles started to rattle on the walls and fall to the floor as the shaking worsened.

"Okay, times up." Dean cocked the rifle even as Sam slammed shut the book he was holding and grabbed two more. "Let's move!"

The three hunters took off across the trembling floor as the walls began to collapse in on themselves. The lights fell from the deteriorating ceiling, crashing to the ground and creating a dangerous game of Frogger for the three men.

"Where do we go?" Sam yelled even as Dean overtook their father for the lead. He headed back to the black and white tiled room with the table map, and booked it straight for the metal staircase leading to the second story.

Given that this was Dean's construct, Sam followed without question. Luckily, so did John.

Dean made it to the second floor, scrambling through a short hallway that quickly ended at a heavy metal door Sam hadn't seen from below. His older brother was pulling at a large lever and Sam slammed into the door, grabbing at the mechanism and heaving with his brother. Together, with a grunt, they managed to slide it up and over the locking mechanism.

Ceiling rained down around them. They were out of time. John grabbed both boys by the bicep and hurled himself and his sons through the door.

-o-o-o-

Sam landed hard and groaned at the multiple, painful points of pressure along his body from the uneven, pokey surface he had landed on.

"Get off me, you're friggin' heavy."

The youngest Winchester rolled with a groan, sliding off of his brother who struggled up with a gasp of air now that all two hundred and twenty pounds of moose brother wasn't compressing his rib cage and diaphragm.

“Don’t be a baby,” Sam groused, rolling to his knees and climbing to his feet from there. He offered Dean a hand, which is brother took with a mock glare.

“Where are we?” He muttered instead, dusting off his jeans and glancing around.

“Home.”

The two boys turned to their father, who was standing a few feet away, looking as if he hadn’t taken a dive with them moments before. The older hunter was staring at the quaint house around them. The white walls, tinted blue in the moonlight filtering through the kitchen just behind them. The wooden staircase near the front door, inlaid glass showing the quiet yard and no sign of damage from the ax Dean had taken to it a month ago.

“This is Jenny’s house,” Sam realized as he turned around, inspecting the surroundings. Jenny and her children were nowhere to be seen, nor was any evidence that they had lived in this rendition of their childhood home. The furniture and arrangement was unfamiliar to him. The child’s drawing on the fridge and the pictures held by magnets were too far to identify, but Sam didn’t recognize any of them as the pictures Sari had been drawing.

“No, Sammy.” John was staring at him with a mix of emotions darting across his face. “This is our house.”

“Uh…right. I know.” Sam shrugged one shoulder. “The woman that lives there now is named Jenny. We were there a couple months ago. There was a poltergeist….”

He trailed off uncertainly, suddenly feeling both awkward and irritated at his own explanation. John would have known all this if he ever checked his messages or showed up when his sons needed him.

“We called you,” he ended up adding defensively, and with no little amount of hurt in his voice.

“Shit,” Dean swore, breaking up the possible fight before it could begin, as well as any sentimental reunion, however unlikely one was in this family. He patted down his jacket and waistline. “The weapons are gone.”

Sam searched the floor for the books he’d grabbed on Asian lore and mythological beasts. Neither were in sight, and he knew he’d made it

through the bunker door with them.

“Can you make more?” he found himself asking his brother, even though Dean already had his eyes closed in concentration, trying to do just that.

Green eyes opened, filled with annoyance. “Not working for me.”

“Maybe because it’s not your dream?” Sam turned to face John. The house they were in was clue enough as to whose construct this was and whose nightmare the Baku had pulled from.

Their dad looked between the two of them for a moment, before he gave a ‘what the hell’ shrug and closed his eyes. After a moment of nothing, he opened one, then followed with the other. No such luck.

“The Baku must have taken back control,” Dean muttered, making the entire thing sound like one long curse.

“That can’t be good.”

The words weren’t even out of Sam’s mouth before light sprung into existence around them, orange and hot and flickering. Crackles broke the air and smoke hung heavy in the room that had been clear seconds ago. Dean swore as he stumbled back from the walls suddenly engulfed in hot, angry flames. Sam grabbed at his shoulder in an effort to pull him back and steady him all in one. Beside them, John’s military-trained instincts kicked in and he sought the nearest exit among the fire.

The front door was blocked by the growing flames, as was the kitchen. That only left upstairs. Of course.

He grabbed his boys and hollered for them to make it to the second story. Sammy’s old nursery was above the garage. They’d be able to climb onto the roof from his window and hopefully jump to the ground, assuming the fire hadn’t consumed too much of that part of the house.

Dean led the charge, scrambling up the stairs even as flames licked at the railings as the fire climbed higher. He knew what he would see when he made it to Sam’s old room, so he didn’t look up and he didn’t stop moving.

But his brother did.

John slammed bodily into his youngest son as Sam skidded to a halt, eyes locked on the ceiling. There were no flames in this room, but the body pinned to the plaster, red spreading across her white nightgown, was hard to miss.

"Mom," he whispered, and the resemblance to his dream of Jess, pinned to the ceiling and bleeding to death, had him rooted to the floor of his old room.

"Sammy." She smiled down at him with tears in her eyes. Blood dripped from her stomach and hit his cheek.

He was shaking as John grabbed him by the arms and spun him around, forcing his eyes away from the visage of his mother's death. Unlike the other two men in the room, Sam had never seen it. And while he'd dreamt of the exact scenario with Jess, so much so that he felt physically sick at the mirror image, he still hadn't been prepared for the way the real thing stole his breath or burned achingly deep in his soul.

"It isn't her, Sam!" John was yelling, and the voice sounded like it came from a thousand miles away, through an ocean of noise. His father was shaking him, refusing to look up at the image of his wife, who was now asking him why he had left her, where he was, why he hadn't saved her. But he ignored each and every sobbed question. He'd been plagued by them for weeks now, and he knew it wasn't his wife who was asking.

Sam finally centered himself, reaching up to grab his dad's wrists as the world came back into focus and the image of his girlfriend pinned to the ceiling was replaced by his dad's worried face. He nodded numbly, keeping his head down as he turned back into the room and made for the window. Dean had one leg out, the other still dangling inside, ready to leap back into the nightmare to save his family.

The younger Winchester hit the windowsill hard, but he didn't stop. He scrambled up and through the small portal as his brother began sliding across the roof. Bright light ignited behind them, and Sam couldn't help the instinctual turn of his head. But John was directly behind him, blocking his view of the fire flaring along the ceiling.

"Keep going, son. None of it's real."

He knew that. He did. So the hunter nodded and slid his way down the shingled roof. Dean landed on the ground below, rolling out of momentum. Sam dropped heavy beside him, his extra half foot of

height keeping him on his feet. John landed beside them with a grunt and the three boys moved away from the fully engulfed house as it crackled and burned.

John finally let something flit across his features as he watched his family's house, the little fixer-upper he had worked tirelessly to buy, had spent years making into a home with his wife, crackle and give to the hungry flames.

And within, the love of his life. Again.

"We gotta keep moving." Dean gave his father's arm a tug and John nodded. It wasn't smart to stay in one place. He turned after his boys but stumbled at the sudden, unnatural pull deep within his body. He gasped, falling to one knee to brace himself against the suddenly tilting world.

"Shit," his eldest was swearing, trying to steady him. "It's feeding off of him!"

Sam dropped to a knee, grabbing John's head to steady him. Brown eyes darted between his own, thoughts racing across that quick mind that had gotten him a free ride to Stanford.

"It hasn't fed on you before," Sam said as realization settled in his stomach like lead. He looked up to his brother. "Why would it start now?"

Dean reached down and hauled their father to his feet, slinging one arm over his shoulder to support him. "We know what it is now. Game's up; either it doesn't need dad anymore, or it's given up on getting his location. Either way, we gotta get out of here *now*."

It became obvious as they made their way down their old childhood street, that the small bites the Baku had taken out of Sam and Dean had been a meager snack at best. John, being the host of the dream, was the salad, entrée, whole bottle of wine, after dinner aperitif, and a heaping dessert all put together. If the way he was listing to the side and gasping through shallow, pained breaths was any indication, the Baku was tucking in for a hasty, gluttonous meal.

They stumbled together across the lawns of several houses before Sam took the lead, changing directions to slip between two homes. He pulled open the wooden gate that closed off the side of the house, holding it for his brother and father to struggle through. They hobbled past trashcans and recycling, into the fenced yard. There was

a door between bushes, probably leading to a laneway or another yard. Unlike the side gate, this one was locked.

Sam climbed up the five foot wooden structure, straddling the top and leaning back over for his brother to heft John up. The older hunter grumbled at the treatment, but it was obvious he was having difficulty standing on his own. Every pull of the Baku sent him staggering in a different direction, like being tossed back and forth on the deck of a very small boat on very rough seas.

Dean managed to haul John up enough for Sam to get a sturdy grip around his middle, and together they were able to push-slash-pull their father up and over the gate. As soon as Dean knew they'd cleared the other side and started moving through the next yard they'd landed in, Dean hopped up and over the fence.

And came face to face with Castiel.

"Jesus!" Dean's back slammed into the fence in a purely instinctual reaction to having another person's face appear out of nowhere, inches from his own. He dug his fingers into his chest, where his heart was racing and lungs struggling to find the air he'd tried to swallow instead of inhale a minute ago. "What the hell, Cas!"

The hunter straightened up as his mind moved much faster than his body. "Wait, why are you here?"

"You need to wake up, Dean. Right now." Cas took a step toward him and the hunter immediately raised an arm to stop him from doing the Jedi, two finger mind trick.

"No, wait a minute. Dad-"

"Bobby Singer is in danger. You must wake up."

Cas pressed his hand to his forehead before he could reply.

-o-o-o-

They made it through the yard, down the side of yet another house, down the drive and onto the sidewalk before Sam paused. He was panting from the exertion of pulling his father's weight alongside him, and now he was faced with a street he didn't know in a town he hadn't been old enough to remember. Sam stared down the road in both directions. The street was poorly lit, with trees and cars lining the road, and yellow street lights flickering through the leaves to

illuminate unfriendly looking houses. He didn't see the Baku, or spot any dangers in particular, but he didn't feel great about either choice.

"Which way?" he asked John, though he didn't expect a very coherent answer given that all his dad seemed capable of doing was focusing on breathing. The older hunter groaned, and Sam physically felt the pull of the Baku that time as John was seemingly yanked to the side. He grunted as his father tilted to the side, nearly sliding from his grip before he managed to tighten his hold and right the hunter.

"Dean, we have to find a different way to get out of here." Sam turned his head to see if his brother had of those miraculous, last minute ideas he was so good at. The younger Winchester frowned at the lack of response, and the lack of Dean in general. "Dean?"

He turned them around, and his heart spiked at the empty driveway behind them. "Dean!"

Sam was about to set John down and go back for his brother when the ground started shaking. No, no no. The nightmare couldn't change now, not when they'd been separated. He dropped his dad a little harder than he'd meant to and broke into a run back the way they'd come.

He only made it a few feet towards the side of the house before the earth pitched and rolled, and Sam slammed into the ground and kept sliding as up became sideways.

He slid clear off the sidewalk and across the street and straight into darkness. The floor came up hard, jarring the bones in his legs all the way up to his hips. He was upright, though, as disjointing as the landing experience had been in a sudden ninety degree tilt to reality. John hit next to him, stumbling but able to catch himself before he completely face-planted.

Sam offered a steadying hand on impulse, but it was obvious from his dad's newfound balance that the Baku had, at least temporarily, stopped feeding.

"Dad?"

John nodded at his son, looking pale and shaken, but steady on his feet. "I'm alright. What happened?"

"The dream shifted again." Sam looked around them, hoping to spot his brother who could have gotten kicked out of the last world and

into this one with them. But as Sam spun in a circle, he quickly realized the dream had done more than change. The world was slowly building around them, walls lined with pipes, catwalks stretching over their heads, and large vent pipes in the distance, all sliding into existence like a bad movie fade-to-black, only in reverse. Unlike the last shift, this world was slow to form and not yet complete.

Sam didn't know if that was good or bad. The Baku wasn't feeding on John, and it felt like it had been interrupted doing so. But if the Baku wasn't feeding on John, and Dean was now missing…. The last shift had been a clear offensive move to separate them. Maybe Dean was fighting back, taking up the beast's concentration away from building the world around them.

"Your brother can take care of himself," John spoke up, as if reading Sam's mind. "He'll find his way."

Sam nodded, trying to absorb his dad's confidence as his own. He didn't like the idea of Dean facing that thing alone.

What was forming around them was an old factory of some sort. Chemical, if Sam knew his factories (and given how monsters tended to like the abandoned ones, he was pretty rehearsed in them). He didn't recognize this one, but then again, he wasn't sure he'd be able to pick out ones he'd visited in the past. They tended to blur together.

"Do you know where we are?" Sam asked even as he tried to summon a weapon like he had the first time they'd faced the Baku. But slow to bounce back or not, it looked like the beast still had control of the dream; his hands remained frustratingly empty.

"No." John was staring at the world around them as it finally settled into place with a clarity that echoed reality. "Looks familiar, though. Probably a hunt."

His youngest nodded beside him and they started in a random direction. Even with Dean lost, staying in one place was always a bad idea when a supernatural baddie was on your tail. Sam hoped to find Dean somewhere in the maze of equipment and metal. But more importantly, and their primary concern now, was finding a way out of the dream world. The African Dream Root wouldn't last much longer, and John wouldn't shake this on his own.

"Can you think of any other way to wake up?" Nosie to their left had both hunters turning, going for weapons at their hips that weren't

there. John gave a toss of his head and they changed direction, away from the clang of a fallen pipe that suggested they weren't alone.

"No. Been trying for weeks, every time this bastard traps me."

"What happened those other times?"

John shrugged as they ducked under some low-hanging pipes. The Baku was large, about the size of a cougar, so hopefully it would have trouble navigating the smaller areas they were fitting themselves through. Of course, it also limited their range of movement in a fight and their escape options as well.

Not that there was much escape in a dream, as they were quickly learning.

"I woke up eventually. Like you said, it never fed on me. Sounds like the damn thing was only meant to get my location."

Sam nodded, as that seemed to fit with everything they assumed before. But with the Baku after them now, it was unlikely it would let John go this time.

"Can you wake yourself up?" his dad asked. Sam had a feeling he knew the answer, given the lack of weapon or books on him, but he gave it a shot anyway. Had he any confidence it might work, he probably wouldn't have tried. Leaving his dad here alone wasn't exactly part of the plan.

He opened his eyes to the factory and the waiting face of his father.

John nodded, having expected as much. The root hadn't worn off yet, and neither of them were going anywhere until it did or the Baku let them.

His dad pulled ahead as Sam checked behind them to make sure the Baku wasn't approaching from the rear. He didn't see anything in the dark lighting but the walls and pipes around them. When he turned back, something immediately niggled the back of his mind.

John was a dozen or so feet ahead, but it felt infinitely further. Unreachable. The world around them faded slightly, turning darker than a moment ago.

There was movement to his left, the slide of paws across hard-packed dirt, and Sam suddenly realized he had seen this all before, in a vision

in a dirty bus station.

John glanced at him over his shoulder.

The young hunter was moving before his dad could tell him to run. But run he did, straight into John, tackling him to the ground as the Baku soared over their heads in a lunge. It hit the ground and slid to a stop, letting out a terrifying cry that was both a roar and a trumpet.

Sam threw himself to his feet, hauling his father up after him and the two took off running.

They did not make it far before John stumbled. His youngest tried to catch him and keep him upright as they kept moving, but his hands went right through him.

Sam pulled back, freaked out at the suddenly wispy quality around the edges of his father. He tried to grab him again, and his hand sunk a good inch into the fuzzy, incorporeal bicep before he found solidity. He stared, horrified, at his half-buried hand on his father's arm.

"Run, Sammy." It was a whisper even as John swayed and Sam had to grip his shoulders to keep him from falling. They sunk to the ground and the young hunter watched as wisps of his father were tugged away from him like smoke through a vent.

He turned to face the Baku, standing twenty feet from them. His paws were spread wide on the ground, back arched low in a predatory stance. He flicked his trunk back and forth, like the twitchy tail of a cat about to pounce. Beneath him, the ground looked like viscous paint, being greedily sucked into the monster's open mouth. The edges of the walls that hemmed them in were starting to waiver where they met the floor, bleeding out and towards the Baku as the dream liquefied into nothing more than food for the beast.

They were out of time.

Chapter 22: Season 1: Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Our dream adventure wraps up with a lot of bangs! Slamming doors, guns going off, explosions of light. What is happening?!

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 21

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean woke with the same momentum he had last held in the dream. He shot out of the chair, nearly taking it with him as he stumbled back and away from an angel that didn't exist in the waking world. Gone was the quiet, suburban neighborhood in Lawrence, Kansas, replaced by the panic room. His father was still sleeping on the cot against the wall and his brother was conked out in the kitchen chair beside him, head hanging back at an angle that would punish him when he woke up.

"Shit." Dean ran his hand through his hair as he spun around. Had the root worn off? But why wasn't Sam awake too, then?

A loud bang and a crash came from above, and the hunter dropped into a defensive stance out of habit. The reverberating blast of a shotgun followed.

Bobby.

Dean sprinted out of the panic room and bolted up the stairs at a pace that surpassed fast and hit reckless. He burst through the basement door and rounded into the study, skidding to a wobbly halt at the petite girl, maybe seventeen at most, standing in the front door of the house. It was pretty obvious from the damage the wall and door had taken that she'd kicked the thing in.

Shit, Meg was early.

"You must really think I'm stupid," she spat out, taking confident strides forward. Dean searched the room around him for a weapon, pausing at the sight of Bobby's crumpled body in the corner. A shotgun lay in his limp hand, books from the shelf he'd been chucked

into littered the ground around him.

Dean tried to spot movement in his chest, but he didn't have time to confirm if the old hunter was still alive. Please, God, let him be alive.

Meg came to a stop just outside of the study, a smirk on her lips. Dean's gaze snapped back to her as he stood, weaponless, in the center of the room. "I thought I said no more games."

"Says the bitch who showed up to the party early."

The demon laughed, tossing her head of curly hair back. "Oh, Dean. I never said I was *at* Caleb's when I slit his throat. Really, after everything I heard about you Winchesters, I have to say I'm a little underwhelmed."

The hunter fisted his hands as the echo of his friend's dying breath flashed through his head. He was going to kill this bitch if it was the last thing he did. Screw the timeline and screw some things staying the same; she wasn't going to be one of them.

Meg held his gaze in their standoff before brown eyes roamed around the house tauntingly. Dean glanced at the stretch of carpet she was almost standing on, knowing Bobby had painted a devil's trap beneath it as part of their trap and dragged it over to the entryway. He just needed her to take a step forward.

"So," Meg didn't move; she just glanced curiously around the room, her eyes lingering on the door down the hall to the basement, and the open entrance to the empty kitchen on her other side. "Where's your brother?"

"Bermuda."

"Cute."

"I think he was going more for 'hot.' Bikinis. Speedos. Little umbrellas in all the drinks."

Meg waved her arm and Dean found himself flying through the air. He tried to tense his body for the hit, but it still knocked the air out of him as he crashed into the corner of the window above the couch. He hit more wall than glass, but he heard the window rattle in its frame and he considered himself lucky he didn't go straight through it. Instead, he bounced off the couch and rolled onto the floor beside Bobby with a grunt. God, his back was going to hate him in the

morning.

With a low moan, he climbed to his feet, shaking pain and books off. It took a moment to gain his footing as he nearly tripped over a heavy tome on Greek mythology, almost sprawling across the floor again. She'd thrown him harder than he'd expected. Awesome.

"You're going to start answering my questions, you know."

"Or what?" He blinked at the double vision of the demon, but it was clearing up quickly enough. "You gonna kill me?"

"Something like that." Meg took a step forward and Dean tensed as her foot brushed the edge of the carpet. But she stopped, tilting her head to stare at him.

Oh crap.

Her eyes dropped to the rug and he swore like a sailor in his head as she toed the edge of it. Lifting her foot, she flipped the corner over and the edge of the spay-painted devils trap was clear even across the room. Meg's eyes met his, the smirk gone.

"I'm so done with your crap, Dean."

She raised her hand once more and the hunter flew across the room and into Bobby's desk. He managed twist, hitting the edge with his side rather than his back, so it was his forearm that snapped with a splintering crack and not his spine. He gasped against the shock of pain shooting up his limb even as momentum from the toss sent him up and over the desk. Papers and books went flying as he rolled off the surface and hit the ground below, hard. He cried out as the drop jarred his freshly broken arm, but at least he hadn't landed on that one.

Bobby had moved the devil-trapped carpet out from the center of the room to block the entrance to his study completely, but that didn't stop Meg from darting down the hall, passing the basement door to skid into the library's secondary door just to the right of the desk. Dean scrambled back up as she appeared in the doorway, holding his arm close to his chest. He vaulted over the now cleared desk, landing on the floor with too much momentum and ended up half running, half tripping to the other side of the room.

He spun around to face Meg, who was moving around the desk and pursuing him through the study as he backpedaled as quickly as

possible into the kitchen. She got in one more, good toss that sent him careening into the cabinets hard enough to see stars, before she walked straight under the devil's trap painted on the ceiling in the center of the room and slammed into the invisible barrier of the far edge.

Her eyes snapped furiously to the ceiling and widened as she realized her mistake.

On the floor of the kitchen, Dean let his head fall back to the ground and laughed loudly. He didn't bother holding back as he rolled over, deep-chested chuckles interrupted by painful grunts as all his aches and pains were jostled. He climbed to his feet, arm held feebly to his body. He stretched his back, wincing at the multiple pops, before turning to stare at the trapped demon, a grin stretching over his face.

"I can't believe you fell for that *twice*."

Meg glared at him from the center of the room, baring her teeth.

"Don't go anywhere, sweetheart. I'll be right back." Dean lumbered out of the kitchen and over to Bobby, bending down to press two fingers shakily to his neck. He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt a steady pulse, and could see the old man's chest rising and falling from the close distance. Straightening with a pained moan, he headed for the front door, not bothering to hide the limp in one leg or the way his back throbbed from the last crash. Damn demons. He ambled down the stairs on the front porch and crossed over to the haphazardly parked Impala. It took him a moment to dig into his jeans' pocket for the keys, grimacing at the constant, unintentional jostling to his broken arm.

And he had a good six weeks of useless one-armness to look forward to.

He popped the trunk, ready to get a little payback.

-o-o-o-

Sam stared at the Baku as it kept its distance. The beast didn't need to get close to do damage, as was evident by the amount of dream mass it was sucking into its open jowls. The walls were bleeding away into the floor, which was being pulled up by the Baku like a never-ending vacuum.

On the ground beside him, his father groaned against the constant pull

of the creature. He was still conscious, but by the looks of his fading edges, wisps curling away from him and towards the beast, John wouldn't be aware for much longer.

The young hunter swallowed and forced himself to focus. He still didn't know how to wake John up while he was trapped by the Baku's influence. The African Dream Root wouldn't last much longer for him, either. If it kicked him out of the dream, his dad was as good as dead. He had to keep the Baku distracted long enough to find a way to free his dad from its hold.

Red flight flared through the cramped alley they'd trapped themselves in running through the factory. An explosive crack thundered off the small space, making even Sam wince at the volume. The firework lit up, true and bright, not more than five feet off the ground between them and the beast. The hunter could feel the heat from the flares.

The Baku hissed, staggering back away from his feeding fest. As the light faded and the echoes of the gunpowder explosion petered out, the creature lowered its head and stared at Sam through dangerous eyes.

The hunter eyed those tusks as the beast pawed at the ground. Crap, he'd hoped to scare it off, not make it charge.

Another firework exploded between them as the Baku reared back on its hind legs and trumpeted. Sam released two explosions of green and blue, but the creature charged, relentless. It jumped between the two explosions of light and color, skidding across the ground on the landing. Throwing it's trunk in the air, it let out a horrendous roar and sucked the firework straight into its open throat.

Sam staggered at the pull as a piece of his conscience, however small, was devoured and he felt himself fade in and out of the corporeal world.

The bursts of light faded, leaving them in darkness lit by the monochromatic illusion of a moon. The young hunter was panting by the time the pull against his very soul faded with the colors. The Baku turned to face them again, head lowered dangerously in line with his spine. This time instead of charging, it tossed its head to the side and Sam felt the world tighten around him, like a hug gone too tight and lasting too long.

He tried to summon another explosion and got nothing.

Shit.

Beside him, John finally collapsed into unconsciousness. The Baku eyed the fallen hunter before turning those fierce irises to Sam. He swore he saw the taunt there as the creature dipped his head back down and started feeding, all but ignoring the now defenseless hunter.

Sam's hands tightened into fists, nails biting at the flesh of his palms that wasn't really there in dreamland. There was only one thing left he could think of to try, even if he'd promised Dean he wouldn't do it again.

-o-o-o-

Within the circle, Meg was seething when Dean made his way back into the study. The more minor aches and pains were beginning to fade, which was a good sign for how he'd be feeling come morning. His back still spasmed with every step, causing him to limp, but besides that and the damn arm, he had gotten away with nothing more than bumps and bruises.

The rest of his family had better come out in similar condition, or Meg would be begging for a quick death before the day was through.

The demon's fury faltered when she spotted the Colt in Dean's hand. She eyed the gun, her face falling, then reddening, and then settling for something like pissed acceptance. Meg had always been a quick one.

"I should have killed you both," she spat, turning her chin up at the human as he stood just outside of the trap with her death in his hands. "I could have, you know. A hundred times."

"Oh, I don't doubt it." Dean flipped the cylinder of the old revolver open with a flick of his wrist, checking the bullet count. "But Azazel wouldn't let you, would he? See, me and Sam, he needs us alive. At least for now."

Meg shook her head, anger fierce in her eyes along with fear. "Who the hell is feeding you this shit? And where were they when I was beating the crap out of you, huh? You think they're on your side? They sure don't seem to care whether you live or die."

Dean huffed something of a laugh, though there wasn't much mirth in the sound. Meg was one of the toughest demons they'd ever dealt with. Relentless, cruel, and fiercely loyal. Crazy, even. But she had

never been much for negotiation.

Probably why Crowley couldn't stand her.

"No one's feeding me anything," Dean snapped as he flicked the cylinder shut and raised his good arm to aim directly between the demon's eyes. "You want to know how I know so much? I lived through it. Been there, done that: took a one-way ride in an Angelic DeLorean."

Meg's eyes widened.

"Spoiler alert." He cocked the hammer of the Colt. "You don't win."

The bullet tore through her chest, just below her right clavicle. The demon staggered back with a gasp. Light scattered beneath her skin in microbursts of lightning, silhouetting her bones in relief. Meg met his eyes for a single moment before the bullet within extinguished her rotting essence in an explosive burst of orange, and she hit the floor.

"That's for Ellen and Jo, you demonic bitch."

-o-o-o-

Sam shifted his stance, spreading his feet shoulder length apart. He raised his hand, fingers spread wide as he focused on the creature. The Baku wasn't paying attention to him, convinced he was no longer a threat. That would be his first and last mistake.

The hunter closed his eyes and drew a slow, deep breath. He focused on that thing just beneath the surface of his skin. The thing that, here, was a dull thrum in the back of his mind, like the buzzing of electricity through wires.

It didn't take him long to find. When he did, he only hesitated for a moment before wrapping his hand around that pulsing cord of energy.

Brown eyes flew open as the thing he'd just enveloped his mind around flared at the sudden attention. It filled his body, vibrating bones and muscles and making him feel weightless and heavy in a single breath. His mass increased as gravity retreated, although he knew neither existed in this place. His feet were still solidly on the ground when he checked, but damn if it didn't feel like he was struggling just to stay connected with the earth.

The Baku stopped feeding, lifting his head to stare. Sam met the thing's gaze head on, squaring his shoulders and clenching his jaw. This monster picked the wrong hunter to mess with.

His physical hand, clenched in a fist as surely as his mental hand wrapped around that throng of darkness within him, spread open. The energy within him practically sang and his whole body shook from the vibrations it caused within him.

It wanted out, and he would let it.

The Baku winced, ducking his head with a hiss. It staggered back a step, eyes full of confusion and the first flickers of doubt. The creature doubled down, pressing his feet hard into the ground against the pressure building from the tiny human. It tossed its trunk with a roar, shoulder blades scrunching together in preparation for a pounce.

But Sam didn't care. He pushed harder, shoving the thing back with his mind and digging beneath skin that wasn't really there. The hunter searched deeper than the visage of the beast, straight through flesh and muscle that were nothing more than representation. He pushed down to the soul.

The creature hissed and writhed, tossing its body from side to side in an attempt to dislodge the presence wrapping tight claws around its insides.

The hunger could feel blood beginning to drip down his nose. He could almost taste the copper on his tongue echoing down from the waking world. He ignored it.

Sam tightened his fist when he was sure he'd found the beast's center. It felt slimy, like oil sludge dripping through his fingers. But he could feel warmth within it, beneath the inch thick darkness that snaked around the white light like a living thing.

The hunter slammed his eyes shut, focusing everything he had on the thing he currently held within his mind. He started pulling at the sludge, ripping away fistfuls of the dark goop as the creature screamed and snapped and howled.

-o-o-o-

Dean lowered the gun, savoring the momentary calm that filled him. Meg was dead and all the people she would hurt going forward would be spared. He rubbed at his chest, Colt still in hand. The strong ache

that had been there since Cas jump started his consciousness was finally starting to fade.

The man from the future moved forward swiftly, dropping beside the young body the demon had been possessing. He'd shot true, a through-and-through just under the clavicle. It should be survivable for a human, though it would hurt like a bitch, but it was too close to the heart for a demon to escape when the bullet was from the Colt.

He dropped the gun beside her lifeless body to search for a pulse. Even as his fingers pressed to cold skin, he spotted the blood spreading across her chest in more than one place. Dean pulled away with a clenched fist. She had multiple gunshot wounds in her gut and breast. Caleb or Garth had gotten off several good shots, their aim as true as hunter's had to be.

Scooping up his gun, Dean stood. When it became evident that tucking the weapon into his waistline one-handed was easier said than done, he set it down on Bobby's desk instead, frustration mounting in the face of another innocent life he'd cost. A moan and a grunt alerted him to Bobby waking up, and he quickly crossed the room towards his fallen friend, side-stepping the girl they'd lost in the middle of all this.

Bobby was just sitting up as Dean sank to a knee beside him. The older man grumbled, grabbing at the back of his head and the no doubt fresh bruise there.

"You okay?"

Bobby waved the question off, obviously fine given the circumstances. He dropped his hand back down as he eyed Dean critically. "You?"

The younger hunter nodded with a half grin. He raised his broken limb by the shoulder, wincing as he did so. He extended his good arm to the older man. "Arm's busted, but otherwise I'm good."

"Good." The older hunter took Dean's offered hand and pulled himself up with a grunt, body aching. He caught the boy's eyes and held him there with a single look. "Then you can tell me all about that angelic DeLorean of yers."

-o-o-o-

Sam pushed past the pain in his head and bones, the exhaustion that

dogged him down as he clawed and scrambled through the black ooze of this thing's infested soul. If he couldn't destroy the Baku, he'd tear it into shreds too tiny to harm his family ever again.

He didn't know what he was doing, but he didn't spare time to think about it. Working on instinct, he tore dripping chunks of slime away from a ball of light that shone too bright to look directly on whenever he pulled enough sludge back to expose the blinding brilliance. If he could get through to that light, he knew he could free his father and end this nightmare once and for all.

Focused on a task that narrowed his world down to the beast, himself, and that bright soul, Sam didn't notice the tremors that started beneath his feet. They ran across the surface of the world with finite trembling, and slithered up his body to fill his ears with a low, distant buzzing.

At first, it lined up with the way his body vibrated with the power coursing within and Sam paid it no mind. Soon enough, though, the buzzing grew until his ears went numb, and then it kept going. Sam grimaced, twitching his head to dislodge the growing noise that stabbed at his concentration. The earth beneath his feet began to truly shake. He tried to refocus his attention on the Baku. The buzzing grew in pitch until it was piercing, and he finally had to release the beast to slam his hands over his ears.

The terrifying realization that his hands made no difference came almost immediately, and the sound still continued to climb. It felt as though it was penetrating straight into his brain to the point of exploding. The young hunter cried out and fell to his knees, whether from pain or the tossing of the earth, even he didn't know. Fresh blood ran from beneath his palms as his ears practically wept and the world shook tried to shake itself apart.

The Baku cowered beside the factory wall, whining in high pitch bursts and clawing at its ears and head. The dream started to crumble around them. Large portions of the world split open, like tears across a canvas, and white light shone through with such brilliance that Sam couldn't look. Even with his eyes closed, the building explosion burned through his eyelids until he was sure he was blind and deaf.

It grew until he was encompassed in a light so pure and hot it burned. The piercing pitch shattered the world like glass, and everything disappeared in the explosion of white.

-o-o-o-

The ‘oh crap’ expression plastered on Dean’s face would have been comical in almost any other situation, and it was a shame they were in the middle of a damn demon attack and Baku nightmare. Bobby would have liked to take a moment and enjoy the dumbfounded look on the cocky hunter’s face. He’d been getting damn tired of the enigmatic man being three steps ahead of them for the past six months. It was nice to see some genuine surprise and speechlessness on the kid he knew.

Dean stood there, gaping like a fish at his surrogate father. He didn’t know how to respond. He was pretty sure he was screwed, but even if he wasn’t, part of him didn’t want to try and lie his way out of this. Part of him – the bigger part – was tired of lying, tired of walking this path alone.

With nothing else to do and completely unsure of what he was supposed to say in the face of Bobby’s realization, the man from the future reached out with his good arm and pulled the other man into a hug. Bobby stiffened under his grip, but Dean didn’t let go.

“I wanted to tell you so many times.” He said it more as an apology than explanation. He stubbornly ignored the flare in his chest and the burn in his eyes, or the relief that practically drowned him. Before the moment could get more chick-flicky than he’d already made it, Dean pulled away.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself for coming clean, when Bobby emptied a bottle of holy water straight across his face.

Dean blinked through the water at the man. He spit a mouthful of purified water to the side. When the hell had he even pulled out his flask? “I’m not a demon, Bobby.”

His half-assed shrug was utterly unapologetic. “Sounded like a better option than time travel.”

Dean was spared from answering as the light in the room suddenly dimmed dramatically, despite the late afternoon sun outside that should be shining in. Before either man could move to the window to figure out what the hell had happened to the sun, smoke slammed into the house from all sides as dozens of formless demons barraged the Singer home out of nowhere.

The two hunters stumbled into the center of the room, avoiding Meg’s

body as demons attacked the remaining warding of the house in a three hundred and sixty degree arc around them. The building shook under the assault, groaning at the structural stressors. Picture frames rattled on the walls and books vibrated right off their shelves.

Dean glanced at Bobby, eyes wide. "Holy crap."

The wards held as the demons collided against them again and again, disembodied voices screaming. Bobby met Dean's wide eyes with confusion and panic of his own. He had disabled only the minimal amount of protection needed to let Meg in, but even that was enough to seriously weaken what remained to protect the house. And under this level of assault, the rest weren't going to hold for long.

Bobby reloaded and cocked his shotgun. Dean swiped the Colt off the desk, but he wasn't even sure what to shoot at. Would the colt disable the wards if he shot through them? The thing was supposed to kill *everything,* right? Smoke swirled violently outside the study's window, pulsing with each push.

"What the hell is this?" Bobby asked, spinning continuously at each new bang and rattle, coming from every wall. It was a true siege, a barrage against his home from dozens of formless demons. He'd never seen anything like it.

The house started shaking.

It wasn't the same hits and rattling the demons were inflicting on the old structure as they fought the remaining wards to get inside the house. No, this was new and in addition, like they needed more to deal with. First it was just the floor, trembling minutely and quickly growing until the tremors were climbing up the walls and the building rumbled and quaked until the hunters could barely keep their feet beneath them.

Dust and bits of plaster rained down on the two hunters as a crack suddenly split through Bobby's ceiling, cutting straight through the devil's trap painted on the ceiling.

And then it was gone. The shaking stopped abruptly with a final shove; the demons pushed off the walls of the house and vanished with a scream. Dean bolted for the window, pulling back the curtains. A writhing ball of black smoke was flying away to the east at impossible speeds, disappearing from visual range in seconds.

Dean looked back at the older hunter.

What. The. Hell.

Bobby, eyes bulging, could only shrug helplessly.

The silence in the house seemed deafening, and with it came the realization that he had left his brother and father in the panic room. Shouting Sam's name, Dean took off for the basement, Bobby hot on his heels.

"We're here!"

The response immediately eased the tightness in his chest before he threw open the door and spotted his brother at the bottom of the basement stairs. Sam was holding John up with an arm slung over his shoulders. Their dad looked shaken but alive.

"We're okay."

Dean took the stairs two at a time to help his little brother get their father back upstairs. He spared a glance at Sam, who met his gaze with the same expression.

"What happened?"

"Not a friggin' clue," Dean shook his head. "Meg showed early. She brought a bunch of bodiless demons with her. They took off like bats outta hell after she ate a bullet from the Colt. You?"

Sam blinked in surprised, having not been privy to the siege upstairs or been able to discern the shaking in the dream for the shaking in the waking world. He shrugged as they hefted their dad up the first steps. "No clue, either. The Baku just…disappeared in a bright light. Then we woke up."

"Well that's anticlimactic," Dean grumbled, causing Sam to send a prize-winning bitchface his way.

"Sure wasn't anticlimactic for those of us still stuck in it," he sniped back, though there wasn't much heat in it so Dean didn't bother feeling guilty about leaving his kid brother and father to face the Baku alone. It wasn't exactly like Cas had given him a choice.

So he didn't take the bait, instead helping Sammy get their dad up the rest of the stairs without further comment. He could tell his brother wasn't telling the whole truth; the smeared blood across his upper lipped suggested a hell of a lot more, but Dean didn't push. At least

not yet.

He caught Bobby's eyes as they made it to the landing. Yeah, it wasn't exactly like he was telling the whole truth either. At least…not yet.

-o-o-o-

John was out as soon as they'd finished the warding circle around the couch in the study. It was unclear how much damage the Baku did down there, but he was coherent enough to be his usual grumpy self, insisting he was fine despite being unable to stay upright on his own for more than half a second.

Dean watched him from the kitchen, arms crossed and leaning against the doorway. Sam checked the warding again, referring back to the book in his hand again and again to make sure he got it right. Neither of them knew if the Baku had been killed in the explosion of light Sam described, and Dean couldn't draw any firm conclusions while his brother obviously left out a chunk of the story.

A chunk he suspected was the cause of that explosion and came from the demon blood flowing through the kid. His hand twitched with the urge to lock his brother in the panic room and sweat it out of him until he was sure he was still the Sam he knew.

"He'll be okay now," Sammy said as he set the book on one of the practically empty bookshelves and crossed the room to stand beside his brother. "Nothing should get through that circle."

Dean nodded. Too bad they hadn't done that to start with. Too bad John didn't check his messages or rely on his sons for fucking help when he needed it. Too bad Bobby hadn't called them when their dad first showed up. Too bad Sammy couldn't leave his powers well enough alone and listen to Dean when he told him not to do something. Too bad Dean had fucked everything up to start with, coming back to the past like he thought he could change anything.

The hunter pushed off the wall, tension filling every line of his body. His brother let him go. He moved over to the devil-trapped center of the room, where Bobby was wrapping the dead girl up in a sheet. He knelt down, helping the older hunter with the last of the ties.

"Her family will never know what happened," he muttered angrily, guilt eating at his insides for getting some poor kid killed.

Bobby looked at the hunter, and opted out of telling him it wasn't his

fault. He knew the boy too well, and those words would fall on deaf ears when he was like this. Together, the two grabbed the girl and hefted her off the ground.

"I know some people." The two headed for the yard, pushing the screen door open and letting it clang behind them. "They'll make sure she's found without it tracing back to us."

Dean nodded, feeling marginally better that her family wouldn't live the rest of their lives wondering what had happened to their precious daughter. Wondering if she was still alive, out there living a nightmare.

"We're gonna have a talk about that DeLorean, you know."

Dean didn't meet the hunter's eyes, but after a moment he nodded anyway. They set the girl down in the bed of one of Bobby's trucks. It was out of view of visitors, and she'd have to stay there until these people Bobby knew could come pick her up.

It didn't sit well with the guilt-ridden man, but there wasn't much else they could do.

"Maybe you and Sam ought to stay here a while. Recharge. You two probably need as much sleep as your daddy, at this point."

Dean met his surrogate father's eyes, and saw the concern there clear as day. Sure, there were questions too, but Bobby didn't ask them. Not yet, at least, and Dean almost sagged with the relief of it.

"Sure, Bobby. Sounds good."

-o-o-o-

Dean went back into the study as Bobby made the call to his cleanup crew. Sam was putting books back on their shelves, occasionally glancing over to their sleeping father for any signs the Baku had come back. Dean started with the bloodstain on the old wood floors, at least until Bobby came back in, spotted him, and told him to give it up and move the carpet back in place atop it. Wouldn't be the first hidden stain in the house.

Sam waited until the grumbling hunter ambled into the kitchen to take stock of the damage before he glanced in his brother's direction, finally asking, "What happened back there?"

Dean didn't answer, dragging the rug back to the center of the room one handed, using the grunts of effort as cover for his silence. Sam let it be until the devil-trapped carpet was back in place, desk and chairs atop it like it had never been moved.

"Dean."

"Back where?" the man from the future parried, despite knowing exactly what his brother was asking.

Sam spared him a look before going back to his librarian duties. "In the dream. You disappeared."

His brother shrugged defensively, starting to pick up the papers, books, and scattered items he'd sent flying with his desk vault earlier. "Guess I got kicked out early."

The Stanford student thought that was weird. He was pretty sure it wasn't the whole story, not by the way Dean wasn't looking at him. But it was hard to tell, given that every line of his brother's body was filled with anger and pain and guilt, so much so that Sam couldn't tell where all of it was coming from.

Yes, Garth and Caleb were dead because of them, as was a young girl they didn't even know the name of. Yes, demons had showed up in an unprecedented frontal attack unlike anything they'd ever seen, and Yellow Eyes was recruiting monsters to do his dirty work.

But they'd saved their dad, Bobby was alive and okay, and Meg was dead. The amount of guilt and self-loathing radiating off his brother wasn't adding up.

Besides, given the differences in their build and weight, Sam should have burned through the Dream Root faster than Dean, if one of them was going to. Then again, given what his brother could eat in a single sitting, along with the fact he didn't exercised outside of a hunt yet never gained a pound…. Yeah, metabolism like that could have made up for the difference in their body weights.

But Sam was pretty sure the Dream Root had nothing to do with his brother leaving dreamland early.

-o-o-o-

John slept through the dinner the three hunters ordered in that night. None of them felt exactly like cooking and pizza was easy. Sam

retreated after a couple slices, leaving his brother and surrogate father to finish the rest of the box and head out for the hospital. They'd splinted Dean's arm, but it was definitely broken and would need a cast. The stubborn bastard insisted it could wait till morning, at least until Sam reminded him if it started to set at all then they'd have to re-break it.

So Dean and Bobby headed out for a long night sitting in the ER waiting room of the nearest hospital while Sam stayed behind for a long night of his own, waking John up every hour or two to make sure the Baku had not returned. Dean had been more than reluctant to leave his brother in a house recently and unexplainably sieged by demons trying to bring the entire structure down. But hours after the attack, they hadn't returned.

It was a mystery that did not sit well with the man from the future.

Best the boys could figure, the demons had been trying to free Meg, only to realize she was dead and bounce as fast as possible. Bobby reasoned the Baku had probably split at the siege. Not even monsters wanted to be surrounded by demons. The white light explosion could have been the Baku's power shattering and John waking up.

None of it lined up completely, but it was the best they got.

Sam collapsed in the armchair he'd dragged over near the couch by his father's head. All he wanted to do was sleep for a week, or at least until the next "wake dad up" alarm went off on his phone, but he couldn't just yet.

Digging through his bag, he pulled out the notebook once more. It was still folded open to the scribbled notes on angels. He'd have to dig into Bobby's extensive lore as soon as he had a chance. But for now, he had other things to look into.

Sam thought back to that dream world, when he'd first found Dean standing in the darkness. The older hunter had been unsure of where he was, confused when his brother showed up, and even more so when Sam had reminded him that they were there to find Dad.

But more importantly, he had looked a good ten years older.

Sam ran a hand down his face and blew his hair out of his eyes. He put the tip of his pen to paper, but hesitated. It was crazy. He must be crazy. But so was his brother looking a decade older than he should. So was Dean realizing it and slamming up mental walls with

such strength and conviction that he'd suddenly looked the right age again in the blink of an eye, and hadn't slipped again for the rest of the dream. Not even when the Baku started feeding on his nightmares and generating things and people Sam had never seen: nightmares he didn't know his brother had.

Sam stared down at the page with notes about angels and theories on demon blood.

Dean knew things he shouldn't. He acted different; heavier and older. He said things that Sam didn't understand, made references to hunts he'd never heard of, and knew what would happen next with a confidence not even psychic dreams could explain. Sam knew it was his brother and not some imposter, but he hadn't been able to explain how it wasn't the brother he knew, time and time again for the last six months.

Then there was the kid that had shown up in Dean's dream. A young boy that had made his brother look heart broken, yet happy enough to cry. Sam had suspicions on who that boy must be, but it didn't make sense. The woman had been older too, far older than his twenty-seven year old brother, and Dean had never been much for older woman.

And the boy, Ben, had been at least ten. Too old to be Dean's son. At least, not yet.

Sam put the pen to paper once more, scribbling down two words and underlining them several times with hard, firm marks and no more hesitation.

Time travel?

Chapter 23: Season 1: Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Time for some long overdue talks! First up, John Friggin' Winchester!

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 22

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean descended the stairs of Bobby's house with an aching body, rubbing at the grit in his eyes still left over from the meager amount of sleep he'd gotten the night before. He and the older hunter had been in the ER for four hours after an already long and painful day. Through bleary eyes, Dean eyed the heavy cast securing his broken ulna from mid-palm to elbow and currently sitting pretty in a sling.

He wouldn't even be wearing the annoying thing, except Bobby would kick his ass if he didn't and the older hunter was surely already up and in the kitchen. So sling it was.

Awesome.

The hunter lowered his useless arm back to his chest and hit the bottom of the stairs, only to draw up short. He could partially see into Bobby's study through the same door Meg had charged him yesterday. The desk was all back in order, or, you know, as much order as Bobby's desk was ever in: covered in books, loose papers, old artifacts, and the odds and ends of spell components.

John was awake, standing in front of the far side of the desk, inspecting something he held reverently in his hands. Dean's grip on the railing tightened as he realized his father was staring at the Colt. Dean had left the gun on Bobby's desk last night, within reach of his brother in case those demons showed back up or God knows what else attacked.

Now Sammy was asleep upstairs and their dad was staring at the gun that would kill Azazel. There was a look in his eye that Dean knew too well, even ten years later.

He took the last step down loudly, purposefully hitting the floor hard

enough to jolt his father out of his thoughts. Clearing his throat, the man from the future crossed into the study, body language defensive. John stared at him, then set the gun back down on the desk.

"Where'd you get it?"

The intensity of Dean's gaze didn't waiver. "Daniel Elkins."

John huffed, shaking his head. He clenched his jaw for a second, angry at the thought of his old buddy having the damn gun that could have ended all of it. He'd had it the whole time. The jaded man ran a hand over his fisted knuckles before forcing himself to let it go. It didn't matter anymore.

"And he just let you have it?" The huff in John's words was disbelief enough.

Dean straightened his shoulders, lifting his chin. "I asked him for it."

His father's head snapped up at that, and Dean kept his chin up. John frowned immediately. There was that man once more, the one from his dream; the one that held a gun to his jaw and fully intended to use it. If the boy hadn't walked through two devil's traps, cut himself with a silver knife, and swallowed a glass of holy water after getting home from an exhausting night at a hospital to find his dad holding a gun on him from the couch…. Well, if it wasn't for all that, John wouldn't have believed it was his Dean standing in front of him.

He still wasn't convinced it was, even if it was human.

"Who told you about it?"

His son's eyes flashed dangerously. "Not you, that's for sure."

John opened his mouth to tell his boy to watch it when the thumping of Sam coming down the stairs halted both of them. His youngest son entered the room, faltering in the doorway at the obvious tension in the room.

"Morning," the sasquatch of a younger brother said a little awkwardly, looking between his brother and father. He glanced at Dean's splinted arm and clenched fists, then John, standing almost possessively close to Bobby's desk. Sam's eyes lowered to the gun sitting atop the surface.

Oh.

"How are you feeling?" He directed the question at their father, attempting to break the pressure building in the small room.

"Better, thanks to you, son." John smiled at his youngest, pride shining in his eyes that made Sam's heart swell. He so rarely got that look from his dad. It was offset, however, by the way John turned back to Dean, gaze immediately hardening. "I'm going to need that gun."

"Not gonna happen, *sir*."

John clenched his fists against the edge of the desk and Sam recognized that expression as the one that usually proceeded his older brother getting hit.

"That gun can kill the thing that murdered your mother!"

Sam took a step forward, but Dean beat him to it as he threw his good arm out angrily. "Yeah, and you're gonna get yourself killed right alongside her!"

The youngest Winchester snapped his eyes to his brother. That didn't sound like speculation or worry. That was the kind of fury Dean used to cover grief. And the look in his eye was enough for Sam to know that Dean wasn't just saying it for the sake of his argument. If he really was from the future… Sam looked back at their dad, as if seeing him for the first time. Suddenly, he really, really hoped he was wrong for once.

John took a physical step back at the verbal slap to his face. Dean had never talked to him like that before, even at his most obstinate. He rallied immediately, straightening up for a good talking to, but his oldest son wasn't done.

"You want to go after the Yellow Eyed Demon, we do it together. Otherwise, tough luck; the Colt's staying with us."

The finality in those words were certainly coming from a man a hell of a lot older and more confident than Dean Winchester had ever been, at least in this timeline. Sam chanced a quick glance at his brother. Dean was going to have to tell him exactly what happened between father and son that broke the good soldier he used to be. Right after he explained that little comment about them losing their dad to Yellow Eyes. Just what the hell was coming down the road that could take down John Winchester and turn his goof-off, insecure, crass brother into this angry, sharp, hurting man before them?

Sam stepped between the two.

"Can we at least make it through breakfast before we try to kill each other?" He almost couldn't believe what he was asking, or that he stood between Dean and John Winchester, trying to diffuse a bomb. Sure, he'd seen his brother and his dad fight before, but to be honest he'd never been the one to break it up. Honestly, he'd rarely needed to. His father and brother were more the 'storm off and cool down' fighters, especially Dean. No, he rarely played the referee; usually, it was Dean standing in those shoes as Sam fought every bone in his body not to tell his father to fuck off and John used every not inconsiderable ounce of his self-discipline not to beat his son into submission.

Yet here they were; Dean looked just as close to punching their dad as John looked ready to give his oldest a good whipping. Things had definitely changed.

"I'd appreciate that." The three men turned at the new, gruff addition to the conversation. Bobby was standing in the doorway to the study, expression one part cautious, six parts annoyed. "And if you're plannin' on destroyin' someone's house – *again* – make it someone else's. I'm too old to be cleaning up after you lot."

With that, the old hunter crossed through the room and headed into the kitchen for coffee and whatever was left in his fridge that could be scrapped together for something resembling breakfast.

He didn't stay to see what kind of ridiculous tension-filled, silent-communication looks the Winchesters exchanged. But he put Dean to work scrambling eggs when he entered the kitchen with a somewhat guilty, if not still stormy expression. Sam was put to clearing the table of old bottles, pizza boxes, and books as soon as he edged in behind his brother. John didn't bother coming to help, instead heading outside to do Lord knew what and letting the door slam on his way out.

Bobby didn't pay him much mind, happier with the company that chose to stay as he barked at Dean that he'd put too much milk in the eggs and snapped at Sam to not be messing up his organized chaos until both of them lost the tension in their shoulders and broke down into bickering between each other, the way family should be.

-o-o-o-

When breakfast was cooked up and divvied between four plates, Sam

grabbed two of them and headed for the back door.

"Leave it, Sam."

The youngest Winchester paused at the screen, turning back into the kitchen to regard his older brother. Sam's face said he didn't want to fight, on either front.

"He's our dad, and he almost died."

The softly spoken words were yet another verbal slap delivered that morning. Dean's expression flashed to something hurt and haunted before he looked away, burying it under self-righteous anger. Sam pushed the door open with his back and slipped into the salvage yard.

-o-o-o-

His dad wasn't hard to find. John hadn't gone far, leaning against the bumper of an '82 Ford pickup that had seen better days. Sam settled against the car beside his father, handing him a plate of scrambled eggs and a couple pieces of buttered toast. It wasn't much, but as Bobby had griped over the stove while cooking it, it wasn't like he had signed up to host breakfast for four people that morning.

John accepted the offering without a word, and Sam started picking meagerly at his own breakfast, trying to remember the speech he'd prepped on his way out here. Everything sounded stupid now, or likely to start a fight.

"That man in there." John shifted against the car, staring at Bobby Singer's house. He glanced over at his youngest, who met his severe gaze with raised eyebrows. "That's not your brother."

Sam stared at his father, eyes darting back and forth between John's, wondering exactly where this conversation was going if not a fight. With a huff, he looked down at the plate in his hands.

"So you noticed that." It wasn't a question. If anything, it might have been sarcasm. The changes in his brother weren't exactly subtle. But God help John Winchester if he suggested Dean was anything but human. Sam knew what this family did to things that weren't human. "It's Dean. Believe me, I checked. It's…a lot's changed, Dad."

John's gaze was no more relaxed; if anything, he looked harsher in the morning light as he stared at his son with a mix of disappointment and anger. "You can't be sure, son. Whoever that is-"

"I'm sure." Sam straightened against the car. "*That* is my brother. You think Bobby would let him walk around his house if it wasn't? You think I would let him into your head? That's Dean. He's just… different."

Because he had apparently traveled back in time an undetermined amount of years and wasn't the Dean they knew at all. And yeah, Sam would be having *that* conversation with his brother just as soon as he figured out how to approach it. Or got over the all-encompassing rage he felt every time he thought about it.

There were a dozen theoretical explanations for his brother not telling him he was a time traveler from the future. Hypothetical paradoxes and metaphysical laws Sam could only hazard at. And if this 'Castiel' had anything to do with it, possibly divine intervention as well. But Sam knew his brother better than Dean knew himself; none of that would matter to him. The only reason Dean Winchester wouldn't tell his kid brother about a secret that big was because he didn't trust him with it – didn't think he could take care of himself in regard to it. Because Sam had been dealing with that Dean Winchester for twenty three years, and a hundred more wouldn't change that about his brother.

Heaven help John Winchester if he dared open his mouth and told Sam his brother was a monster, or anything else. Liar or not, from the future or not, Dean was still his big brother. Of that, he had no doubt.

Lucky for both of them, John changed the subject. "That gun. That how you kept your girl safe?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah. We came to…an arrangement with the Yellow Eyed Demon."

His dad huffed in disbelief, but it was relatively non-judgmental for the bitter hunter, so Sam tried not to jump down his throat for it. It took more effort than he was willing to admit.

"He tell you how he got it?"

The young hunter shook his head. He was pretty sure 'he asked for it' wouldn't go over any better the second time. Not to mention, he still had trouble believing it himself.

Beside him, John was shaking his head angrily. "Daniel wouldn't even tell me he had it. How the hell did your brother know about it?"

Twenty four hours ago, Sam would have jumped on that in the blink of an eye. Dean had definitely told him their dad was the one to mention the Colt. To be honest, though, he'd known that was bull in the same breath Dean first said it. John Winchester didn't share things, alcohol-induced or not.

Now, Sam was pretty sure Dean learned about the gun from entirely different circumstances. Of course, that wasn't something he was about to share with his father. So he shrugged.

"Dean knows a lot of things he doesn't tell me."

"That gun could end it, Sammy." John locked that harsh, imploring gaze on him once more. Any softness that might have been present in any other widowed father was absent in the face of the revenge and anger that was John Winchester. "It could kill the thing that killed your mother."

Sam looked away. So that's how it was going to be. John Winchester disappeared for almost a year, refused to answer their calls or show up when they needed him most, and now expected Sam to turn on his brother, the one person who had been there for him the last half year. Through Jess and her family, the yellow eyed demon and Meg, the demon blood….Dean had stayed beside him through it all.

Damn. He really hadn't come out here to start a fight.

"I think it's bigger than one demon, Dad," he protested quietly, trying one last ditch effort to keep the train from crashing. Knowing him and his father, it was an inevitable outcome. His grip on the forgotten plate of breakfast was only tightening, despite his best efforts.

He could still see Yellow Eyes standing half a dozen feet away, the ice cold grip of the colt in his hand, the pressure of its muzzle flush against his skull. He could still feel the pulsing in his vein, begging him to do it, to kill the thing that had ruined his life, that had tried to take Jess away from him, for nothing more than a damn game.

Did John think he didn't want the demon just as dead? Jess's life was riding on them ending this. His future with her was riding on it. God, he had wanted nothing more than to shoot that bastard right between his horrid yellow eyes.

But it hadn't been about him. This couldn't be just about him. That was something John Winchester would never be able to act on. This was still about revenge for the jaded man, no matter how he tried to

color it with honor or justice.

Sam looked back at his father in the face of his silence, only to stop at the sight of the man looking back at him. He could see it. He could see it in the lines of sorrow around his father's eyes, the crease in his brow, the way his hardened gaze had turned more desperate than angry.

John Winchester god damn knew this was bigger than one demon, and still he was asking for that gun. Still, he was leaving his sons behind and cutting them out of the biggest decision of their lives.

"Did he say anything to you?"

Sam looked away from his father. The man already knew the answer. He'd known all along.

A terrifying numbness overcame him as he gripped at the edges of the plate in his hand, food all but forgotten. His dad was asking about the confrontation with Jess, but all Sam could see was that muddy parking lot. The taste of copper climbed up his throat and spilled into his mouth. He turned away from his father, trying to keep the bile from rising. Hastily, he placed the plate on the hood of the car with a clatter. A piece of toast fell off, sliding onto the metal.

He didn't want to admit it out loud – not to John Winchester, who had no room for grey in his black and white world. Not to his hunter father, who drew the line in life between human and everything else. Right now, Sam didn't know where he existed on that line, not anymore. He really didn't want to know where his father would put him either.

The college kid swallowed, finally turning back and leaning against the truck in a parody of normal that hurt his soul. He clenched his hands in fists. He didn't want to lie. Lying was all the Winchesters seemed to do to each other, and he was sick of it. He refused to be a part of it any longer.

"You first."

He looked back up at his father, mustering every ounce of his anger, every ounce of betrayal and fear, and forced it into strength and resolve. John watched the boy before him and wondered, with no small amount of pride, when the kid had grown up.

"I don't know much," he conceded, taking a deep breath of the cool

morning air as he turned his eyes up to the blue sky, dotted with clouds. He and his youngest had never been on the same page. Hell, most of the time they weren't even in the same book. They lived in two very different worlds, both unable to cross into the other's understanding. But what that demon had done to him…That was on John. It was a father's job to protect his children, to protect his wife. And he'd failed them all.

Damn, it had hurt to learn it. He'd suspected something for a while, but the confirmation of finding another kid that bastard had touched, of hearing his parents talk about the night, about the blood… He glanced back at his son, at the boy with the demon blood who was destined to kill, if that demon had any say in it. The kid would never know how badly John wanted to spare him that, how desperate he was to kill the monster before he could dig his claws in any deeper.

"He…. He did something to you as a kid," he finally admitted, unsure how to best say it. If confirming it had hurt, telling Sammy was a thousand times worse.

"He bled in my mouth."

John's gaze snapped to his son's and he had no words for the surprise blanking his mind. How had Sam- had the demon told him? Why would Yellow Eyes do that, what advantage could it possibly give him?

His dad's silence was reaction enough. Sam shoved himself off the car, anger eating at every inch of him even as he fought it back.

He really hadn't come out here for a fight.

"You knew," he bit the words out with enough venom to make John Winchester flinch. He spun back on him. "How long?"

"Sammy-"

"How. Long."

John couldn't keep his son's gaze, looking down at his hands. "Not long. I suspected something for a while, but I didn't know what he really did to you until…about a month ago."

Even angry, Sam's mind never stopped, and he connected the dots easily enough. "When he came after you with the Baku.

The vein under his dad's ear ticked as he worked his jaw, remembering too easily the close calls he'd had the past couple of weeks, culminating with the Baku. "Guess I was getting too close."

He looked up at his youngest, who was standing with a wide stance, squared shoulders, and clenched fists. Like a caged animal, Sam seemed a moment away from blowing up.

"I'm closing in, Sammy. The fact he's coming after me is proof I'm getting to him. I'm close, son. With that gun-"

It was the final push that John Winchester never could see coming when it came to his youngest. Sam, sick of his father seeming to only care about his revenge over everything – over his own well-being, over the inclusion of his sons, over the lives they were trying to lead – finally exploded.

"You're not the only one invested in this, you know!" He took a step towards John, who stood from the truck, knowing the sharp lines of a man about to throw a punch. Sam stopped himself at the single step, but he knew the anger coursing through his veins wouldn't be held off a second time. "Jess's life, my life, Dean's life – we've all got something in this, Dad. It can't be about revenge anymore!"

"You think that's what this is?" John countered, voice raising to match Sam's. "You think stopping that yellow eyed bastard is just about avenging your mother?"

"If it isn't, then why the hell aren't you letting Dean and me in? We can help, dad, we have always been able to help. It's what you *trained* us for! Let us!"

John turned away from his boy, frustration clear in the taut muscles of his back. "It's too dangerous, I told you that-"

"Bullshit! I am so sick of you and Dean trying to protect me. You dragged me all over the country, raised me like a soldier, made me murder things before I was old enough to drive. I learned how to stab a werewolf in the heart before I learned about the damn birds and the bees, Dad."

John spun back around, face reddening in the face of yet another round of the same argument he'd had a thousand times with his stubborn, bleeding heart of a son. "It isn't murder. I have told you-"

"It is murder! We *kill* things, some of them just trying to survive!"

"*Evil* things!"

"Who are we to decide that?" Sam shook his head, jaw clenched. "We don't get to play God just because a demon killed your wife or my mom."

John's fists shook at his side as he loomed before his boy, despite the good half foot Sam had on him. "You watch your tone with me, boy."

"I'm not a boy," Sam bit back, matching his father's anger and intimidation step for step. "And I'm done taking orders from you."

He spun towards the house, stalking back with blood still boiling. He hadn't hit his dad, though, so that was better than some of their previous fights, at least.

"Don't you turn your back on me, Samuel!"

Of course, there was still time.

"Like you turned your back on us?" He spun on his heel, standing ground like he always had and always would against his old man. "I was *dying*. Where were you? We *needed* you, in Lawrence, in Palo Alto. So many times in the last six months. But you left us. You don't get to change that now that we have something you want. You want that gun, you want Yellow Eyes? Then you can hunt him with us. But it's Dean's gun, Dean's show. I've got nothing else to say to you."

He turned back to the house.

"Alright."

The soft admission drew him up after only a few angry steps, and he glanced back at his dad. "What?"

John, staring at the ground, shuffled uncomfortably. He raised his gaze to meet his son's, and Sam could count on one hand the times he'd seen his dad look so damn regretful. "I said alright, son. It's Dean's show."

The young hunter narrowed his eyes at the easy concession, hardly willing to trust something so simple. Not when it came to John Winchester.

"I don't like it," his dad added, and there was a hint of the miffed soldier beneath the honest-to-God father in his expression. "But I get

it. I wasn't there for you boys when I should have been..."

Sam didn't move, still not daring to believe the utter one eighty. John shook his head with a heavy sigh and settled back against the old pickup. He looked damn tired, almost as tired as he'd been in Sam's first vision of him and the Baku.

"You gotta understand somethin'," he began, rubbing his palm over his thigh roughly. "When your mother…passed, all I saw was evil. Everywhere. And all I cared about was keeping you boys safe – *alive*."

John nodded his head, though it hung heavy with the movement. "So, yes, I trained you. Hard. I wanted you prepared. Ready. Somewhere along the line I….I stopped being your father. I became your drill-sergeant. And when you wanted to go to school…" John huffed a breath, shaking his head side to side. "I never could accept that you and me…we're just different."

Sam stared at his dad, at the first confession he'd ever heard that they hadn't had an ideal childhood. The first time his hard-as-granite father tried to understand his world. It didn't look like it was any easier on his father than he imagined it would be.

"We're not that different," the young hunter all but whispered, a bitter grimace stretching his lips. "If Jess…if the demon had gotten to her…I think we'd be exactly the same."

It was a cold, painful confession, but one he knew was true. He had no doubt that if the yellow eyed demon had taken her away from him, like he had taken Mary away from John, he would have done anything to hunt him down and kill him, without mercy.

John lifted his head to stare at his son, eyes starting to water despite his multiple attempts to blink away the evidence. "That evil is still out there, Sammy. And it's after you now. If we can just end it…I can keep you safe, like I couldn't that night…"

The young Winchester couldn't help but see it from his father's perspective, couldn't help but empathize with the father and husband, still grieving the loss of his wife and his children's innocence. It didn't make it right, didn't fix all the wrongs, and certainly didn't change the fact that it was John Winchester who had cost his sons their childhoods, not a demon. But Sam could still sympathize with the haggard, tired figure in front of him, in a way he rarely had in his lifetime.

"It's not your job to save me from him, Dad. It's not your fault, either." Sam commented softly, the anger draining from him as quickly as it had set in. "It won't end with him."

"I know…I know, I can't-" John had to look away, fisting his hand in the material of his jeans like it was that was grounding him. "I can't see any further right now, son. It has to end with him, because otherwise I don't know what to do."

Sam crossed the space between them to resettle against the truck beside his father. "We'll face it, together. One obstacle at a time. We can do this, dad, we'll use the gun together, and then we tackle whatever comes next. We can end it, as a *family*."

His dad stared at him with as close to pride as Sam had ever seen in his father's eyes. That look was usually saved for Dean, and the young hunter had mixed emotions suddenly seeing it now. But John nodded and dropped his gaze. He didn't agree or make any promises, which didn't escape Sam's notice, but he didn't fight anymore either.

Father and son sat in a rare peace in the South Dakota morning sun, and John soon asked him about Jess. Sam's anger and worries were almost forgotten as he tried not to gush about the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, and who he still hoped to one day marry. The smile on his dad's face was one he'd never forget.

-o-o-o-

Bobby waited till he was sure Sam was out of earshot before he pinned Dean with a look.

"Alright, spill it, Future Boy."

The boy spared him a half-assed glare of his own before shifting, uncomfortable, in the kitchen chair. He glanced at the back door, then Bobby, then the door again.

"Not now. They could come back any minute, alright?"

Bobby shook his head. "That's your brother and father out there, son. You know sure as I do we'll hear the end of that conversation long before they make it to the door."

Dean shifted again, but couldn't argue the truth of it. Bobby leaned across the table, elbows supporting his weight as he regarded his surrogate son with a stare he couldn't avoid any longer,

"So spill."

Dean pealed at the label of an old beer bottle while Bobby sat across from him in silence, growing ever more impatient with each tick of the kitchen clock. Finally, he rolled his eyes with a huff, climbed up from his chair, and crossed over to the fridge. He returned with two beers in hand, clunking one down pointedly in front of his surrogate son.

When he sat down across from the man again and still only silence filled the space in front of them, he cleared his throat. "You waiting on a Christmas card, or something?"

"I don't know where to start." The confession was immediate, but quiet. Bobby had to take a moment to appreciate the gravity of the situation in front of him. His kid, the loud mouthed boy he'd helped raise from training wheels all the way up to shotguns, not knowing what to say. His time-traveling, snarky ass boy.

Bobby dragged his hat from his head, ran a hand through his thinning hair, and took a deep breath. When exactly had he become a damn den mother?

"The beginnin's usually a sound place," the older hunter snarked. Catching his surrogate son's expression – half glare, half pained grimace – he sobered. "Maybe start with whatever climbed up your butt concerning your daddy."

"Thanks for the mental image, Bobby." Dean's look definitely turned more glare. But he set the beer aside with a deep breath. "He lied – *is* lying – about…almost everything. He knew about Azazel, about what he did to Sam and the demon blood-"

"Demon blood?" The look on Bobby's face clearly said he was already regretting starting this conversation. Dean had half a mind to shove it in his face, because *yeah*.

Instead, the elder Winchester closed his eyes, counted to ten (it didn't help), sat back and settled an intense gaze on his friend and father. "Six months ago, an angel sent me back in time from the year 2016."

Bobby, who had sort of hoped this was all still some weird joke or a really bad joke, blew out a long breath. He went for the beer he hadn't bothered opening for himself, popped the top and took a long, hardy swallow. He cleared his throat awkwardly when he'd finished, his son still staring at him. The hunter shrugged awkwardly in the face of that

foreign, intense gaze. "Balls."

Dean couldn't help it, he shook his head as his face broke into a grin. "That's all you gotta say? I just told you I traveled back in time ten years!"

"What do you want me to say?" Bobby repeated his awkward shrug. "You know who wins the Super Bowl?"

The younger hunter full on laughed that time. Leave it to Bobby Singer, father of idjits, to greet his first time traveler with the severity appropriate to the situation. There were many reasons Dean thought of this man as more of a dad than his own. The thought – the reminder of both deaths to come, one significantly sooner than the other – sobered him damn quick.

The change of mood in the kitchen wasn't hard to catch on to, and Bobby set his beer back on the table. "Alright. I want all of it. Don't sugar coat it."

Dean caught his gaze, frowning.

"Start at the top, ya idjit. Lay it out for me." Bobby stood from the table. "I'll get some paper, we'll write it down and…I don't know. Figure it out, I guess."

The man from the future stared up at his friend with the same awe he'd always felt in the tenacious, older hunter's presence. He had to blink away the water in his eyes as he realized how much he'd missed that man. Damn emotions. Instead, he grinned up Bobby, the man he went to when he had to talk to someone, to work things out, to be less alone. The surrogate father who had been just as inaccessible these past six months as he had been for the last four years. Far too long, in either case.

"Man, Bobby, I missed you." He said it with a light chuckle and a sip of his beer. The heavy, awkward silence that followed clued Dean in before he'd finished swallowing. Bobby was staring at him with shell-shocked eyes and a slack jaw. Dean almost choked on his beer when he caught the look, realizing what he'd said.

Shit.

Bobby's jaw clacked shut. "I don't wanna know."

He turned into the study to fetch that paper, shaking his head and

repeating it more for his own sake. "I don't want to know."

-o-o-o-

When he sat back down, legal pad and pen in hand, Dean cleared his throat awkwardly and tried to assuage the ten year expiration date he'd just inadvertently informed his father figure of. "It's not gonna happen this time."

Bobby pinned him with a look he had seen few times. It quelled monsters and Winchesters alike; few dared speak in the face of it. "I don't. Want. To know."

Dean nodded and went back to chugging the last of his beer. He had a feeling there would be several more before this conversation was over.

Chapter 24: Season 1: Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Quick Reminder: For anyone who hasn't read the prologue to this in a while, I wrote it as an AU to the Season 11 ending, where Amara was losing the fight but pretty much everyone was already dead. It comes up in this chapter, hence the reminder, so no one is confused when Dean says it.

Chapter Warnings: More talking! Time to catch Bobby up on everything that's coming. Well, everything accept maybe that selling his soul bit. Okay, and the releasing Lucifer part. And probably the losing Sam to the cage bit...Maybe he'll just tell Bobby the next five years are super peachy. Everything's fine, nothing to see there.

Actual Chapter Warning: It's been eons since I mentioned in a warning that this story is Slash (Destiel). As you may have noticed, it's just about the slowest burn ever. And even when we do get there, I'm not much of a romance writer. I like a good romance subplot, but I'm action first and foremost. So it'll always be a nice added bit, but never the main focus. Anyhoo, we FINALLY have our first teeny tiny itsy bitsy mention of pre-slash destiel. Lol. Figured I'd be super cautious and warn you all about it anyway.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 23

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"So…"

The two sat awkwardly as Bobby tapped the pen against the legal pad and Dean stared at his beer as if everything could be blamed on the poor bottle of suds.

"Angels?"

God, Dean did not want to have this conversation. No matter how well Bobby was handling it, talking about what was coming meant dredging up so many bad memories. Memories that the hunter now

felt he was pretty much damned to relive. Dean glanced up and, with a monumental effort of sucking it up, straightened from his abysmal slouch in the chair. "Yeah. Angels."

"Let me guess. Cass?"

The hunter raised his eyebrows, but didn't look too surprised.

"Sam had me looking into him," Bobby explained with a shrug. Which, yeah, Dean had sort of figured. "Can't say I'd have ever gotten to angels on nothing more to go on than black hair and blue eyes."

Dean practically choked, coughing around the mouthful of beer as he hacked at his chest. "What? H-how?"

Bobby looked torn between answering and making sure the kid wasn't about to swallow his own esophagus, giving him plenty of time to realize the answer on his own. Missouri Mosley. She was the only one who could have glimpsed Cas from his head. Damn that woman. But of course, it was probably his genius little brother who'd put it together, asked the right questions, and refused to let it drop without answers.

"That kid," he muttered, ever amazed by his brother's tenacity.

"Tell me about it," Bobby chucked out in agreement. "So, this 'Cass'… He one of the good guys?"

"Uh….yeah." Dean cleared his throat, pulling his thoughts away from his brother. "Castiel, holy tax accountant of the Lord. He might have started on the wrong side of things but…yeah, he's one of the good guys."

"Tax accountant?" It was Bobby's turn to stare at him with raised eyebrows.

Dean let out a laugh, taking a swig from his beer. "He was a total nerd angel."

The older hunter didn't miss the bitterness that filled that chuckle, or the way that despite the evident pain in his boy's face, Dean was still smiling almost nostalgically at the thought of this Castiel. It was damn weird to see the boy who followed in his father's black and white footsteps get that kind of look on his face talking about something very much not human.

"'Was'?"

The smile on his face dropped pretty quickly, and Bobby almost felt bad about it. There was something about this Dean, this kid from the future, that made the older hunter wonder just how often he got to smile in his world.

"Yeah." Dean's eyes strayed down to the bottle in his hands and stayed there, though it was obvious from the pained glaze in them that he was seeing anything but Bobby Singer's kitchen. "He was hurt pretty bad when he sent me back. I don't think- I don't know if he made it."

It was the truth, too. Every time Cas popped up in his dreams, at the lake or pulling him out to save Bobby, Dean was sure. He was *sure* that at least some part of the angel had made it back in time with him. But there was no consistency – the guy didn't come when Dean called for him, *begged* for him. The hunter went to sleep praying to dream and usually got nothing. He more often showed back up when Dean or Sammy or Bobby were in danger, but even that was inconsistent. The guy just seemed to pop up randomly.

If that jackass was pulling another 'stay away to protect you/lead a normal life/it's not my place' crap move, Dean was going to have serious words when he finally caught the bastard.

"You got something making you think he did?" Dean glanced back at Bobby, distracted by his own thoughts. The confusion on his face was must have been clear enough for the old hunter to add, "You said you weren't sure. Could he have made the jump with you? Not that I know how *time travel* works but…did you need a co-pilot?"

Dean swallowed, dropping his eyes again. God, he didn't *want* to have this conversation! His first thought was Cas would have made the jump if he could have; he wouldn't have left him alone in this. But… was that even right?

They hadn't exactly been on great terms before the end, and Cas had picked up that nasty martyr complex from the Winchester boys pretty damn quickly. Stay behind, hold them off. He'd been doing that well before two human hunters tried to teach him humanity and royally screwed it up several times over.

Back in that graveyard, he had been hurt bad – how bad, Dean couldn't be sure – but he'd seen the look in his eye, known that final good luck that was really goodbye. It was entirely possible Cas just didn't have the juice to do more than send him back. His grace

shredded, possibly on lockdown from Lucifer, all but a step away from mortal before it all started….

The last time he'd been that weak, sending Dean and Sam back had been ugly and left him laid up for days. To be truthful, Dean had been working pretty hard avoiding thinking about it. About what that same act would cost the angel when you added 'fatal wound' to the equation.

He cleared his throat. "I've been seeing him. In, uh…in dreams."

"Yer psychic dreams?"

Dean pinned Bobby with a look that said don't push it. The old man new damn well those dreams had been a cover the entire time, if that sarcastic comment was anything to go by. Not that Dean could blame him, given how much lying he'd been doing to his family lately.

"Sam's dreams a lie too?"

"No, he's really having visions. Azazel's causing them." Dean scrubbed at his face and ended up burying his head in his hand, propped up on the kitchen table. How the hell was he going to explain all of this? There was just too much.

"One step at a time, son. Go back to yer angel."

"He's not *my* angel," the elder Winchester quipped back. "Why does everyone always call him that?"

Bobby wisely declined to answer, though the smile on the kid's face the first time he brought him up and the devastation he carried all over him when talking about his death seemed pretty damn conclusive to him and, he suspected, everyone else.

Dean Winchester, closet gay for an Angel of the Lord. Well alright then.

"He used to show up in my dreams when he needed to talk. Or if he couldn't find me." Dean said it like he knew how crazy it sounded, how crazy all of this sounded. Bobby tried really hard not to react with the appropriate level of crazy that this all really, really was.

"Right." Okay, so there was at least some judgement there, despite his best attempts. When Dean leveled a look at him, he cleared his throat and moved on. "What makes you think it ain't him, then?"

"Because I'm pretty sure he's dead," the man from the future answered bitterly. "Time travel…he did it once before, when he was weak. Bobby, it almost killed him. He was spitting up blood for days."

Dean shook his head at the memory of the angel popping back into existence hours after he should have, spouting red and genuine surprise to still be alive. "Besides, it's not…it's not the Cas I know. It's like…a memory of him."

At his friend's confused look, he clarified, "He was always awkward as hell with pop culture, references, stuff like that. You know, basically humanity. But he was getting there. Even started binging Netflix."

Bobby frowned. "What's Netflix?"

Dean stared at him for only a moment. "Son of a bitch." He pointed his beer bottle at the confused hunter. "The past *sucks*, you know that?"

When Bobby gave him the stink eye at his unhelpfulness, he settled down and continued, "Point is, *that* Cas isn't the one showing up in my dreams."

"Who else could it be, then?"

Bobby wasn't trying to cause trouble, Dean knew that, but the question still rankled him. It wasn't anyone. It was his own mind, supplying his lonely, broken self with his best friend. But that….that wasn't right either. Because his own mind couldn't kick him out of his own subconscious when Dream Root had him securely under. It couldn't warn him of impending attacks, either, which Cas had done more than once now. Meg showing up early, that possessed Jehovah's Witness back when they still had Jess with them. He'd woken up shortly before each of them had made an appearance, immediately after a push from the dream angel.

Dean's instincts were good, but they weren't *that* good. Which left a very different version of Castiel as the only possibility. Not that that made much sense either.

"He still exists in this timeline, probably up in Heaven right now. But that Cas doesn't have a clue who I am yet." Dean met Bobby's gaze, the clear confusion in his own eyes hoping someone, anyone, could make sense of all this. "We don't meet for another two, three years. He's definitely not dream-hopping through my noggin."

"But you're seeing him."

"Yeah, but I just told you, it can't be him,"

"Unless he took that DeLorean ride with you." Bobby shrugged. "Maybe some parts got left behind."

Dean didn't answer, staring at the table top. Obviously, the thought had occurred to him enough to break down and pray, to plead for him to answer, to be alive and here, however weak or broken.

Cursed or not.

But he'd gone down that road before, lost the angel so many times and hoped so often he'd be back. He knew what false hope got him, and this time he didn't have Sam to talk him off the ledge of utter reckless stupidity he ran along anytime he lost the two important people he had left. So he was trying really hard not to hope at all.

"What's he saying in these dreams of yers?"

Thankful for the change of subject, however minor, Dean replied, "That I'm changing too much."

Bobby frowned and glanced down at the still blank legal pad sitting in front of him. "What have you changed?"

"Jess is alive." Dean's voice broke halfway through, but he cleared his throat and the two hunters did as all manly men do: they pretended it hadn't happened. Instead, Bobby met his emotional gaze with surprise and so many questions. "Brady killed her that night in Stanford, on Azazel's orders. Burned her on the ceiling, like…like mom."

"Jesus," Bobby breathed out, glancing back down at the paper. His eyes snapped back to the kid. "Sam?"

"Got back into hunting purely on revenge." Dean shook his head. "He was just as bad as dad…angry, reckless….He never saw what was coming. None of us did."

God, Bobby didn't want to know. He really, really didn't want to ask. But if the dread pooling in his stomach was any indication, it was worse for the kid sitting across from him. "And what's coming?"

"The apocalypse."

-o-o-o-

Bobby cleared his throat, chugged half the fresh beer Dean had pulled

from the fridge in the silence that had followed that bombshell, then cleared his throat again. "So…the end of the world. Right. That why yer angel sent you back?"

Dean actually laughed, causing the older hunter's eyebrows to climb right into his receding hairline. "No," he answered with a jaded grin. "Not even close. We beat the apocalypse, and the angels that tried to restart it, and the mother of monsters that came afterwards, and Abbadon, and every other piece of crap life tried to throw at us."

The hunter realized his chest was tight, almost to the point of pain, and he was having trouble taking deep breaths, possibly because he hadn't actually taken one throughout the building rant and accompanying anxiety it came with. God, they were going to have to face that all again. His hand ached where it sat on his thigh in a tightly clenched fist. It took a moment, but he released the tension with a shaky breath. There was so much crap coming, so much he had to stop, and he couldn't even fix the friggin' apocalypse.

Bobby was staring at him again with wide eyes, probably having gotten about a quarter of that vitriol. This was going about as well as he figured it would.

"Alright…" he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What would future Sam do? He was the one good with words. "Let's….let's start from the beginning."

-o-o-o-

The beginning was actually the end in this case.

"So, this darkness, God's *sister*…that's why yer angel sent you back?"

Dean scrubbed at his face. He'd given the old hunter a monumentally minimalistic rundown of Amara breaking free of her binds – conveniently leaving out what exactly her prison had been or just who released it and *how* – and finishing with him and Sam and Cas taking her on alongside God.

He left the whole Lucifer bit out, too. They so weren't ready for that.

"He's not *my* angel. But, yeah. Don't- Don't worry about it, it's not going to happen this time." Bobby raised a brow and Dean couldn't quite look him in the eye at the utter lack of belief there. He tried not to take it personally. Bobby was practical, and always operated with a backup plan. Dean was more of a….edge of the seat, seat of his pants,

plans are for sissies kind of hunter. At least, when he didn't have a plan or a brother to make up a plan, that's how he rolled.

And right now, he didn't have crap amounting to anything close to a plan.

"It's not," he reiterated with some stress on the negative. "But if things go that way – and that's a long way off – I'll tell you everything. I swear."

The old hunter didn't look impressed, but he didn't press it. He was starting to get the feeling that if they covered everything in detail, they'd never get it all down.

"So this darkness was about to win-"

"No, she was gonna lose." Dean could still feel her pain just under his skin. Her anger and, worse, regret. She'd only wanted a family. The love of the those who were supposed to love you. Yeah, she hadn't gone about it the best way, but Dean could relate only too well. "It didn't matter – it was already too late. Sam was gone. Cas was as good as dead. He used the last of what he had to send me back, I think. I don't even know if he meant to go this far."

Because time travel wasn't easy on a drained, hurting angel. Who knew what Cas's intentions had been. To send him back further, before any of it so he could stop all of it, or to drop him exactly where he had. Cas had always known more about the connections of events and the flow of time better than any of them.

Dean had four trips under his belt and still no friggin' clue about that crap, so who was to say Cas hadn't meant to come back with him too. Sure as hell would have been easier if he had.

"And that's ten years from now?"

"Closer to eleven," he answered easily, rubbing a hand through his short hair. He blew out a breath, covered it with a swig of beer, and tried to keep going. "The next, uh…the next five years are what we have to stop, though. The rest of it…. We'll deal with it when we get there."

Again, Bobby didn't look convinced, but didn't push either. He settled back in his chair. "Right. So. The apocalypse?"

-o-o-o-

"Should we go check on them or something? They're too quiet." Dean was standing at the back door, trying to spot his father and brother. They'd heard some yelling, as expected, but then nothing had followed it. No angry Samsqatch stomps, no furious venting from John. Dean was starting to worry they'd actually murdered each other.

"Leave them be and stop puttin' this off." Bobby gave him the stink eye, calling him out on exactly what he was doing. "The apocalypse."

Dean sighed and sat back down.

-o-o-o-

"Azazel wants Sam for *what*?"

Dean stood up and got them another round of beers. Bobby chugged half his in a single go.

-o-o-o-

"So…uh…Lucifer."

"Yeah, Lucifer." Dean muttered, looking down at the tabletop beneath his rough fingertips. He pushed back in his chair, leaning on the back two legs as he raised his gaze to the ceiling. "It's not just him, though. Angels want the showdown too. They aren't going to do dick to stop it."

"Showdown?" Bobby was staring at him. He was getting the feeling that expression was going to be the new norm for a while.

"Michael and Lucifer. Heaven, Hell; the ultimate Deathmatch. Winner takes the planet. Or whatever's left of it."

"…Shit."

"Yeah. I haven't gotten to the best part. Angel's need vessels, like I said. For Lucifer, that's Sam."

"Right, that's why the yellow eyed- why Azazel is prepping him with demon blood." Across from him, Bobby's brow furled. "Who ends up taking Michael to the prom, then?"

Dean just stared at him until the old man got it. It wasn't a pretty reaction when he did.

-o-o-o-

"Back up, boy, you're going too fast." The old hunter grumbled as he scribbled an endless vitriol of death and pain and pure ugliness on his legal pad. They were already several pages deep, about equal to the rounds of beer they'd both had. It helped take the edge of the crazy. Not to mention the insurmountable.

Dean scrubbed at his scalp. "Back up to where, Bobby?"

"The seals. You said there are a butt-ton of them-"

"Six hundred and sixty-six."

"-but you skipped over what that first one was. It has to be popped first, like you said, right? So….we stop that one from breaking, we're scott free, ain't we?"

Dean chewed on his lip, a pretty damn foreign act for him, born out of the very rare, white-knuckled grip his brain was trying to have on his tongue right now. God, why did they have to have this conversation! He blew out a breath.

"Yeah…about that."

-o-o-o-

"You did *WHAT*?!"

"He was *dead*, Bobby! I had to save him!"

"People DIE, boy. It's what HAPPENS."

"Not Sammy. I won't let it."

The room fell silent. Bobby, red faced, stared at the obstinate man in front of him. Dean's fists were clenched around a bottle, eyes threatening the older hunter to push this.

"Balls." Bobby sat back, the wind in his sails depleting with the look in his son's eyes. "You're gonna do it again."

He shook his head when Dean couldn't meet his eye.

"I'm going to stop it," the young man confessed quietly, but with the kind of determination only a Winchester was capable of.

"You gotta let him go, son," Bobby whispered automatically and green eyes glanced briefly up to his. "If it comes to that, if we can't stop it….

Sam wouldn't want you to start the end of the world. To go to hell. Not for him."

"I know," was the only reply he got, muttered almost blankly from a boy who couldn't look him in the eye as he said it. "I know, Bobby."

-o-o-o-

Dean was able to remember a handful of the seals Hell had broken, as most of the battles for those had been fought between angels and demons. Of course, they hadn't learned until later that most of it as a show, with Heaven putting up a good act but purposefully throwing in the towel where it was needed.

Not that it mattered, he'd insisted to the older hunter as Bobby furiously scribbled down what he could from Dean's story. There were so many seals that anything they did to protect them would be futile. Hell would just go after the other seals, even if they were the harder ones to break. And a handful of humans couldn't protect all six hundred of them without Heaven's help, which they weren't going to get.

"All the more reason *not* to let that first one break, boy," Bobby muttered with a purposeful look in the kid's direction. Dean didn't bother answering.

They were just getting through an abridged version of the year after Dean had been pulled from Hell by Castiel, culminating in that horrid night in the church, chasing after his blood-addicted brother, when they heard Sam and John coming back towards the house. Dean's mouth snapped shut tighter than a virgin's legs at an orgy and Bobby spared him a warning look. They were not done talking about this. Not only did the boy have a hell of a story to finish, the old hunter knew he'd left some serious details out, if the guilt-ridden gaze avoiding him several times throughout the hour-long, heavily-truncated tale was anything to go by.

Bobby tucked the legal pad off to the side, hidden beside the multiple landlines labeled for various agencies. The back door opened seconds later.

"Hey," Sam greeted as he came back in, a rare smile on his face after a conversation with his father. Even John seemed somewhat at ease as he came into the kitchen behind his youngest. Sam eyed the kitchen table, littered with a dozen beer bottles. "Uh…little early, guys, don't you think?"

Dean snorted, then wrapped his hand over his mouth and stared moodily down at the table. His brother gave him a weird look – something between concern and the infamous bitchface – before looking at Bobby for a hint. The old hunter just shrugged.

"Been a long week."

Sam huffed in complete disbelief, but the issue was dropped for the time being. Unfortunately, all that left was the silence in the room quickly escalating in tension. Dean refused to look at his father, Bobby was staring up at the corner of the ceiling as if the cobwebs up there were the most interesting thing he'd seen in a couple years, and Sam was caught between confusion and loss.

He really wasn't used to being the one in these situations. Sam figured he might just owe Dean an apology for all the times he had to play mediator in the family.

"Look, Dean, I'm….I'm sorry." John cleared his throat as he addressed his oldest, avoiding looking at the kid as much as the kid was avoiding looking at him. "I…I shouldn't have demanded the gun, or shut you boys out. I just…"

John cast his eyes upward, as if praying for strength from a God he didn't believe in and would probably try to kill if he ever met. Dean would probably put his money on John Winchester, knowing Chuck as he did.

"You're my children, and this demon is a bad son of a bitch. I can't make the same moves if I'm worried about keeping you safe."

Dean's grip on the beer in his hand, empty now, tightened as he listened to the words he'd heard before. The same comment – reconciliation, really – that had happened between their small, broken family all of forty-eight hours before it got even more broken. John had said the same words not two days before he made that deal and *died*.

Damn it, don't let it be now. Not now. It was too soon, he should have *months* left.

"I don't expect to make it out of this in one piece," John was saying, shaking his head as he looked at an increasingly distressed Sam. "Your mother's death almost killed me. I can't lose you boys too."

The man from the future stood from the table quickly enough and

with enough force to send it skidding a half foot back, rattling the empty bottles and knocking several of them over. Bobby caught one before it could roll of the table and shatter on the floor.

"And what about what we lose, huh? You're going to throw yourself in front of this, but it's gonna be me and Sam who bury you!"

Again, Sammy stared at his brother, knowing Dean wasn't talking in hypotheticals. The man standing in front of him had buried their father. Knowing their line of work, he'd probably burned him, actually. Sam ducked his head, unable to look into those angry eyes furiously blinking away tears. They shouldn't being having this conversation with Dean half drunk.

"What do you want me to say, son?" John shrugged his arms helplessly. "Killing this thing comes before everything. Before you, me, Sammy. *Everything*."

Dean's jaw creaked under the pressure of his anger.

"Dad," Sam cut in quietly, turning his pleading gaze to his father. "I don't want to watch you burn."

The sudden drop of color from John's face was testament to the effect his youngest son's words had on him.

"I wasn't old enough for mom…" Sam glanced at his brother, who was looking away now, trying to contain the anger and grief that had him seeing red. The youngest Winchester turned back to his father. "Don't make us bury, too."

Bobby watched the three Winchesters cautiously. His thoughts were right with Sam's, despite having actual confirmation from the kid across from him that John's days were numbered. But he knew the man, almost as well as his sons did, and he didn't see the hunter giving this up for anything.

"Three Winchesters are better than one," Sam insisted. "We need to do this together."

John finally dropped the tension in his shoulders, his body sagging with the weight of the last twenty two years. He was so damn tired, and just wanted this over.

"Okay," he whispered, closing his eyes. "Okay, together."

At the table, Dean let out a silent breath, the rage filling the lines of his body fading slowly, as if he didn't trust the sudden truce. He spared his father a cursory glance, and the older hunter nodded firmly at him. Dean didn't say anything, but he returned the gesture with only a slight hesitation.

Chapter 25: Season 1: Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Things come to head as ten years of grief and anger bubble over for Dean, and John makes a stupid choice.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 24

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The rest of the day passed almost like a normal family. They sat and talked like a normal family, caught up on their lives like a normal family. Sure, the topics of choice weren't exactly normal. Taking down an urban legend or shapeshifter were hardly common dinner topics, but still, for the Winchesters it was approaching dangerously normal.

Which is why there was no way it could last.

"How did you know it was a Baku?" John eventually asked as they circled topics, starting with their frankly miraculous save of Jess and the Moore family. Dean hadn't volunteered much information, letting Sam tell most of the stories with minimal input supplied by the man from the future. But it was obvious with every adventure or nightmare they recapped that there was a running them of one thing missing from each: information and where they got it.

"Uh…" Sam glanced at Dean, unsure what to say. His older brother didn't look particularly helpful, expression already growing stormy. The younger Winchester swallowed, looking down at his hands resting in his laps as he sat on the old, sagging couch. He knew they would have to tell their father eventually, but he'd sort of hoped Dean would provide more support than a brooding figure in the corner of the room. "I had a vision."

John straightened, brow furling as he stared at his youngest boy. When he spoke, his voice was that terrifying flat tone that always proceeded bad memories for both boys. "A vision."

"He's been getting them since Palo Alto," Bobby chimed in from his desk, purposefully keeping his tone nonchalant, like it was old news. In truth, the three men around John Winchester were watching him

with the tension of skilled animal wrangler who knew, despite years of practice, that what he was approaching was still a pissed off lion. No matter how experienced you were in handling that beast, it was always going to get in a few good swipes.

"They, uh…they happen randomly, far as we can tell. First, it was nightmares, but now they happen during the day, too. Whatever I see always seems to come true, pretty reliably." Sam shrugged, trying not to feel small under the eye of his father, who somehow always made him feel like that. For the most part, it resulted in anger and defensiveness that bordered on the dramatic. But it always started with that feeling of being too small, too disappointing, to ever be a worthy son to the man across the table from him. "We don't really know what they mean."

Their father stood in terrifying silence, turning his back on his family as he ran a hand down his mouth. It was only a moment as he crossed the room, almost pacing, before he turned back around, but the tension in the room made it feel much, much longer. John leveled his boys with a hell of a glare, settling on his oldest. "Something like this starts happening to your brother, you pick up the phone and you *call* me."

Dean, who remembered this conversation well enough to know he had no interest in repeating it, opened his mouth for a lashing of his own. The last time they'd had this talk, he'd finally stepped out of his soldier mold, finally stood up for the brother who cared about him a hell of a lot more than his dad did. He wasn't the good little soldier his father had raised anymore; that kid had died in Hell a long, long time ago.

"Call you?" Sam stood up from the couch to meet John's height. Dean blinked, looking over at his younger brother who beat him to the punch. "Like Dean *called* you when I was dying? Like I called you from Lawrence?"

The older of the two brother's turned his head at that, eyebrows raised. "What?"

For a moment, Dean panicked, thinking of the cosmic consequences of John Winchester showing up in Lawrence with a bossy psychic already reading too much off of the man from the future. But he pretty quickly remembered he'd called John the first time around, and it wasn't like the man had shown up back then, either.

Sam trucked on right ahead, ignoring his brother. "All we ever do is *call you!* We called you when we found a demon who wanted to murder my girlfriend on the anniversary of mom's death! We called you when Yellow Eyes agreed to spare her if I kept hunting. We called you when we knew a Baku was on your tail. Don't bother lecturing us for not telling you about the least crappy of all the cards we've been dealt lately!"

Dean stared at his brother, eyebrows raised to his hairline and the corner of his lip pulling up as he, for possibly the first time in his life, watched his brother yell at his father and felt nothing but pride. He turned his green gaze back to John Winchester with a clear look of 'what he said.'

Their dad frowned between the both of them, but finally settled back into the kitchen chair they'd dragged to the edge of the den hours ago. He was silent for a moment, head hung, before he nodded. He glanced up to meet is youngest son's fiery gaze. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Sam glanced at his older brother, who gave him a miniscule nod, and took his own seat. Bobby, eyebrows raised as high as Dean's, glanced between the three Winchesters.

"Well, now that that's off yer chests," he pulled his feet off the edge of his desk and straightened up. "How about you tell a story of your own, John. Like how you knew the thing chasing after you and yer boys was a demon. Last time I saw you, ya still didn't know squat about that yellowed eyed bastard."

The grizzled father sat in a contemplative silence for a moment. With a slow nod, he raised his eyes to his sons, and began. "Truth is, he hadn't shown himself in twenty years. Our whole lives we searched for this demon, right? Not a trace. Just…nothing."

"Till you caught his trail," Dean added, remembering the spread of research his father had presented them the first time he'd finally agreed to work with them.

"No," John huffed out, the sound self-deprecating. Both his boys frowned at him. "Not at first. I was on a hunt in Arizona six months ago. There was signs worth checking out: odd weather, crop failure, livestock mutilation, that sort of thing."

"Demonic omens."

John nodded at his youngest. "Yeah. I thought it was a run-of-the-mill

demon hunt. Rare, but not unheard of. At least, until I got there. There'd been a fire the night before. It was a small town, so it was the talk of it. Only one room in the house had burned."

"The nursery." Dean's quite confirmation was the loudest thing in the tense room. John nodded, regret flickering through his hard eyes.

"And it took the mother with it."

"Just like us…" Sam stared at their dad. Realization was starting to settle over his features.

"The kid was six months old, to the day." John continued, glancing to his youngest as he started putting the pieces together. "Just like you were, Sammy."

"I was?"

Their dad nodded, turning his gaze down to his hands as they rested on his legs. "So I knew what it was. A demon. More importantly, that bastard was *back*. After all this time… I started looking for other signs. I looked back through the weather readouts for Lawrence and sure enough…"

Sam exchanged a look with Dean, though they both already knew what was coming.

"There were signs a couple days before your mother..." John let out a loose breath, a reminder to the two boys that their father was still mourning the death of his wife. "I chased the thing across half the damn country, following omens from one town to the next. I never made in time to save any of them."

The confession was weighed with the same guilt he'd spoken out in the salvage yard, admitting his failure as a father to his youngest son, who had never seen it that way and never would. John was many things, had made many mistakes, but what happened to their family that night had never been on him.

Sam swallowed, trying to remind himself it wasn't on him, either. "Every time, there was a fire?"

John shook his head. "No. Sometimes there was nothing. All the omens, but no house fires, no deaths."

Dean pushed himself off the wall, uncrossing his arms. "He only kills

the parents if they interrupt him."

John's gaze followed his oldest son like a hawk, eyes narrowed. Sam, on the other hand, glanced at his brother in surprise.

"Interrupt him?" He frowned for a moment, before Dean caught his gaze. Sam stiffened, memory flashing back to that church and the empty jar in the mud. He looked away, self-loathing eating away at his expression and his insides. "You mean the blood."

John nodded, albeit slowly. "That's right. Far as I can tell, there are other kids out there; kids the demon did something to who still have both parents. Lead normal lives. But they're not exactly normal."

Sam worked hard to quash the flare of jealousy his dad's words immediately sparked within his soul. "How many are there?"

Their dad shook his head. "It's impossible to know. Two dozen, maybe more. Who knows how long he's been doing this."

"We need to find them." Sam shifted almost urgently. "If there are more kids out there like me, with visions or- or powers, we need to find them. Try to help them!"

John was already shaking his head, but Sam pushed on. "If Yellow Eyes did something to them…they could be experiencing things too. He said we were part of a…race. A game or something that demons were betting on. If there are more kids out there, we need to save them!"

Dean saw the way his father's head snapped to his youngest son at the revelation. The man from the future immediately tensed. John hadn't known that last time. At least, he didn't think he had. Dean honestly didn't know how deep John's knowledge of Azazel's plan went. He was pretty sure his dad hadn't know about the apocalypse. It had been kept too under wraps, not to mention John would never have left his boys to face it. Dean didn't waste time conjecturing whether John would have stuck around out of love, patriarchal obligation, or just being a control freak who didn't trust anyone else to handle a problem that big.

But Bobby was already talking it through for them, and with a hell of a lot more reason than John Winchester. "Only problem there, is there's no way of trackin' 'em. We could probably find the ones that had house fires as kids, but if this thing didn't leave signs on every stop, it'd be a crapshoot guessing which kid he messed with twenty

years later. We'd be up to our eyeballs in research that could take years to lead anywhere."

"We don't have years," Dean bit back, with some confidence that that was exactly where Bobby had been leading. Not that it would hurt to track down Azazel's other kids. They could stop a lot of pain, everything from warning them about the Battle Royale to come, to stopping Azazel from hurting future kids.

Dean's brain paused on the thought, having never given it time before. What did happen to those kids Azazel had been infecting in 2005 and 2006? They would be too young to participate in the free-for-all to be Lucifer's vessel. They were too young for anything.

Had the yellow eyed bastard popped back up just to catch Sam and John's attention? Or had he been turning more children for a purpose? In the years after the apocalypse, they'd never run into a psychic child. Would their powers even activate without Azazel's presence? Or had other hunters found them taken care of it? It wasn't the kid's fault, but a lot them had turned into killers.

Suddenly, Dean wished he'd followed up on it a little more. He made a mental note, adding it to the ever growing list of shit they would need to deal with.

"They're not a priority," John insisted, staring at Sam. "We'll deal with 'em after, but right now, we focus on Yellow Eyes. He comes before everything else."

Dean's head twitched slightly at his father's words, at a memory he couldn't grasp, but he knew he'd heard before. It passed as quickly as it came, leaving him with an uneasy feeling, but nothing he could do about it.

"But, Dad, these kids-"

"I told you, we'll deal with them later."

The harsh finality of John Winchester's tone is what finally clued Dean in to the memory flickering at the edges of his mind.

"Deal with them?" He took a step towards his father. His brain was filling with images of those kids who'd never stood a chance, whose deaths had been written for them ten years before they were even born. Andy and Ava. Gordon coming after Sam. His brother sinking to his knees in Colorado, the ghost of a knife sticking out of his back.

Even Jake What's-his-name didn't deserve what John Winchester would deal out to him in the name of human justice and protecting the world.

No, life wasn't that black and white anymore. It never had been. And you didn't kill kids for the shit lemons life handed them.

More to the point, what exactly would John decide to do to his own son? Because Dean remembered the last thing John Winchester had said to him. The hunter remembered, vividly, every time his dad told him to take care of Sammy. How John had raised him to take care of his little brother. He remembered each time he'd been yelled at, screamed at, reprimanded and brought down. The disappointment in his dad's eyes. The anger in his voice. That one time when John got too drunk and struck him for letting Sammy run off to a cabin and a friggin' dog. It was always watch Sam, protect Sam. Save Sam.

And the last words Dad ever said to him, telling him to kill the one thing Dean had formed his entire life around. The one person who kept Dean going, no matter how dark it got, no matter how much he hated himself.

To do the one thing John Winchester had raised him to never let happen.

"How exactly are we going to *deal* with them, Dad? Where do kids with demon blood in them fall on your black and white scale of the world? You gonna deal with Sammy after you've dealt with all of them?"

"Dean!" Bobby barked harshly, warning the kid he was approaching a line. But Dean didn't stop there.

"Let me guess. If you can't *save* 'em, well, we'll just have to *kill* 'em, huh? That your grand, master plan?"

"Dean…" Sam sat, shocked, staring at his big brother who had switched, once more, into that cold, hard killer he'd seen a handful of times over the last six months. The man who was probably from the future, who had seen things that had frozen him over, turned him dark and dangerous. This Dean had killed, of that Sam had no doubt. And not monsters, not the things that went bump in the night that needed to be put down. No, this version of his brother had done things a lot darker than try and save the world one monster at a time.

John shoved himself up from his chair, knocking it over in the process

as he matched his son's aggressive stance, tension-filled inch for inch. One hand hovered on the gun he kept in the waistline of his pants. Even in Bobby Singer's house, John did not go unarmed. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but you are not my son."

"Dad," Sam immediately cautioned, eyes darting to the hand wrapped around the butt of a handgun. John Winchester wouldn't really shoot his son, would he?

….He would if he thought Dean was a monster.

Sam swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat and the dryness pervading his entire mouth. Well, he had been asking himself for a week now where he stood on the line between human and other. What his father would do once he learned that information.

Guess he'd just answered his own question.

"No, I'm not your *soldier*," Dean barked back, placing his hands on the table with rigid arms and locked elbows. He looked like an animal about to pounce. "I stopped being that man when I realized just how much you lied to us – kept from us. You're right; I'm not the Dean you know. I'm not the good little soldier anymore. But I'm still your son."

The hunter shoved away from the table, green eyes lit with a fire forged by ten years that no one in that room could ever understand. Dean jabbed his finger in Sam's direction. "And so is he, demon blood or not."

Then he marched himself straight out of the kitchen, through the backdoor and into the salvage yard before he could do worse to his dad than just yelling. He left behind a room full of stunned family who had never yet heard the eldest Winchester boy talk to John that way.

Bobby was the first to finally react, clearing his throat in the awkward, tense silence.

"I'll go after the idjit," he mumbled, but his trademark insult lacked the usual fondness and levity it often brought.

Sam and John were silent as Bobby followed the volatile hunter out into the yard. John was still fuming, red in the face and hand gripped tight atop the butt of his gun. Sam didn't think he would exactly be the calming force in any discussion between them, so he chose not to speak. He was still reeling from his brother's words and what they

implied. Lucky for him, John stormed off on his own after several aborted steps, one towards the back door, then the den, then the back door again. When he finally left in a huff, it was in the direction opposite of his oldest son.

-o-o-o-

Dean was angry. Angrier than he thought he would be. His dad's death had been hard. Devastating, really. It had changed his entire world and had been the first crack across a soon to be broken man. But none of that compared to having his father tell him – expect him – to do the one thing he just couldn't, *wouldn't* do.

John should have let him die in that hospital. He should have taken care of Sammy himself rather than ask his oldest, a child he raised with only one purpose, to kill his own brother. To even think that he could do such a thing.

Dean had spent months after John's death angry and desperate and hurting. There was guilt over his father selling his soul to save him, rotting in Hell in exchange for a life Dean had never felt he deserved. There was anger that *those* were the last words his father found strength to say, that John Winchester had staved off the demon long enough to find his son and pass on a final message. A final message Dean wished to God he'd never heard. He hated himself for it, but he wished John had died before he'd been able to whisper that damning sentence to him. Then came the fury and shame, equal in proportion and destruction, that John thought Dean could ever do it.

It felt like a terrible, unfair test. Killing Sammy hadn't even been an option. Hell, killing himself would have been a thousand times easier. But failing to follow his father's last order, his last warning, was like spitting on the man's grave before his body was even cold.

No matter what he did, he'd already lost.

John should have fucking stayed and finished the job himself. He had no right – *no right* – to ask that of his own son. No right to offer himself in some noble sacrifice so he could shuck what he couldn't do himself off on Dean.

That thought had ultimately let the anger beat out over the guilt ten years ago.

The thing was, Dean thought he'd gotten over it. It had been nearly a decade since he'd lost his father. He *hadn't* killed Sam, and sure they'd

started the Apocalypse in exchange for it, but hindsight was a bitch. Besides, Dean knew that neither Heaven nor Hell would have let Sam's passing slide by. They needed their Michael Sword in Hell, after all.

But here he was, ten years later, reliving it as he stood outside Singer Salvage Yard, fuming all over again as that guilt and hurt and shame and anger crushed him beneath his father's heel.

He spun and slammed his good hand against the side of an old sedan. He hit the flat of his palm against the metal again and again until that wasn't good enough and he switched to fists. The first hit stung. By the third he couldn't feel his hand anymore. When he started leaving blood splattered across the metal and glass, he finally pulled back.

Having a broken arm and a broken hand and no angel to magically heal him wasn't something he could afford right now. Dean flexed his fingers. The knuckles ached and stung, blood welling up sluggishly, but nothing felt broken. Small favors, he supposed.

"You done beating up my cars, boy?"

Dean didn't have to turn to know Bobby had followed him out. He was hardly surprised. The hunter flicked his wrist several times, dispersing the gathering blood across his knuckles.

"Sorry, Bobby."

"S'not me you gotta apologize to," the older man countered, though there was no heat in his scolding.

"Don't," Dean whispered, head hung. "Just don't."

"Didn't come out here to fight, kid." Bobby uncrossed his arms with a heavy sigh and moved over to the car Dean had unleashed on. He settled against the passenger door, clear of the splattered blood and new dents. "Got enough of that in my house as is."

Dean's shoulders sagged at the added guilt. Bobby didn't deserve all this shoved on him. He'd always been family, and a damn good friend to them. Dean knew he couldn't do this without him, knew cutting him loose to keep him out of the shitstorm to come wasn't an option (the old man would never allow such a thing to happen). But damn, he'd never meant to bring this down on Bobby's house.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled for the second time in a span of minutes.

"Hell, it's hardly your fault, Dean." Bobby cocked his head to the side forgivingly. "We both know you're father's a stubborn SOB. Sam and him are more alike than either of 'em care to admit."

The kid chuckled, but it was a dry and bitter sound. "Yeah. They're both gonna throw themselves in front of this and die fighting it."

Bobby suddenly stilled, shell shock silencing him as if slapped, and Dean immediately realized what he said.

"No, they won't," he quickly corrected, and then had to correct again, "Dad…Dad does."

Which Bobby already knew, but they both were aware of the large gaps missing in the story Dean had told. Bobby could really only hazard at what those gaps were.

Dean cleared his throat. "Sammy will be, uh…"

He took a deep, painful breath as he realized no, no Sammy would not be fine. None of them would be fine. Why did he think he could do this all over again?

"You know the last thing he said to me?"

If the abrupt change of topic was jarring, Bobby didn't let it show. He didn't know John's final words, but he could hazard a guess and it made his stomach twist and his chest ache. "Something to do with saving or killing those kids?"

"Yeah," Dean whispered as he moved over to the car. He settled his chest against the back door, covering the evidence of his outrage. Bowing his head until the cold metal of the car roof met his forehead, he confessed, "*Sam*. His own son."

The old man beside him sucked air through his teeth in a sharp inhale of shock and, worse, pain. It wasn't that that the news was all that surprising given the conversation that had gone down in the house, but it still hurt to think John Winchester could want Sammy dead. Worse, that he asked Dean to do it.

Bobby had always watched John Winchester with an air of distaste and regret when it came to how he raised his boys. The older hunter had tried to be a force of good in their life, a pillar of support and *love*, in comparison to the military expectations of their demanding father. Even given John's harshness with his boys and his

cold distance in raising them, Bobby would never have thought the man could kill one of his boys. Or expect his sons to kill each other. It was wrong on so many levels, and Bobby was beginning to see the edges of this cold, hard Dean in a new light.

He swallowed harshly at the thought that filtered through his mind, guilt immediately flooding him afterward for even thinking it.

'Did you?'

The old man bit his tongue and didn't dare ask. Not only for the damage it would do to Dean, but because he damn well knew Sam lived another ten years, long enough to die in a graveyard fighting God's sister.

How could he even think such a thing? Damn, he was no better than that bastard currently holed up in his house.

"Just the fact that he'd ask me to do that." Dean mumbled the words against the roof of the car when Bobby failed to say anything in response. Silence always had been one of his biggest weaknesses. "That he even thought I could… What- What kind of dad asks his kid to do that?"

Bobby could hear the thickness in the kid's words well enough to know there were tears painting the top of the junker right now. He didn't mention it, just crossed his arms and tilted his head back to stare at the stars.

"Not a very good one," was his gruff reply. He didn't bother hiding his own anger and self-loathing in the statement. "Dean, I know you love him. Realizing your parents got faults – hell, even the *good* ones – it ain't easy."

And yeah, he was so not thinking of his own drunken bastard of an old man right now.

"But…Family don't end with blood, boy. You got…You boys got more than one daddy. You should know that."

The words trailed off quietly at the end, as if this staunch, grumpy man was almost embarrassed to mutter them. Dean lifted his head off the rusted roof of the car to stare at the hunter that would always be more of a father to him than John Winchester ever would.

He didn't stop to think, knowing he might back out if his brain was

given time to admit just how sentimental and touchy this exchange was getting. Instead, he reached out and took what he so desperately needed, pulling Bobby into a crushing hug. He held on far longer than two men hugging ever should, but for one of the few times in his life, he told that voice in his head to shut it and he didn't let go.

When they finally pulled apart, Bobby quirked an eyebrow. Dean sniffed, in a very manly fashion of course, and wiped at his face with his good arm, careful to avoid the sluggishly bleeding cuts across his knuckles.

Bobby, eyebrow still raised, cracked a half smile. "That enough man talk for one evening?"

"God, yes." Dean laughed as he finished making himself semi presentable and the older hunter stood awkwardly by, pretending his boy wasn't falling apart and pulling himself back together. "Thanks, Bobby."

"Anytime, ya idjit." The hunter turned his gaze towards the house, which seemed quiet and almost peaceful in the night, with yellow light filtering out through several windows. "You should tell Sam."

Dean immediately cast a weary look his way.

"You should tell the kid all of it, if ya ask me." Bobby gave a pointed look of his own, knowing Dean was unlikely to follow that advice, even given freely. "But if nothin' else, you should tell him about yer dad."

Green eyes darted away, flickering to the lit windows of the kitchen. Bobby was right. Dean knew he was. With how things were going this time around, he doubted they'd be able to save John Winchester. The man was hell bent as ever to throw himself on the grenade that was the yellow eyed demon.

Even if they managed to avoid all of it – if they kept the Colt away from John, and John away from Azazel. If they kept the demon from possessing their dad, from beating the crap out of Dean, from getting in that car without knowing the truck waiting to ram them off the road. Even if they avoided it all, Dean had a sick feeling in his stomach that it wouldn't be enough.

John was going to keep finding other grenades, it was only a matter of time.

"I don't know," he finally confessed.

"Sam's gonna figure it out, son." At the skewed look Dean sent his way, Bobby just shrugged. "He's not an idiot."

"Yeah, but *time travel*, Bobby?"

The old hunter shrugged again. Dean should know better than to underestimate his little brother. "I'm just saying. If he finds out after that you knew and didn't tell him…"

"I know," Dean immediately responded, eager to stop thinking about the entire train of thought. "I just…I don't know how much I can tell him."

"Why not all of it?"

The younger hunter just shook his head.

"This got something to do with that dream angel of yers telling you yer changing too much?"

"I don't know, Bobby!" Dean spun away from the house and his kid brother somewhere inside. "Cas wasn't exactly clear on that, you know."

And damn it, he didn't even know if it *was* Cas.

"What if I change too much?" He glanced back over almost hesitantly at Bobby, and once more the man could see just how lost Dean was in all of this. "What if he's right? If I change too much and the demons start noticing something's up, that I know what's going to happen…"

"Then they go left instead of right," Bobby finished quietly, realization forming more firmly now in the pit of his stomach. He tilted his head back up to the sky once more, ignoring the heavy sigh that settled in his chest like dread.

"Exactly. We lose the only advantage we have here."

Bobby did let that out that sigh, despite it. "Balls."

Dean huffed a laugh, but there wasn't much funny about the situation at all.

-o-o-o-

By the time Dean and Bobby returned to the house, the old hunter eventually grousing at Dean to suck it up and quit hiding out in the yard, John had retired to the couch in the darkened den and Sam was milling about in the room the boys shared upstairs.

The two brothers didn't say much once Dean joined him. Sam had questions but no idea how to frame them, and Dean just wanted to sleep and not think about the weight of the world for a couple of hours.

They turned in with nothing but a quick 'night' to each other.

-o-o-o-

He wasn't sure what woke him, he only knew that one moment he was peacefully asleep and the next he was up and aware that something wasn't right. Sam glanced to his brother's bed. Dean was still out, snoring lightly, good arm thrown over the side of the mattress and broken arm strapped to his chest.

Wetting the roof of his dry mouth, Sam rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he checked the room for whatever had woken him. He stood between the beds, bare feet on cold wood floors. The door to the hallway was partially cracked, but he couldn't remember what state it had been in before collapsing into bed several hours earlier. There weren't any sounds through the house to suggest what woke him up. Still, he knew better than to ignore his instinct. Pulling the hunting knife from under his pillow, he quietly slid out of their shared room and took to the stairs.

The answer came to him at the same time as his feet hit the landing, providing him a glimpse into the den. He'd probably never know if it was his brain or his eyes that supplied the information first, but he supposed it didn't matter. The reason he was awake in the middle of the night was staring him in the face, no longer a mystery.

The couch in Bobby's den was empty, the blanket tossed to the side and John's go bag missing from the floor beside it.

-o-o-o-

When Dean woke to his brother's voice, not urgent in the way that meant they were under attack in the middle of the night but still rushed and definitely angry, the older Winchester already knew. He sat upright as the words spilled out of Sam's mouth, but he already knew.

Dad was gone.

In a flurry of motion, Dean kicked off the sheets and blankets on his bed, moving over to the left of the door where they'd dropped their bags. He rifled through shirts and pants, throwing articles and weapons onto the bed. Sam watched him, knowing what he was looking for and fearing the same thing Dean did.

"It's not here," the older Winchester finally, stoically, reported. Sam closed his eyes. Dean let out a primal, frustrated scream, slamming his hands into the overturned duffle of clothes. "The bastard took the damn Colt!"

-o-o-o-

John Winchester drove sullenly away from the Singer house, fingers tight on the wheel of his truck. The roads were dark, the moon already set for the night and the stars flickering brightly in the velvet sky. There weren't a lot of street lights along the outskirts Bobby where lived. The yellow and white lines of the road were illuminated only by his passing headlights.

The hunter glanced to the passenger seat and the revolver sitting on the old leather.

He'd had to do it. It was the right call, even if stealing from his boys and leaving them in the middle of the night felt low, even for him. But he couldn't let his children get tangled up in this, especially not now. Not with the effects of blood starting to show in his youngest, and his oldest questioning his every command.

John didn't have the extra bandwidth to keep his boys safe, not this time. He needed every ounce of his focus on the demon and the hunt to come.

They wouldn't thank him for it – they never had – but he was going to keep his boys safe.

Chapter 26: Season 1: Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Bit of a longer chapter this time as we continue this drawn out hell of brotherly angst, Sam finally gets some things off his chest, and we finally get physical plot advancement along with all this verbal stuff! Oh, and Bobby's awesome. But then again, Bobby's always awesome.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 25

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam was furious. Not with John, not because of their dad stealing the Colt, sneaking off in the middle of the night like some criminal, and once more leaving them behind in a fight they had every right to be in. Sure, he was pissed about all of that, but that was John Winchester. That was predictable. No, Sam was furious and the cause was sitting across from him at Bobby Singer's kitchen table, nursing a beer at four in the morning like he had nothing better to do.

"I can't believe you!" the younger Winchester yelled, tossing his arms to the side. "Dad stole the damn *Colt*, Dean. He's going after Yellow Eyes and, according to you, it's going to get him dead. We need to go after him!"

Dean spared his brother a rather scathing look, given that Sam was the one clearly making sense here and Dean was the one sitting on his butt doing absolutely nothing. The brunette dropped his arms back to his sides, staring at his brother in disbelief.

Sometimes, he really didn't know this man. If you'd asked him six months ago if his brother would ever change, he'd have laughed the question off because the honest to God answer was no. Winchester men didn't change.

But the cold, broken man sitting in Bobby's kitchen across from him, refusing to save his own father, was so foreign to Sam that he found himself once more questioning if he knew him at all.

"What do you want me to do, Sam?" Dean countered, green eyes

refusing to look up at the sasquatch towering over him. "Dad's gonna throw himself at this no matter what we do."

"Then we stop him!"

"It can't be stopped!" Dean leaned forward almost violently, eyes ablaze as he stared at his brother and Sam immediately realized they weren't just talking about John Winchester any more.

He swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. "What's coming that you're so afraid of, Dean?"

His brother shoved back into his chair, once more looking away like a child put in timeout. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Bobby, leaning against the far wall of the kitchen and so far staying out of the sibling spat, cleared his throat and gave the older Winchester a pointed look. Dean ignored him, but Sam bounced his gaze between the two, brow furling.

The realization that Bobby knew hit him like a bag of bricks straight into his stomach, plummeting the vulnerable organ right to the floor and pulling the air from his lungs in the same go. He turned back almost slowly to Dean. He could feel the rage starting to build, not just from their dad and from Dean's refusal to do anything about it, but from the endless lies.

Dean, John, now Bobby. Was he the only person in this family unworthy of the truth?

"Are you going to tell the whole world what's going on with you before you tell *me*?" he shot at his brother. The flinch he got in return only furthered the anger coursing beneath his skin. He could practically feel it vibrating through his veins. It was a building buzz, a tingle through every muscle that reminded him of facing the Baku in that nightmare dream. He felt the swell of pressure through his sinuses before the blood filled his nasal cavity, a steady stream that pooled just above his lip.

Dean was up and out of his chair, the scraping of wood across linoleum suddenly the loudest thing in the tense room. Sam swiped the back of his hand across his face, smearing away the result of what flowed just beneath the surface. He looked back up at his brother, who stood across the table from him, looking more helpless than Sam had ever seen him.

The bitter smile that pulled at his lips was as full of self-loathing as it was anger. Sam held up his hands, the one still smeared with red.

"I'm done." He shook his head and took a step back. "I'm done."

The youngest Winchester spun out of the kitchen, grabbing his jacket off of Bobby's couch as he headed for the front door. Dean was already following, calling after him.

"Where are you going?" he hollered, his concern coming through as abrasive as ever as Sam wrenched open the door.

"I'm going to stop dad or I'm going to help him kill that damn thing. Like *you* should be doing! " the younger answered automatically, one hand on the knob as he regarded his brother incredulously. He threw his arm out to the side, jacket flapping in the motion. "And after that? I don't know. I just don't know anymore, Dean. Maybe I'll take my life back, go back to school, marry Jess."

The silence that followed his declaration was answer enough as to what Dean thought of that idea. To what the man supposedly from the future knew would never happen. Sam dropped his arms, so damn tired of waiting for his brother to trust him.

"Yellow Eyes said you had to keep hunting," Dean muttered, a lackluster comeback for any Winchester.

Sam scoffed, that bitter smile finding his lips. He turned back through the door, not bothering to face his brother as he called back, "Yeah, but he didn't say it had to be with you."

He left the door open as he jaunted down the steps and across the yard. Dean could close it or follow after, maybe throw a punch or try to stop him. At this point, he really didn't care.

-o-o-o-

Dean watched his kid brother disappear into the stacks of cars, likely to find one still worth hotwiring, since the kid had walked right past the Impala. Sam knew better than to take off in Dean's car, though part of the older hunter might have preferred it. It would have been easier to follow after him, to fight him on this, if he'd given him a reason.

Because Dean knew he didn't have the high ground here. Sam was right, through and through. They should be going after John, stopping

him from confronting Azazel, for so many reasons. This hadn't happened last time, so Dean didn't know what would come of it. John could get himself killed sooner, Azazel could get a hold of the Colt, could hold their dad hostage *again*. This wasn't part of the script, and Dean was barely holding on to his escalating blood pressure just thinking about it.

But he was also tired. Tired of fighting for his dad, who seemed as determined as Time itself to make sure he found an early grave. Dean had almost forgotten what it was like trying to talk to John Winchester, the brick wall variety of inflexible. He was tired of doing this alone, tired of lying to his brother, tired of having to police a timeline that had done him no favors, twice over now. And he was terrified for his brother. *Terrified*, with no idea where to start on fixing it.

"Give him some time," Bobby spoke beside him, the two still staring out the open front door into the yard. Headlights lit the far corner, and soon enough a car pulled onto the drive and headed out the gate.

Dean swallowed hard. "You saw his face, Bobby."

"Yeah, I did." The older hunter's perfectly calm tone was infuriating to the amped up man beside him. "But going after him won't do any good, and you know it. Give him time to cool off. He'll be back."

The older Winchester huffed. "Not if he catches Dad."

Bobby turned back into the house with a roll of his eyes at the kid's pigheadedness. Truth was, Dean was itching for a fight, for someone to vent all that pent up worry on. Bobby wasn't gonna give it to him. "You and I both know he won't. Yer Daddy's got at least a half hour head start. That might as well be a private jet. And Sam knows it."

Dean glanced at his friend before finally heeding him and closing the front door. When he followed Bobby into the kitchen, still glancing back towards the yard, the older hunter rolled his eyes, this time in full view of the intended audience.

"For Christ sake, boy, he wasn't wearing pants." Dean frowned slightly at the older man, who finally gave a hell of a shrug. "He's got all of a jacket and the boxers covering his ass. Pretty sure he'll figure that out about the time he runs out of gas."

Green eyes widened slightly, and the twitch at the corner of his lips told Bobby his job of comforting the damn baby was done. So he

plopped himself down in the kitchen chair, reached over to the row of landlines and pulled out the legal pad from that morning. He tossed it onto the table, staring up expectantly at his kid.

"Now sit down and put the time to good use. You got a story to finish, ya idjit, and if I'm not getting sleep in my own house, then neither are you."

-o-o-o-

Sam realized his state of dress and lack of plan long before the gas gage ran low on his hotwired, stolen car. He didn't care. For weeks now, they'd been on the go, non-stop. Between Meg revealing herself to them in California, the Yellow Eyed Demon confronting him – *saving him* – in Nebraska, and fighting off the Baku, they had barely stopped to breathe or sleep as they crisscrossed the country. Yet, for weeks now, Sam felt stagnant. No closer to finding dad, no closer to ending this nightmare, no closer to getting the truth from his brother.

Even now, with so much of it to a head, it was like running face first into a concrete wall. He now had a pretty good idea what was going on with Dean, but nothing changed. His brother still didn't trust him, believe in him. Dean continued to lie straight to his face. Sam had given him every opportunity to just say it and he was out of reasons – done coming up with excuses – for why Dean couldn't tell him the truth.

They'd finally found their dad, even saved him. *They* had saved *him*. Their dad, always untouchable, invincible, had needed them and they'd been there. They'd made it, even when he refused to ask for their help. Again, nothing had changed. Sure, they'd had one of the most civil conversations of their relationship to date, but John had still left. He'd still gone behind their backs, refused to trust them to handle themselves as he'd raised them to. Once more, he'd left them behind.

Sam knew he'd never catch him. His dad was too good; the man barely needed a ten minute head start to disappear, and this morning he'd had far longer. They'd wasted precious time arguing about going after him.

The anger resurged, coursing through him almost to a boiling point. He could feel it filling every blood vessel, screaming to be released. To just punch something. To hurt something.

Of everything Dean had done over the past six months, this was the

most infuriating of all. Perhaps because it was the least explainable for Sam. It didn't make any sense. Dean had all but said their dad was going to get himself killed, and Sam had less and less doubt about its validity. Yet his brother refused to go after him, to stop him?

Why? Was Dean Winchester really going to just let their dad die? Not for the first time, Sam wondered if he really knew this man that had taken over his brother's body and turned his life so utterly upside down.

Worse, he'd kept Sam from going after Dad while he could have made a difference. He could have caught him – could have at least had a chance – if he'd left right away. Now, he was out driving the darkened backroads of South Dakota for no reason. His 'search' was pointless, accept that it got him out of that house and away from his brother.

If it even was his brother anymore.

The boiling in his blood reached the tipping point, fed by the pain that lanced through him at the thought he couldn't take back. With a recklessness that could have gotten him killed, Sam wrench the car off to the shoulder, slamming on the breaks. He was out the door before the parking break fully engaged, pacing along the dirt and weeds that lined the backroad.

He could feel it building in him like a pressure gage. Like a shaken soda, and his brother was the damn bottle cap. With trembling fists, Sam spun back towards the car and let out a primal scream. Metal wrenched and screeched in tune with his cry. He threw out his hand and the driver door flew across the road with a shriek, clattering across the cement to careen into ditch on the other side.

It wasn't enough, though. He could still feel the bubbling in his blood, the anger coursing through him that needed release. So he tore at the car again and again; he ripped at the doors and dented the roof. He exploded windows and crushed the interior. When the airbag blew, he ripped that out a well, sending it off into the field along the highway with nothing more than his mind and his rage.

As the anger finally petered out and his adrenaline crashed into a hollow, empty pit in his chest, Sam sank onto the side of the road. Blood was flowing freely from his nose and his lungs were heaving, desperate for air that suddenly seemed in short supply.

The young hunter sat on his heels, gasping in the middle of the dark road, vision blurred by stinging eyes. He wipe the back of his hand

across his face, erasing evidence of snot and tears and spit. When breathing became more manageable and his hands weren't shaking so badly he couldn't even grip his jacket, Sam looked back up. He stood in one fluid motion, brought to his feet by sudden shock of what he had done.

The car was unrecognizable. There was nothing left but a wrecked, mangled pile of metal that looked closer to a mechanical pancake than a vehicle. A shaky breath left him as realization hit tenfold and he lifted his fingers to his upper lip, caked with blood.

He'd done that. With his mind.

Sam stumbled back a step, staring in horror at the direct result of his loss of control and the new power flowing beneath his fingertips. His hands were shaking again. He swiped again at his nose, and then again and again in a desperate bid to rid himself of the proof. He spun away from the flattened car, pinching his nose until the flow finally slowed.

Was this what Yellow Eyes wanted? Was this why he had saved him, given him that blood? Sam stared at his hands, shaking and smeared with patches of red so dark in the early hours that the liquid almost looked black. The boy curled his fingers into loose fists, hiding them too.

"What am I?" he whispered to the empty road, as terrified of a response as he was of the silence he got in return. He tilted his head back to the heavens and screamed it to the sky. Maybe if he yelled it loudly enough, someone would answer him.

Was this why Dean sometimes looked at him like he was terrified for him – or maybe it was of him? Was that car and the blood on his hands the reason Dean wouldn't tell him the truth? Didn't trust him?

He glanced over his shoulder almost hesitantly at the vehicle as though it might come to life; the embodiment of his fear and uncontrollable rage. Maybe Dean wasn't the one in the wrong here, he thought. Because staring at that mangled, broken mess of thankfully lifeless material, Sam was no longer sure he trusted himself.

He hung his head in the silence that surrounded him. The wheat stalks rustled in the light breeze and the moon hung low in the sky, on its way back down for the day. Any other time, he would have called it peaceful. He would have called Jess, despite the early hour, and told her about the stars in the sky and the crickets on the wind.

Sam sniffed once, blinking away the water build up in his eyes and pulling the jacket tight around himself. A million would-haves wasn't going to change things, and he had a long walk ahead of him. He started past the car, back the way he'd come, but hesitated as his booted feet crunched on asphalt.

Hesitantly, he glanced at the metal wreck. He couldn't just leave it there. A gutted car that looked like it had gone through a compactor in the middle of nowhere Nebraska? Yeah, that was going to call some attention. Quite possibly of the hunter variety.

Sam stared at the chunk of metal and the corn field behind it, stomach twisting. Slowly, he raised one hand, fingers splayed. His entire arm trembled as he stared at the metal between his fingers. Nothing happened for several long moments. He knew, with no idea how he knew, that it was his fear holding him back.

With a deep swallow, he shoved that twisting knot in his gut down deeper, out of the way where he couldn't feel its hesitancy. He closed his eyes and concentrated, searching for that ever present vibration in his blood. And then he pushed.

The car screeched across the road terribly, sparks jutting up in its wake. It rocked and dragged at first, then went flying into the field beyond like a saucer from space. Sam released the power shuddering through his body as soon as the car was hidden among the stalks. He stumbled on the road, but managed to keep his feet and immediately checked his nose.

No blood.

He stared down at his hand, having no idea what that meant. He turned heel on the long road and started back the way he'd come, refusing to look at the field that hid the evidence of his very terrifying new ability.

-o-o-o-

"We have a problem."

Lilith looked up from the ancient scroll she was tracing a petite finger across, deciphering ink long faded by years on earth and now all but deteriorating in the heat and depths of Hell. But Azazel's tone booked little room for pause, so with a toss of black hair and pink ribbons, she sent the attending demons from the room and set aside the parchment detailing the creation of six hundred and sixty six seals.

Once he had her full attention and the promise of a private audience, Azazel tilted his head towards the demonic princess. "John Winchester has the Colt."

Any lingering sweetness painted across her pink cheeks by youth or innocence disappeared in a snarl far more reminiscent of her true face. Her eyes flashed pupil-less white, tinted red and orange by the ever flickering flames of Hell. "What? We've been searching for that wretched thing for decades! How the hell did that useless meatsuit *stumble* across it?"

Azazel paid her reverberating wrath little mind. He was the one who had neglected to mention the Winchester's primary means of negotiation six months prior, when they played their hand early to save one bitch out of thousands. The Prince of Hell had let that piece of information slide precisely for this reason. He had witnessed his fair share of temper tantrums by Lucifer's firstborn in the two decades since he'd managed to unearth her from the depths of the Pit. They still hadn't gotten her topside – that would take a Devil's Gate and no less. A demon of her age and power drew the denizens of hell behind her like flotsam caught in a wake. They'd plug up any hole they tried to squeeze her through well before she got close.

Luckily, they'd worked that into their plans long ago, and fate seemed only to be shining on them.

"It's in our favor, really," he offered, crossing his arms and leaning one shoulder against the rocky wall, the uneven surface sweltering hot as all things in the Pit were. "Without it, we were going to have to open one of the more troublesome gates. Now we can go straight for Cavalry Cemetery."

"Assuming we can get our hands on the Colt," she bit back.

He was surprised at her pessimism, really. Of all the head demons in on Hell's apocalypse plan, Lilith had maintained a steadfast and loyal optimism not common among their kind. But here she stood, worrying her lip between her baby teeth at the first real obstacle they'd hit, which they hadn't bothered ruling out as a possibility to begin with, and one that really would serve them better in the end.

"Do you think it could kill him?"

Ah, so she was worried about dear Daddy. Azazel shrugged. "I don't know. But it certainly can kill me or you, and ahead of schedule I might add. That's a bigger concern then hypotheticals."

Her eyes darted to the parchment, then back to him. She drew her shoulders back and thrust her chin out, which might have been cute on an actual eight-year old girl. "I want that gun, Azazel. It's time to take John Winchester."

Her command left no room for argument, though Azazel had none to give anyway. Heaven's gate remained shut and quiet. The Winchesters were falling into line without knowledge of their complicity. The appearance of the Colt was the final sign Azazel had been waiting for. It was time to get the wheels of Hell's apocalypse really turning.

-o-o-o-

The legal pad was almost full by the time the sun started its way back down, and that was only the apocalypse-based stuff. Dean still refused to bring up anything after, insisting that they wouldn't get there and if they did that he'd already written it down. He ignored Bobby's repeated looks at that point, and now stood at the back door, staring out into the yard.

"He'll come back, son. Give it time."

Dean shot a half-hearted glare over his shoulder at the old hunter, sitting at the table, going back through the endless notes he'd written that day. He'd been asking questions every couple of minutes, any time he hit a part he felt didn't have enough information.

Dredging all of that up and then being quizzed on it was only making Dean twitchier.

"It's been all damn day, Bobby."

The old man huffed, not even bothering to look up. "Your brother's a grown ass man, Dean. He can check himself into a hotel. Tell me about the Harvelles."

Dean's stomach clenched at the request. Bobby was slowly tracking through eight years of crap, systematically but methodically identifying each area Dean had neglected to define in detail. He'd pretty much glossed right over Ellen and Jo. Their deaths still rubbed his heart raw in ways that had never healed right.

When the kid didn't answer, Bobby sighed and let the pages of the legal pad fall back into place, covering five years of unpleasant memories. He watched his son stare out the window with a singular focus and decided to take pity on the kid.

"You know something about today?"

Dean glanced over at him with a frown, not understanding his question at first. When he realized what Bobby was asking him, he shrugged. "No. None of this happened the first time."

"Date doesn't ring any bells?"

The hunter paused to think for a moment, then looked over sheepishly. "What's the date?"

Bobby rolled his eyes hard enough he should have gotten whiplash. "May first, you idjit. Two thousand six."

Dean shook his head. He didn't recall anything happening on that date specifically, though there honestly weren't that many events he remembered down to the detail of the day.

"Then give him some space. He'll come back."

The kid grumbled by the window, eyes still looking back through the blinds to the empty yard beyond. Bobby had just gone back to the legal pad when he finally turned into the room. "What if he catches up to Dad? He's going to get himself killed, Bobby, and if Sammy's with him…If Azrael gets him early… God, we've already got the blood addiction to worry about-"

"Calm down," Bobby answered immediately, notepad falling to the side once more. "Getting your tights in a twist ain't gonna fix anything. Sam's a smart kid; he'll be back. But he ain't gonna stay if you keep lying to him, and you know it."

Dean shot him a glare, which he promptly ignored. But movement out the back window caught his attention, and he turned to see a lone figure making his way toward the house. Immediately, Dean pushed open the door with his good arm, jogging down the stairs as Sam came walking up in nothing but his boxers, a pair of dusty boots, and a jacket.

"What happened to the car?" Dean glanced around the yard, wondering briefly why Sam was walking the length of the drive. He hadn't actually figured Sam would run out of the gas. The kid was too smart for that. "Wait, did you *walk* here?"

His brother spared him a heated glare and pushed right past him back into the house. He gave a brief greeting to Bobby, which was returned

in kind, and then headed straight upstairs for a pair of much needed pants.

Letting the door close behind him, Dean watched his brother disappear into the den and the stairs beyond, glancing at Bobby helplessly. The old hunter just guffawed and gave him a 'told ya so' look before going back to his legal pad.

With an eye roll of his own, totally done with being the bad guy here, Dean stomped after Sam. He took the stairs one angry footfall at a time, giving his brother plenty of warning he was coming with all the noise he was making. Sam was just buttoning his jeans and grabbing a clean shirt when Dean opened the door to the room they shared.

"You gonna talk to me, or we just doing the silent thing now?"

Sam paused for half a second before he resumed pulling the shirt on over his head. He let his brother stew in his lack of answer as he pulled the hem down, then reached for his jacket. By the time he'd gotten it on, Dean looked ready to blow. So Sam finally faced him, a mask of nonchalance covering his own anger. "Do you ever get tired of being a damn hypocrite?"

Dean pulled back. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means Kettle," Sam gestured to his brother, then to himself. "Pot. You want to talk silent treatment?"

His older brother had the brains to at least move to the side as Sam pushed past him and into the hall. Those brains didn't stop him from following after him, though.

"What the hell, Sam. Since when am I giving you the silent treatment? Pretty sure this is me talking to you."

Sam snorted as he started down the stairs. He swiped his phone and wallet off of Bobby's desk, where he'd left them the night before. He turned around to face his brother, shoving the items into his jacket pocket. "Talking to me? Dean, you haven't *talked* to me in six months. And I'm done. I'm headed right back out that door after dad or the first hunt I can find unless you start telling me the truth."

Dean hesitated, eyes sliding just over his brother's shoulder, where Bobby was still sitting in the kitchen, watching the confrontation unfold with a pointed look.

Sam shook his head once more. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. Dangerous. "I'm not kidding, Dean. This is your last chance. I'm your *brother*. If that means anything to you, then *talk* to me."

The older Winchester opened his mouth, only to have nothing come out. He tried again, but damn it, how was he supposed to even start?

Sam dropped his gaze, jaw clenched. He gave a nod and turned toward the kitchen and the back door.

"I don't know how to," Dean blurted out almost desperately. When Sam turned halfway back to him, he shrugged helplessly. "I don't know where to start."

"You're from the future."

Whatever he had been expecting from his brother – and honestly, he'd been expecting that soft, victim-voice and puppy dog eyes to help walk him through this – it wasn't that. The words were biting and fierce, and Sam's eyes dared him to say otherwise.

Dean's mouth flapped like a fish and Bobby coughed harshly in the kitchen, likely covering up the fact that he'd practically snorted his beer. Sam spared him a glance, but quickly refocused his attention on his floundering brother.

The younger Winchester, shoulders heaving with each tension-filled, super-charged breath, couldn't believe how easy it had been. Almost three days of trying to figure out how to broach the subject, since his brother clearly wasn't going to, and it had come down to blurting it out. He was actually more annoyed that he'd wasted those days trying to approach the problem like a referee. Like Sam Winchester would. He should have just approached it like Dean.

He squared his shoulders and stared down at his older brother, whose expression erased the last little bit of doubt in Sam's mind that he could have been wrong. "How about you start there."

The man from the future gaped for another moment before he shook his head. "How the hell-"

"Because I'm not an idiot, Dean." Sam turned and walked swiftly into the kitchen, his brother hot on his heels. He needed motion – action – and quite possibly a drink if he was staying in this house.

"Oh no," Dean countered, following Sam straight over to the fridge.

"You don't get to drop that bombshell and call IQ points, college boy. Smart people don't jump straight to *time travel*!"

Sam whirled on his brother, beer in hand and fridge door open. "You look about a decade older in dreamland, *future boy*."

Dean was back to floundering, mouth hanging open and snapping shut in a cycle. Finally, with a glance at Bobby who was busy trying out for the Olympic sport of eye rolling and told-ya-so's, the older Winchester cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Oh," he managed, wetting his lips at his suddenly dry mouth. He swiped the beer from his brother's hand, but at least had the decency to look sheepish for all of it. "I hadn't thought of that."

Sam glared at him, but reached in for another beer.

-o-o-o-

The confrontation between the brothers when it finally came to a head was no less tense than Bobby figured it would be. It wasn't quite as volatile as he'd feared, considering Dean was still flabbergasted his brother had figured it out and Sam was far calmer about the confirmation then Bobby thought was normal.

It was still ugly, though.

"What the hell was I supposed to tell you, huh?" Dean popped the cap off the beer with one hand, using the edge of the counter. "Hi, Sam, I'm your brother from ten years in the future. An angel sent me back because serious shit is coming?"

"Anything would have been better than lying to me, Dean!" Sam threw himself into one of the kitchen chairs, and then almost as quickly launched himself back out of it. The wild energy built up in him was clear as day, and Dean at least had the intelligence to stay out of its path. "You're not subtle. I spent the last six months wondering who the hell you were half the time, and the other wondering why you didn't trust me!"

"I do trust you." The words were so quickly state, with such veracity, that it drew Sam up short. He stared at his brother, who was watching him with as earnest as those green eyes ever got. "I trust you, Sam, more than anyone else on this planet."

Dean swallowed, looking away self-consciously, shame flickering at

the edges of his gaze. "This wasn't about trust."

"Then what, Dean?" Sam stared at his brother imploringly. "Make me understand. I'm your brother; you should be able to tell me anything."

The older Winchester shrugged his good shoulder, fingers immediately picking at the label of his beer. Sam knew it well for the tell of insecurity it was. "I don't exactly have a manual here, alright? I'm winging it, and I've…I've gotten a lot wrong."

Sam's brow furled. "In…time travel?"

Dean shrugged again, glancing back up. "I'm trying to change things, Sammy. And so far I've mostly just fucked them up."

"That's not true," Bobby groused from the side. Both boys turned to him, having forgotten he was in the room as an audience to their spat. He had the pad of scribbles in front of him, not bothering to hide it, and was pointing the pen in Dean's direction. "You've done good too, kid. You know that."

Dean ducked his gaze away again. Looking at his brother and his anger and confusion was easier than Bobby and his praise. "Point is, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how much I can tell you, how much I can change without, you know, breaking the friggin' or universe or something."

"Anything is better than you lying to me, man." Sam stood in the doorway of the kitchen, slouched for all his height. Dean sighed and rubbed the back of his head, seeing only his kid brother standing there.

"I know," he conceded softly. "I know, Sam. And I didn't want to lie to you. I've been trying not to, alright, ever since-"

He cut himself off automatically, six months of instinct and rehearsal shutting down that line of thought as soon as it registered as 'future knowledge.' The idea of sharing it now, of uttering it without care, was both terrifying and desperately freeing.

"Since what?"

"Since I promised you – future you – no more secrets," Dean confessed, taking the plunge. It left him in one fast, long exhale, like a breath he'd been holding too long, till his lungs burned with the need to let it out. "Shit, man. Maybe that promise is ten years from now, but damn

it, I was *trying*. You'd think *time travel* would be some sort of exception, but I still felt like crap every time."

"What about now?" Sam held open his arms, beer in one hand and too many expectations in the other. "I know now, Dean, and you didn't even tell me. I figured it out, so the universe can…suck it."

His older brother huffed out a laugh, but it settled in an awkward silence as he hesitated once more.

Sam dropped his arms. "Seriously?"

"It's got nothing to do with you, Sammy," Dean growled, rubbing the back of his head again. "I don't know what's safe to tell you. I had a friggin' panic attack the first time I even tried."

The younger of the two recalled a time not long after Dean had changed that he'd been an anxious, tongue-tied mess. Sam had been scarily close to calling Bobby or a head doctor. So that seemed a likely contender for what his brother was referencing.

"Did you hold back with Bobby?" He glanced back at the kitchen table and the thick pad of paper, curling at the edges and full of the older hunter's scrawl. "Because those pages look pretty full to me."

"Bobby's different."

Sam had to bite down on the instant surge of annoyance and hurt called up by his brother's words. Instead, he reminded himself that Dean Winchester had never been good with them and ignored the slight buzz throughout his veins. "How? You mean he's not your *kid* brother."

"That's not what I said."

"Kind of sounding like it, Dean."

"None of Bobby's decisions are going to start the Apocalypse!"

Dead silence filled the entirety of the Singer house. Sam was staring at his brother with wide eyes, barely able to breathe through suddenly constricted lungs. Dean stood across from him, looking like he wanted to shove his foot in his mouth and then swallow himself whole. At the kitchen table, Bobby made a disgruntled noise, planting his forehead in his palm.

"What?"

The whispered word was hardly a breath and Dean sighed, head hung.

"Bobby doesn't have as many choices coming up – important ones – that are going to have world-ending consequences."

"Yeah, I know the definition of an apocalypse, Dean. How about you cover the part of me starting one."

"It's not just you," Dean mumbled, raising his eyes to meet his brother's with more pain than Sam was comfortable seeing in them. "We both got starring roles to play in this, Sammy."

The younger Winchester took a shuttering breath in, heavy realization settling in his gut that Dean was serious. Not that this as a joke had even occurred to him, but it was natural for his brain to automatically flip the 'false' switch at anyone casually dropping the apocalypse as an upcoming calendar event.

"How…" He swallowed heavily, eyes darting around the room and back again. "Dean, how am I supposed to make the right choice if I don't even know the context of my options!"

"I'll help you."

The answer came so easily, so readily, off lips that had said those words a thousand times to him. Words that were formed in aid, but yielded control. Words he'd learned from their father, however well intended either Winchester man had meant to be.

"No, you mean you'll make the decision *for me*," Sam countered sharply as the buzz beneath his skin returned. It was nothing more than a slight vibration, but he was learning to tune into it faster now. "Helping me would mean telling me the truth and trusting me to make the right call!"

Bobby speared the older of the two brothers with a look that Dean couldn't duck, but could avoid returning.

"Sammy-"

"No, Dean! You can't just take my choices away from me because something's coming, because of decisions I haven't even made yet and things I haven't done." Sam scoffed, turning away from his brother. He rolled tight, aching shoulders, snapping his neck to the side as tension

rippled up his spine. "I should have known better. This family. If I don't fit the mold, you'll just force me into it, won't you? You, Dad, the Yellow Eyed Demon. God forbid I make my own choices! To hell with the road I want to take, right?"

Sam was good and rearing, lungs filled and ready for verse two. Dean was already raising a finger, mouth open to beat him back down. He hardly noticed the building migraine, flaring with every word he spewed, or the way the edges of his vision darkened as he spun back to face his brother.

Dean barely caught the six and a half feet of Samsquatch before he hit the floor, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

"Sam! Sammy!"

Bobby was up and out of his chair in a second flat, squatting down on the other side of the brothers. Sam hissed in Dean's good arm and the older Winchester struggled not to lose his hold on him as he tossed his head back and forth. He squinted past them with unseeing eyes, face pinched in pain as he tried to reach for his temple, entangling his arms with his brother's.

"What's happening?" Bobby asked, hands held out to help and assess, but with no idea what to do.

"I think it's a vision," Dean answered. Sam had only had one or two in front of him in the past, and he was pretty sure he hadn't hit the deck during any of those. Mid-rant, it was unlikely he'd been trying to push himself to have one again, like he had back in Wyoming before the whole blood debacle.

But with a pint of demon blood in his veins…Dean hadn't seen fallout from that yet, but he didn't think for a second that it meant they were out of the woods.

"Sammy?"

His kid brother finally stilled against him, fingers finding purchase against his temple and pressing into the headache he was sure to be feeling. Sam managed to open his eyes to slivers, staring up at his brother and Bobby. He groaned as he realized what had happened, struggling to sit and getting fully upright with his brother's help.

"What did you see?" Dean asked, keeping his hand placed supportively on his brother's back. "Was it Dad?"

"No." Sam shook his head, wincing as he did so and prompting Bobby to climb to his feet and head for the fridge and the ice pack he kept there. Sam accepted it and the hand towel gratefully, wrapping the cotton around the cold before pressing it to his aching head. "It was some guy in his garage. I think…he committed suicide, only it wasn't him. The car turned on by itself – wouldn't turn off – and the garage door wouldn't open. He couldn't get out."

Bobby watched the kid worriedly. He'd yet to see one of these visions, and if they were all doozies like that one, he was rather glad he hadn't. "Sounds like a ghost."

No, Dean thought. But it did sound familiar.

"There was something else-" Sam shook his head slightly, squinting once more as he tried to recall what he'd seen. "A kid. I don't know, the son, maybe? He was watching from the house."

Bobby stilled beside them, face tightening in thought. When Dean called his name, he glanced between the boys and then stood, beckoning them to his desk. Sam grabbed his brother's offered hand, pulling himself to his feet with a pained groan. He kept the ice pressed to his temple as the three men gathered around Bobby's desk, the old hunter pulling maps and sheets of paper from one of the drawers.

Files hit the surface in stacks, spreading out as paper slid over the smooth surface. Each stack was paper clipped together and topped with a photo of various kids. There had to be a dozen of them at least, smiling faces of teenagers and college kids. Some of which Dean recognized.

He looked up, meeting Bobby's eyes with surprise.

"What? You think John Winchester is the only one who can put together a pattern?"

Dean looked back down at the spread of Azazel's special children. Damn, Bobby was awesome.

"Any of 'em look familiar, Sam?"

The younger of the Winchesters pushed loose the few files that had remained stacked, hand hovering just above each photo, before settling on one. "Him. He was the one I saw."

Bobby pulled the stack out from under Sam's hand, flipping it open.

Dean caught the familiar face staring up from the front page as it flopped over.

"Max Miller," the older hunter began reading. "Twenty-three years old, lives at home with his father and step-mother in Saginaw, Michigan. Birth mother died in a house fire when he was six months old."

"Do you think he's like me?"

"No," Dean responded hollowly, still staring at that ghost of a boy. He looked up to meet Sam and Bobby's eyes, respectively. "He doesn't get visions. He's, uh…telekinetic."

Sam stared at him, clearly boggled, though from the confirmation of other children with powers or a boy with the ability to move things with his mind, Dean didn't know. Or possibly his older brother finally admitting to knowing things he shouldn't 'cuz of that whole future thing, and all.

He cleared his throat when the wide-eyed staring didn't stop. "I, uh, don't remember much. I think he iced his parents. Abusive, or something. We thought it was a ghost when we first showed up."

"Telekinetic?" Sam still seemed a little shell-shocked.

"Yeah. All of you have different…abilities."

His kid brother took in a shuttering breath, eyelids fluttering for a moment and finally breaking that hundred-yard stare. "So there are more of us?"

"Yeah… Yeah, a lot more." Dean's words trailed off as he tried to dig through his memories for the confrontation with Max Miller. The kid had killed his dad in the garage, that much he remembered from Sam's vision. But there had been something else, too. He'd gone after his stepmom with a gun? A levitating gun. Dean's levitating gun.

"We gotta go," the older Winchester announced, turning around in the den in search of his jacket and car keys.

"What?"

"The dad died before we got there last time. We gotta go if we're going to save him." The image of Max lying in a pool of blood, bullet to the brain, was suddenly sharp in his mind. "If we're going to save Max."

"Dean." His brother's warning voice drew him up short. He could tell from the sasquatch's body language that he was a moment away from grabbing his own go bag and hitting the road, so it wasn't the sudden departure causing that tone. Meeting Sam's eyes, he could see the unfinished conversation plain as day in those hazel rings.

"I'll…I'll tell you what I can on the road. I promise," he intoned seriously, even as his chest constricted at the idea of fulfilling that vow.

Sam shared a skeptical look with Bobby, but grabbed Max's file from his hand and headed after his brother to confront the first of the Yellow Eyed Demon's other children.

Chapter 27: Season 1: Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dean's got the usual potty mouth, Sam's on a roller-coaster ride of emotions, and Max Miller isn't buying the FBI Agents there to save the day.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 26

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The car shook as the driver side door shut, Dean climbing into the Impala next to his brother. The key hadn't even turned in the ignition before Sam was on him.

"So talk."

Dean sighed. "It's only a day's drive to Saginaw."

Sam's brow furled, not following his brother's train of thought. "So? What's that got to do with anything?"

Dean put the car in reverse and backed away from Bobby's house. Baby hadn't been moved since they'd first arrived in their frantic search for John, since Bobby insisted he drive them to the hospital for Dean's broken arm that night, and the younger hunter hadn't exactly cared about a good parking job when they'd gotten there earlier that day. He flipped gears and pulled onto the partially designated drive, differentiated only by the lack of junkers on the clear stretch of gravel and dirt.

"It's not long enough. Not for the whole story, trust me."

"So I get nothing?" Sam huffed, a disbelieving look painted across his bitter smile and raised eyebrows. "We're going to spend the next twelve hours pretending you're *not* from the future? Oh, yeah, that's going to be a fun ride."

Dean wrung his hand on the steering wheel as he pulled onto the interstate. The conversation was inevitable and he knew it. "What do you want to know?"

Sam turned his head to look at his older brother, who kept his eyes firmly on the road. "What does Yellow Eyes want?"

"Azazel." Dean cleared his throat. He rubbed his broken arm against his sternum and the light ache there. "His name's Azazel."

His kid brother stared at him, brow creased and roiling emotions too masked by the gravity of the situation for Dean to read him easily.

"What does Azazel want with me?"

-o-o-o-

Sam was numb.

He thought he shouldn't be. He should probably be freaking out. Stressed. Emotional. Stunned. Any of that would be a proper reaction to learning *you* were going to herald the end of the world. Sam Winchester, boy with the demon blood, destined freer of Lucifer and vessel of the actual devil.

The young hunter let out a low, slow breath through pursed lips.

They were at a gas station just outside of Rochester, Minnesota. Dean was by the pump, leaning against the side of the Impala as he filled her up. Sam could tell from his posture, going from rigid to forcefully relaxed and back again, that he was trying to give his brother space but didn't want to leave his sight either.

Sam didn't pay him much attention. Sitting in the front seat, he was busy being numb. Not the tingling numb of a limb falling asleep, but the floating sensation of no longer having any ties to the world or the laws that defined it. There was no gravity afflicting his body, pushing his limbs into the old leather of the seats, the rough fabric of his clothes. There was no scent of coffee wafting up from the cup holders or faded music filtering from the broken speakers of the gas station roof. None of that was real – couldn't be – because Sam didn't feel any of it.

He needed to call Jess. It was the only thought that kept going through his head. Everything Dean had told him, from Azazel's plan for him, to defeating the Devil, and all he could think about was calling Jess. She deserved to know he wasn't coming back.

Sam pushed open the passenger door with the squeak of metal. Dean looked up from the pump, across the roof of the car. His face was full

of brotherly concern – the stern type that was about to ask him where he was going. Sam turned away before he could, heading for the small store attached to the pumps.

Dean didn't call after him and he was glad for it.

The young hunter didn't duck around the corner of the dilapidated building like he wanted to. His brother would absolutely put him back in line of sight the moment he was out of it, even if he stayed far enough away to give him some privacy. So Sam didn't waste energy trying for it. Instead, he leaned against the edge of the convenience store, as far from the entrance and close to the side of the building as he could go while still remaining in his brother's vision.

Pulling out his phone, he turned his shoulder to the car and raised the mobile to his ear.

Dean had been emphatic that what happened next – what they were going to change so it never came – wasn't his to face alone. Yes, he was supposed to release the devil on the world and serve as his physical presence. Yes, in the world Dean came from, it had happened. But his brother insisted that he'd also been the one to stop Lucifer, to cage him back up at the cost of his own life. Dean had played his own role as well, breaking the first seal as unwittingly as Sam had broken the last. Though he had skirted details due to what he claimed were time constraints (but Sam easily read as bitter memories and avoidance), he'd made it clear that the two were pawns – weapons – in a war between Heaven and Hell.

So they were going to throw the rule book out. Screw destiny. Go Team Free Will. They'd done it once before, and this time they had the edge of knowing what was coming. They wouldn't be tricked into that fate crap again.

Sam's fingers tightened around the edge of the phone as it rang. See, there was a problem with that plan that Dean didn't know about. Sam *believed* in Fate. In Destiny. The idea that he was meant for something more, something better than hunting, had gotten him through his dark childhood of shotguns and shovels. Sam believed in God and he believed in a plan, because it had been one of the rare lights in the long nights of his youth that he *could* believe in.

Now Dean was insisting both sides, Heaven and Hell, were dicks and God was a no-show; a deadbeat dad with nothing but excuses and silence. There was no good side in the upcoming war but their own.

The oorah-comradery was his brother's attempt at following up some terrible news with a ray of hope, but it did nothing for Sam's numb state. He could feel the taint of demon blood slithering beneath his skin and he knew, as painful as it was to admit it, that he wasn't on the side of good.

"Sam?"

The Winchester boy sucked in a breath at the sound of Jess's voice through the phone. Just hearing her used to bring a smile to his face. He knew, given other circumstances, it absolutely still would. But not tonight. He looked down at the sidewalk beneath his feet, spattered with chewed gum and cigarette butts, illuminated by the flickering gas station lights above

"Hey, Jess." His return was lackluster, despite giving it half a thought of forcing a smile to his face. It would be misplaced and unfair to her now, especially with what he learned. He didn't have it in him to fake that kind of happiness.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's…nothing immediate." He shook his head and pulled the phone away from his ear for a moment. Sam tilted his head back and closed his eyes, praying to someone who his brother insisted wasn't listening.

And he would know, wouldn't he?

"Sam? Talk to me." Jess's voice was sweet as he put the phone back to his ear. She was worried for him, her words dipped with concern and a love that Sam knew now he didn't deserve. "Is it your dad? Did you find him?"

"Yeah. He's…" A bastard, that's what John Winchester was. "…fine. We're uh…we found him, but he left again."

"What an asshole." Her response, immediate and without remorse, made him chuckle. God, he missed her. Silence filled the line for a moment, and he could almost picture her if he closed his eyes. Thin but strong fingers tightening around the phone, blonde waves pressing against her cheek from the weight of the phone, worry in her eyes and bottom teeth abusing the corner of her lip.

"I'm okay, Jess," he said quietly, trying to reassure her as he realized that these calls did nothing but bring her more pain. That's all he

seemed capable of bringing his loved ones right now. And for the foreseeable future. That's why he had to let her go. Why she had to let him go. "I…I learned some things. We found out the demon's plan."

"That's….that's good, right?" He could tell from her tone that she knew it wasn't good. "Better than not knowing…"

"Yeah. But…uh…it's not…" Sam opened his eyes, staring at the edge of the gas station property, marked by an old wooden fence. Dozens had left their mark on that fence, from stains of shattered beer bottles to graffiti gang symbols, tags, and one beautiful mural of a weeping Native American woman. "It's not going to end anytime soon, Jess."

She didn't answer right away, and he knew she was pursing her lips on the other end of the line. The truth was, they'd both known that was the most likely outcome. They'd clung onto each other and their love out of a hope that this could end, that they could be together. But Sam knew it had been unlikely, and each time he talked with Jess he realized she knew it too.

"Okay," she answered softly. "It's okay, Sam. We'll get through this."

"No," he shook his head. "No. I…I want you to…You shouldn't... Don't wait for me Jess."

He tried not to say it, to telegraph it, but the unvoiced *I'm not coming back* was audible all the same. There was a muffled sound down the line, and he knew she was crying and trying not to.

"Don't make this a goodbye, Sam." Her words were fierce and full of fire, even as the tears surely trekked down her beautiful face. "This is *not* goodbye. We'll…We'll take a break, yeah? But I'll be here. I will be *right here*, Sam."

There were tears building in his own eyes now, and he rolled his gaze skyward once more, trying to blink them away.

"I don't want you to wait, Jess."

"I won't. I won't put my life on hold for you, Sam Winchester." Her tone, broken with the half laugh she forced out, belied any harshness to her words and it made him smile through watery vision of his own. "I find one of those cute pre-meds back at school and I'm gone."

Sam choked out a laugh. He could hear her smile through her tears, even as her voice softened and her words turned sincere. "Just because

I'm not with you doesn't mean I'm not here. I will never stop loving you Sam. And I will always be here for you."

He bowed his head, water flowing freely down his face and hitting the cement below. He did not deserve this woman.

"So you will call me when you need me. You hear me, Sam?"

He sniffed but laughed, and she joined him in their bittersweet love. "I hear you."

The rumble of an engine caught his attention, and he glanced over his shoulder. Dean had climbed into the Impala and was pulling away from the pump, maneuvering the muscle car to an empty parking spot across the gas station. The car idled for a second, then shut off and Dean didn't climb out.

Sam knew what his brother was offering without words, so he turned back to his phone and asked Jess how her first term back at Stanford was going.

-o-o-o-

Dean didn't ask about Jess when Sam climbed back into the car, but the younger man knew he wanted to. He thought about offering up the information, but he was tired. Tired of playing mediator between himself and his brother when the wrongs lay mostly in Dean's court. Tired of this game, this hunt that never seemed to end. He felt weary down to his bones, and if his brother was right about what was coming, it wasn't going to end anytime soon.

"What's it like?" he asked instead, head tilted back against the seat as he stared out the top of the windshield at the world passing them by. His periphery caught the curious look his brother shot him, so he clarified what he thought was fairly obvious. "Time travel."

"It sucks," Dean answered obnoxiously. The blunt, immediate response made Sam chuckle, despite his dour mood. "You don't poop for like a week."

The younger brother laughed again, but shook his head. That's not what he meant and he had a feeling Dean knew it. "No, I mean what's it like? Being…back?"

His brother fell silent for a moment, eyes on the road as he contemplated his next words. After a moment, Dean wrapped his

knuckles against the steering wheel and nodded to himself, as if coming to an internal conclusion. "It ain't a cakewalk, I'll tell you that much."

Sam turned his head to finally take his brother fully in. The older hunter chanced a glance his way. "Some of it's good. Seeing you – all wide eyed and schoolboy innocent."

The brunette huffed again while his brother smirked. "Jerk."

"Bitch. Seeing Bobby again." The drop of that smile, that smugness, was so instantaneous it almost took Sam's breath away. He recognized what his brother was doing suddenly. Dean had a hard time trusting people, and a harder time talking when it wasn't bravado. When the older Winchester finally faced both, it was a one-shot rush sort of thing. No time to pause, no time to think or change his mind.

It sobered Sam as quickly as it had quieted Dean, and he stared at his brother, the words registering slowly in his already full mind.

"When?"

Dean shook his head. "Not for a long time. Tough old bastard makes it through the apocalypse."

His brother shot him a grin, though he could see the bitter sadness behind it. Others that they knew weren't going to have the same fortune. Like their dad. Sam looked away. "As long as we don't change it."

Dean sucked in a breath of his own, air taken from his lungs like a punch to the diaphragm. He refocused on the road and ignored the creak of Baby's leather beneath his white-knuckled grip. "Right. As long as we don't change it."

-o-o-o-

"Did this happen last time?" Sam asked out of nowhere, several hours of silence between them and the last bout of rapid-fire questions he'd had for his brother. It was late – or early, depending on perspective – and the roads were empty and quiet.

"Did what happen? The kid?"

"My vision of him."

"Yeah. You saw the dad gassed in the garage," Dean answered, thinking back on what had been happening prior to them showing up on the Miller's front steps. "I was sure it wasn't real; just a nightmare. Guess I didn't want it to be real.""

"This was the first one I told you about?"

"No," Dean shook his head, "just the first one that wasn't about you. Jess, the old house; those had direct lines to you. I couldn't figure out why you'd be getting visions of some random dude in Michigan."

Sam was quiet for a moment as he digested that. Truth be told, he hadn't stopped to wonder. It had been a vision, as painful and disjointed as all the others. Well, maybe this one was less painful. His head had hurt, but he hadn't had the full migraine like the others gave him.

"Why am I dreaming of Jim Miller?"

Dean clenched his jaw for a moment, muscles along his neck flexing with the movement. Sam wondered for a moment if he'd lie again, or just not answer. But it only took a moment for his brother to respond, "Because Max is one of Azazel's kids. You're all connected, and you're gonna keep getting visions of 'em. All of 'em."

"How many more are there?"

The blonde shook his head. "Honestly? We never did a headcount. I know of about a dozen."

Sam sat in silence for a moment, wanting to ask the next question but really not wanting to know the answer. He'd heard enough terrible things for one night. "What happens to them?"

When they'd covered the apocalypse, Dean had rather glossed over the details he knew would hit his brother hardest. At least, he'd skipped the ones he could get away with, knowing they'd come back around eventually. He'd hoped to give the kid at least a couple hours respite between bad bouts of news, though.

"Azazel pits you all against one another in a Battle Royale," he answered honestly in one long breath. "The idea being the winner takes Lucifer to the Prom."

Sam frowned immediately. "I thought you said I was destined to do that from the start."

"You are. We both are." Dean switched on the wiper blades as rain started splattering down from the sky. "Problem with prophecies is they're not all that specific, and Hell wasn't taking chances. So that yellow eyed bastard found as many kids as he could. Up their odds of finding the right one, I guess."

The younger Winchester didn't have any more questions after that, fists slowly clenching against his thighs as he added a dozen more tallies to the list of lives he would be responsible for in the upcoming years.

-o-o-o-

It wasn't long after the sun came up that Dean's phone rang. They were outside Lansing, only an hour from Max Miller's home address. The older hunter glanced at the small screen listing the calling number, a curious frown on his face as he flipped it open.

So not Bobby then.

"Hello?" There was nothing but silence for Sam's part. Whoever was answering on the other line was soft-spoken enough that he couldn't catch anything from the tinny whispers. But by the way his brother's shoulders went rigid and his eyes wide and unfocused, recalling a long-ago memory, Sam was instantly alert.

"I'm sorry, Cassie, I can't."

The younger Winchester tilted his head at the name and it's similarity to the angel Dean had spoken of before. He immediately dismissed it given his brother's distant expression. This clearly wasn't the same person.

"My brother and I…we're, uh…we're on something we can't put off. But I'll…" Dean cleared his throat, running a hand over his mouth. His brother watched him curiously, having rarely seen his brother flustered before. And never by some civilian. "I'll send another hunter your way. He's the best."

The voice on the other line got even fainter.

"It's not about that, Cas-Cassie." Dean responded softy, gaze lowering to his lap. "I swear, I'd come if I could. But I'm sending you the best. He'll stop whatever's going on. I promise."

There were barely other words exchanged before the man from the

future slipped the phone shut. He kept his eyes on the road, refusing to so much as look at his questioning brother. When Sam tried asking, Dean shrugged it off, naming the mysterious caller an old friend who had a case for them. With that, he pulled his phone back open and dialed Bobby to fill him in on the details, of which Dean, of course, knew everything.

-o-o-o-

"I get that Max is important. I want to save him and his family," Sam spoke up several miles later, "but this friend-"

"Don't worry about it, Sammy," his brother answered immediately, eyes still on the road. "It's a ghost running people off the road. Nothing Bobby can't handle. He even knows where to find the object it's tied to. Doesn't get easier than that."

And boy, was it nice to finally be able to openly use that future knowledge he had in hunts. He was damn tired of tiptoeing around cases he could wrap up in an hour with what he knew.

Sam didn't have a counter argument his brother would accept, so he fell silent for several more miles. "I didn't know you had female friends."

Dean finally looked at him, though it was hardly friendly.

"I have tons of female friends," he replied defensively, opening his mouth to continue only to falter. His gaze darted back to the road and he cleared his throat. "Just none we've met yet."

Sam chuckled at that. He watched his brother for another moment longer. "Were you close?"

Dean licked his lips, gaze darting to his side mirror to avoid looking at his brother. Thoughts of that beautiful young woman waiting for him to show up, to reconcile their terrible ending, filled his head. He'd never forgotten Cassie, and the minute he'd heard her voice, he'd recognized it. She was his first real love. But that was a long time ago now and the apocalypse was more important. Bobby could help Cassie, and Dean's reconciliation could take a back-seat to saving his brother.

"It's in the past, Sam. Has been for a long time for me."

"Okay," Sam replied softly, hearing more than his brother meant to

say, but understanding. After all, the words he'd shared with Jess only hours ago were still ringing in his own mind.

-o-o-o-

Three blocks away from the Miller house, Dean pulled into a gas station, climbed out of the Impala and headed for the trunk. Sam followed, brow furled curiously. They still had half a tank from the stop in Rochester.

He caught the haphazardly thrown bundle of clothing from his brother and stared down in surprise at a suit, tie, and white dress shirt. He raised an eyebrow in Dean's direction.

"Feds get a lot further than repairmen."

Sam's mouth dropped open in surprise as Dean chucked something else at him that he caught on instinct. It was a badge – a really good fake – that read Federal Bureau of Investigation. He almost dropped it.

"Impersonating repair guys and wildlife services is one thing, but FBI?" He stared at his brother in open shock. "Dean, that's a felony!"

The man from the future just shrugged, heading for the gas station's attached restrooms. Sam followed after him, surprise still coloring his features. This was clearly not the first time his brother had done this. Not to mention the badge job was top-notch, something that only came with experience. He must have anticipated Sam would need one as well, considering he had purchased a suit in the younger Winchester's size.

"How many times have you impersonated a fed?"

"FBI, CIA, Homeland Security. Whatever, man. It's all the same; I lost track years ago."

Sam just kept staring, even after his brother ducked inside the restroom to change into a suit he never imagined his brother would wear so comfortably.

-o-o-o-

They pulled up to the curb outside of the Miller house after one of the longest drives Dean could ever remember. Sam was roller-coastering between melancholy and fierce curiosity. Not that he could blame the kid. It was a dump of downright unpleasant information Dean had

given him.

Sam had always been a good man – one of the best Dean had ever known. It nearly killed the kid the first time he learned what he had unleashed on the world. That time, though, he'd had spiraling emotions, condemnation from his father, and abandonment by his brother to blame it on, to help explain why he'd done what he did, made the choices he made. To help him rationalize, accept, and fix it. This time it was just a man from the future, guaranteeing he'd make the mistakes that would try to end the world, with no real proof or reason why.

And this Sam, without Jess's death, without Dean's death, had no context. There was no way he could ever accept, could even understand, how he could ever be driven to do such a thing.

Dean wanted to believe that he wouldn't. He wanted to tell his kid brother that they'd stop it, that he was already off the path. But the man from the future knew this wasn't actually about him or Sam. Hell would never let them leave that road, and neither would Heaven. Each side was tenacious, cruel in the lengths they would go in their pursuit, and had the time and resources to force the Winchester's hands. They would find a way to turn his brother, of that he had no doubt.

It wasn't Sam he didn't trust with the coming Apocalypse. It was Hell, which he knew all too well.

"It looks pretty calm," Sam spoke up beside him, pulling his attention back to the suburban street they sat parked along. Sam had his head turned out the passenger window, staring at the house that looked so normal. Uneventful. "Maybe it hasn't happened yet."

"Maybe," Dean replied distantly, leaning over in his seat to stare at the innocuous house as well. "Only one way to find out."

"Do you know what's going to happen?" Sam asked before his brother could open the door.

Dean shrugged, still watching the house. "I don't remember much about the details. He killed his dad in the garage, think he went after his stepmom with a knife."

"And we stopped him?"

His brother didn't answer right away, thinking back to that floating

knife, to his floating gun, and his brother pleading with a child who shared blood with him in all of the worst ways. He sighed, closing his eyes as he remembered how that confrontation had ended. "He killed himself. But the stepmom lived."

Sam was staring at him when he opened his eyes again.

"Can we change it? Can we save him?"

Dean straightened, broken arm reaching for the handle and pushing open the driver's side door with a squeak of metal. "Only one way to find out."

-o-o-o-

Max opened the door to two men in monkey suits who held up badges for him to glance at before flipping them closed and listing their names as Agents Simmons and Freely. The one that did all the talking seemed confident and in charge. Max immediately disliked him. His partner though was young, probably his own age if he had to guess, and couldn't figure out where to put his hands. Probably new to the job. Max didn't like him much either.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah, kid. We'd like to have a word with you," the older replied, giving his partner a measured look that made the man finally settle his arms by his sides. Max stared unimpressed at them.

"About what?"

Agent Simmons opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by Max's father appearing over his shoulder, staring at the two suited men on his front steps. "What's this about?"

"Jim Miller?" The younger one asked, eyes wide in surprise and slight awe. Max frowned and immediately liked him even less.

His partner cast another warning look his way. Then he pulled out his badge once more, holding it up for Max's father. "FBI, sir. We just need to speak with your son."

"What have you done now?" his father growled down at him. Max tried to hide the flinch, but he knew he'd failed when both FBI agents straightened.

"Nothing," Max answered back through clenched teeth.

"He hasn't done anything wrong, sir," the younger agent said quickly, compassion in his eyes that made Max want to hit him.

"We think he may have witnessed a crime," the older partner added fluidly. "Witnesses placed your son and his friends near the scene of a burglary up on State and Center two days ago. We're just hoping Max might have seen something that could help us out."

Max's head shot forward with the hard slap that his father delivered to the back of his skull.

"What did I tell you about hanging out with those friends of yours, boy? Bunch of no-good low lives!"

Max grit his teeth, hand clenching into a fist as he straightened back up. It took all the strength he had to keep his breathing steady, to keep his hand from shooting out and strangling his father with those gifts he'd been given. He'd been practicing, like the yellow eyed man said, and he knew he could do it.

"That's enough!" The younger agent took a step forward, catching his father's wrist before he could deliver a second blow. His hazel eyes were fierce and locked on Max's father.

The older agent cleared his throat, but his gaze was reprimanding as well. "I think we'll speak to Max in private."

Max released the tension in his muscles and felt the vibration beneath his skin fade away as he did. Not now. Not in front of feds. He would kill his father, as he'd promised himself he would. He'd do it tonight, as planned, in the garage, where he could make it look like a suicide. Then no one would suspect a thing and he could finally be free of the bastard.

"Max?" The younger agent was holding his arm out, gesturing for him to walk down the drive towards the street. He straightened and pushed past both agents, not bothering to look back at his fuming father.

-o-o-o-

"Okay, who the hell are you guys?" The kid spun around as soon as they were by the curb, far enough away from the house for some privacy. "I wasn't anywhere near State and Center two days ago."

"We know," Sam answered, hands raised in placation.

"Just needed to get you away from douche-dad of the year," Dean added, dropping the fed persona as easily as he would later shed the monkey suit.

Max watched them through narrowed eyes, suspicion clear. "Why?"

"Because we really do need to talk," the younger Winchester supplied.

"About *what*?"

"You, kid. And your abilities." Dean kept his body language fairly open even as Max's immediately tensed and shut down. There was a moment of tense, deadly silence between them before the kid's hand shot out.

Dean got out half a curse, hand going for his gun even as it slipped from his hip and flew into the air between them. Max's outstretched hand almost touched the butt of the gun as it levitated in the middle of the three men, aimed pointedly at Dean.

"Whoa, whoa!" Sam made an aborted move forward, stopping when the weapon swung in his direction. He glanced around quickly, surveying the quiet suburban street for both witnesses and collateral. "It's okay, Max. I have them too."

The look on the kids face clearly said that was the last thing he'd expected to hear. His hand wavered for a moment, and the gun shook before steadying in the air once more. "What?"

"Not exactly like yours," Sam kept going, hands still raised. "I get these visions-"

"What sort of visions?"

"Death premonitions," Dean supplied, still eyeing his own gun still trained on his brother.

Max pulled a face, switching between the two brothers. "That's crazy."

Dean snorted, then immediately pulled a straight face when the gun jerked back towards him. He raised his hands as well, following his brother's lead. "Says the guy currently Harry Houdini-ing a gun."

"Max." Sam pushed his hands forward calmingly, catching the kid's attention. He was using the soft, puppydog voice he only used with

victims, that one he'd eventually grow out of. "We just want to talk. We think they're connected – your powers, my visions. I think they come from the same place."

"The yellow eyed man," Max mumbled, eyes still darting between the two.

"You've seen him?" Sam lowered his hands, eyebrows raised. If Azazel had been messing with Max too then they'd have to protect him. Maybe they could make another deal, or lure the bastard into a trap and kill him once and for all.

"He comes to me in dreams," the kid answered, eyes focused on the younger Winchester. "Tells me…"

"What's he tell you, kid?"

Max's gaze flickered to Dean but when he spoke, he addressed Sam. "Did you have a vision of me? Am I going to die?"

"No, you're not-"

"He had a vision of your dad," Dean interrupted. They needed to cut to the chase here, not smother the kid with pity. Or answer that question honestly. "Dead, in the garage, because you killed him."

"What…" The kid's face scrunched up in confusion, and then flattened out in realization. "Are you here to *stop* me?"

Given the incredulous tone, they weren't likely to talk him down from that murderous ledge as easily as they'd assumed.

"Max-"

"You *saw* him back there!" he cut Sam off before the hunter could even get started. "You think that's bad? That's not even the tip of the iceberg."

"Max, I know you've had it rough-"

"*Rough?*" The psychic's face reddened, his glower darkening with rage. Dean's eyes darted down to Max's free hand, fisting by his side, and the one splayed out in front of him controlling his gun. Both were shaking, and the gun trembled in the air to match. Man, he'd really hoped to get out of this situation without getting shot.

"You can't kill your parents," he retorted sharply, calling the kid's

attention back to him and off of his brother. "No matter how much they deserve it."

"Why not?" Max rebuked, staring him down with the resolve of a kid who'd already accepted the consequence and made his decision regardless. "Who's gonna stop me? You?"

Dean pulled his shoulders back, staring down the little shit with resolve of his own. "If I have to."

"Okay, everyone calm down," Sam interrupted, stepping between them and coming almost abreast to the floating gun. At least anyone passing on the street behind them wouldn't see the levitating weapon anymore. "Max, we can help you."

"I don't need help. I'm strong now." Despite the watery sheen to his eyes, the kid stood tall and Sam faltered as he realized that talking him down might not even be an option anymore. "The yellow eyed man was right; I can make sure they never hurt me again."

"We'll get your parents locked away," Sam tried again, only to have Max once more cut him off.

"That's not good enough!"

"Really?" Dean laughed, bringing the kids anger his way once more. "Have you seen your father? He's not gonna do well in prison, kid. He'll get what he deserves."

"They *deserve* to die!"

Sam's shoulders slouched slightly as he stared at the kid no older than he was, who'd obviously had just as shitty a childhood, if not far worse. John had never touched him – not bad enough to qualify as abuse. No, his weapon of choice hadn't been fists; it had been neglect and disappointment.

"That's how you get revenge?" Dean scoffed, the condescension in his voice clear as day.

"Yes!"

"Why?" Dean took a step forward, towards the gun and the kid. Sam's train of thought shifted to whether or not his idiot of an older brother was under the delusion that he was bullet proof. "They won't even know it was you. They'll just die, never having to own up to anything

they did wrong. Never knowing you were the one that put them in their place."

"Dean…" Sam tried to caution his brother, concern seriously mounting. But Max just took a step back. His posture faltered as he stared at the older man with something broken in his expression. The gun lowered an inch, and it was obvious the kid's focus was no longer on it. "Let us help you, Max. We'll get your parents arrested. We can get you help."

"You mean a shrink," the kid answered back, but the anger was gone from his voice, replaced with bitterness. "Been there. I think I can handle myself."

The gun clattered to the sidewalk as Max turned and headed back up the drive without another word.

Sam let out a long sigh, rubbing his hands down his face. Dean bent over, scooping up the gun and checking the ivory hilt and cartridge for damage. He tucked it back into his hip holster, safely hidden away by the front flap of his suit jacket. Sam watched him do all of it so mechanically, rote motion par for the course.

Dean caught the look and frowned at him. "What?"

Sam shook his head and turned towards the Impala, parked a couple feet further down the street.

"The kid wants to stick it to his parents," Dean defended himself as he followed after his younger brother. "I figured pointing out the flaw in his plan might stop him."

"Oh, yeah, he totally seems stable now." Sam wrenched open the side door as Dean moved around to the passenger side. "Nice work."

"Shut up," Dean muttered, ducking into the Impala. "It worked, didn't it?"

-o-o-o-

Bobby clucked his tongue to the roof of his mouth as he sat in the Robinson's parlor, shotgun resting against the edge of the couch, tea untouched on the coffee table, and lighter tucked in his breast pocket, still warm from going Son of Sam on a racist truck.

"So..." He bobbed his head absently at the mother daughter duo sitting

across from him just as awkwardly. "You and Dean, huh?"

Cassie shot him a dark glower as Mrs. Robinson glanced between the two of them, eyebrows raised and motherly interest clearly peaked.

Chapter 28: Season 1: Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Oh boy, here we go! Solid T rating for this chapter due to graphic descriptions of violence, gore, and death. Get ready for that cliffhanger, ladies and gents :D

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 27

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Winchesters camped out in the Impala that night, parked on the curb across the street and two houses down from the Millers. Sam and Dean had spent the afternoon catching up on the sleep they'd missed driving through the night, fairly confident nothing would happen since Sam's vision of Jim Miller dying in his garage had definitely shown a nighttime attack. So there they were, stuck watching the quiet house through the late hours of the night for signs of movement in the garage in case Max went through with his murderous plan.

Jim Miller came home at 11:15 in his two door sedan, Michigan license plate a dead match for Sam's death premonition. The Winchesters watched, tense, as Mr. Miller climbed out of his car, made his way towards the door to the house, and pressed the button for the garage door to close.

Sam and Dean waited with another held breath as the light flickered off and everything remained perfectly calm. Dean turned the engine over and the Impala crept forward until they were across the street from the Miller house. He turned off the car, the smooth rumbling falling silent in the still night.

They couldn't hear an engine running from the garage, heard no screams for help or any disturbance of any kind, really. Dean shared a look with Sam, and the two settled in to make sure that didn't change for the rest of the night.

-o-o-o-

When the sun peaked over the first house at six thirty, Dean let out a jaw-splitting yawn. He reached for the keys, ready to call it and go

find some sanctuary in flat pillows and stained motel sheets. "Think we're good?"

Sam was still watching the house, a gnawing deep in his stomach causing him to question the obvious. Jim Miller hadn't died in the garage overnight. There'd been no commotion in the house whatsoever, and Sam's vision had definitely taken place at night. Still, the hunter couldn't shake the firmly planted dread.

But, to be honest, he'd had had that pit in his stomach since Dean told him the apocalypse was well on its way and they were the main stars.

"Yeah," he finally answered, pulling his gaze away from the house with some difficulty. He settled in into the leather seat, forcing himself not to look back. "Yeah, let's go get some sleep."

Dean hummed happily in agreement, put Baby into gear, and pulled away from the Miller house.

-o-o-o-

Sam woke from blood and cries for help to Dean shaking him almost desperately.

"Sammy! Wake up!"

The younger Winchester shot upright in the motel bed, lungs heaving and sweat pooling along the planes of his body. Disoriented, he snatched at his brother's chest, Dean already holding on to Sam's shoulder with his casted left arm, unbroken limb grabbing the younger man's forearm to shake him awake.

"Dean?"

His brother let out a sigh of relief, but the tension didn't leave his body as he took a step away from the bed. Sam let him go, releasing his fistful of Dean's shirt.

"Yeah," Dean breathed out, scrubbing a hand through his short hair as he stared at his heaving, wide-eyed brother. "Well that's not a good sign."

Sam shook his head, memories he'd carry with him for months to come flashing across his eyelids again. So much blood. The younger Winchester kicked away the tangled sheets and swung his legs over the bed. "We gotta go. We gotta go right now."

"Right." Dean nodded, already grabbing his jeans and working his legs into them as he half-hopped towards the dresser and the keys to the Impala.

-o-o-o-

"You gonna tell me what you saw?" his brother finally asked as they raced through midday traffic of south town Sagginaw, back towards the Millers.

Sam clenched his jaw, staring straight ahead. "Just drive faster."

Dean complied, the engine rumbling with approval as he navigated suburban streets at very illegal speeds.

-o-o-o-

The Impala screeched to a halt outside the Miller house, leaving tire treads right up to the curb. Sam was out of the car before Dean had the engine off, and his older brother followed immediately after him. The two raced for the front door, Sam pounding on the wood as soon as he was within reach.

"Max! Mr. Miller?" Sam continued beating the door long past the point where it was obvious no one was going to answer. Dean finally pushed his younger brother to the side and delivered a swift kick to the wood, splintering the edge of the door and taking the lock with it.

The two brothers rushed into the Miller house. Sam took the lead, no hesitation in his run as he headed straight for the kitchen. Dean drew up short as soon as they skidded onto the tile. He didn't catch the sound that made it past his throat as he threw the back of his hand over his mouth and turned away from the site that greeted them.

"Jesus!" Dean slid his eyes shut against the horrific image, hand cupping over his mouth.

Shoulders slumped, Sam stared at the two bodies poised exactly as he had seen in his sleep. Mr. and Mrs. Miller both lay on the floor, pools of blood surrounding their still warm bodies. Alice Miller was face up on the tiles, the only identifiable part left of her was her blonde hair, haloed out around a swollen face, purpled and split in so many places she looked more like flayed meat than a human being. Jim Miller was collapsed half on his side, knife sticking out of his throat, buried to the hilt with his own hand still wrapped around the handle.

Sam finally turned away when he saw the bloodied, broken skin of Jim's knuckles wrapped around the blade and knew it had been those hands that inflicted the damage to his wife's body.

"Why?" he mumbled, more to himself than to the silence of a room where half its occupants were dead. He grabbed at the sides of his head, remembering the way Max had stood there and watched as Jim Miller was forced to beat his wife to death and then stab himself. Max had just watched. Watched like his stepmother had watched for twenty three years. Sam let out a feral cry, slamming his hand into the doorframe of the kitchen. "Why have these visions if we can't stop them? What's the point!"

Dean didn't answer, but his thoughts weren't far from his brother's. He could, after all, relate more now than ever before. Steeling himself, the man from the future turned back into the room and the results of his careless presence in this timeline.

"This isn't on you," he replied softly, though his voice was rough with anger and guilt. He stared at Alice Miller, dead and bloodied because of him. "I'm the one who pushed the kid."

Yeah, he had. Sam looked to his brother rather than the gruesome scene in front of them. Dean may have pushed the psychic in the worst direction he possibly could have, but he hadn't seen Max's face, watching his father murder his stepmom. Sam had. There was no talking anyone out of that.

"It's not on you either," he responded after a moment. Dean snorted, his opinion of that clear enough, but Sam pushed on, "The only one responsible for this is Max."

"Well, he'll be in the wind now." Dean glanced around at the blood splattered walls, the half-prepared meal lying untouched on the kitchen counter, the bloody shoe prints pressed into the carpet to leave a trail towards the back of the house. He took the scene in with a cop's eye. "Even with the murder/suicide look, the police will want to question him. If he knows what's good for him, he's long gone."

"The kicked in door and additional suspects will help his cause," Sam added quietly, looking pointedly down at their own booted feet. Dean may have managed not to enter the kitchen far enough to contaminate the scene, but he'd stepped through one of Max's bloody footprints on the way in and that would be enough for the cops to know there were multiple perpetrators.

"Damn it," Dean muttered, patting himself down. With his good arm, he pulled a handkerchief and then another from his back pocket. "We need to wipe down any place we might have left prints. That wall, front door…"

Sam held his hand out for the second handkerchief, but Dean had trailed off, staring at the blue and white fabric clenched in his hand. The younger Winchester raised a brow when his brother didn't move. "Dean?"

"I've done this before."

Sam frowned at the whispered words, hand still held out for the cloth. Sure, they'd had to wipe down evidence of their presence at dozens of crime scenes throughout their life (and yet Dean still thought they had a good childhood). Somehow, Sam doubted that's what his brother was talking about, though. "You mean the murders? I thought you said the stepmom lived the first time."

"No, I mean this." He shook his hand with the handkerchief in it, still staring at the fabric. Finally he lifted his gaze, first taking in his brother and then the room around them. Given the distant glint to his eye, though, Sam doubted it was the Miller house he was seeing. "We were…we were on a fire escape. Outside a window."

Sam looked around the house as well, not sure what his brother was seeing or even looking for. But he let him work through the deja vu, if that's what it was. Dean went rigid, whatever memory he was trying to access finally secured in his brain. He turned to his brother, eyes wide.

"The window was covered in blood."

"What?" Sam blinked, then blinked again as something twinged just behind his eyes. Dean was already moving through, darting forward to wipe down the wall Sam had slammed his palm into.

"Max didn't just kill his dad," his brother said as he hastily wiped at the wall. "He killed his uncle too!"

Sam tilted his head at the pressure behind his eyeball grew to encompass his temple. It didn't hurt, but it certainly wasn't a pleasant feeling either. Nor was it a good sign. He started moving, grabbing the second cloth from his brother and heading for the front door. If Max was going after someone else, then they had to go. Quickly. He stumbled on his way there, intent to wipe free of any evidence of their

earlier pounding completely derailed as the pressure in his head flared, overriding his balance. He crashed into the living room wall.

"Sammy?" Dean was by his side in a second, steadying him with an arm to either shoulder. Sam sank to his knees, hand pressed to his temple as both the pressure and the Miller's living room were replaced with flashes of light and then instant clarity.

He was standing on the curb outside an apartment complex in the setting sunlight of dusk, gold lettering on the front door reading Saginam Manor. Sam frowned, turning first left and then right in the relatively quiet urban area. Whistling caught his attention, and the hunter turned to see a man emerge from around the building, twirling car keys on his finger. He strolled up to the door, entering a four digit code to enter the building. Four five two eight. The door beeped and the man – who Sam could only assume was Max Miller's uncle – slipped through the glass doors.

"Hey!" Sam took a step towards the man, but a flash of light blinded him and he covered his eyes with his forearm, stumbling back a step. As soon as his vision cleared, he turned around only to find himself in an apartment. He spun again as keys jingled in the door.

The same man stepped through the front entrance, turned the key and pulled them from the lock. He resumed his earlier whistle, tossing the keys into a bowl on an entrance table as he walked right past Sam like he wasn't even there.

"Hey."

Max's uncle shrugged out of his jacket, tossing it on the kitchenette table as he headed into the galley style kitchen. Frustrated, Sam followed after.

"Hey!"

A shadow moved in his periphery and Sam spun around before he made it to the kitchen. Max. He was here. Sam moved into the hallway as Max's uncle pulled a beer from the fridge, cracking it with the bottle opener magnet off the side of the fridge. Sam glanced either way down the hall, keen eyes looking for any sign of Max.

"Hello, Uncle Roger."

The hunter spun around, only to find Max standing between him and the kitchen, his back to the hunter as he faced down his uncle. Roger,

for his part, looked up from his beer with a hint of surprise on his face, quickly replaced by derision.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he groused to his nephew, taking a sip of his beer and moving to push past Max. The kid stood firm, however, and the beer suddenly shattered in Roger's hand.

"What the hell-" Roger hissed as he grabbed at his hand, a shard of green glass sticking out of his palm. "Son of a bitch!"

He ignored his nephew, moving instead for the sink. He froze, however, when the glass rattled on the floor. Roger stared down at it, a frown across his face which quickly morphed into horror as the shards lifted off the ground and aligned themselves to hover in front of his face between him and Max.

"What-"

"How does it feel?" Max stood, jaw shaking in anger and eyes furious in concentration and hatred. With clenched fists, he jerked his head to the side. Sam shouted out a warning, but no one reacted to him as a single piece of green glass flew forward like lighting.

Roger yelped, stumbling back and grabbing at his cheek and the fresh slice through his skin. He looked down at his hand, the blood dotting his fingertips, and then back at his nephew in renewed horror.

"Max…"

"I'm going to repay *every* bruise you ever gave me. Piece. By. Piece."

"Max, don't!" Sam tried to move forward, to stop him, but his arm went right through the kid. Nothing but a vision of something that hadn't happened yet.

"No, Max, wait, please!" Roger stumbled backward, back hitting the wall and kitchen window that led to the fire escape beyond. Another piece of glass flew forward and Roger lifted his arms in self-defense. He cried out as the glass sliced through the flesh of his forearm, far deeper than the first cut.

Max's eyes narrowed as his uncle looked back up at him in realization. The remaining glass pieces twitched, and Roger's eyes widened as they all moved towards him at once. Sam knew he was about to watch Roger Miller get cut to shreds.

Suddenly, the front door burst inward with a bang and, as one, Sam and Max spun towards the interruption.

"Sammy!"

Sam jerked back to the present, shooting forward so suddenly that Dean had to grab onto him to keep him from slamming straight into the side table by his head.

"We gotta go," he whispered hoarsely, vision still spinning.

"Yup," was all his brother said, already pulling the unsteady psychic to his feet and hauling him towards the front door. "You got an address?"

"Close enough to one," Sam muttered, hand pressed to his head. Dean stopped them just long enough to give the front door a messy wipe down with the handkerchief, and then the two were moving down the drive towards the haphazardly parked Impala.

-o-o-o-

Pushing the car as fast as they could in broad daylight, the brothers headed to the address listed under Saginam Manor Apartments in the Yellow Pages. Out of nowhere, the tension in the car having created a heavy silence between the two, Dean hit the steering wheel. Sam startled, turning to his brother as the older hunter let out a frustrated grunt.

"It doesn't make sense."

Sam snorted. "What part?"

"All of it!" Dean shook his head, hitting the steering wheel with the heel of his hand again. "This didn't happen last time."

"Yeah, but our presence here – you knowing what you know – would naturally change things." Sam tried to take the logical route, though he knew his brother was already well aware of what his presence would do. He'd been dealing with the reality of it for almost seven months now.

All Dean heard was Sam's nice way of avoiding the fact that he'd pushed the kid into brutally murdering his entire family.

"It's not just that," he argued back, eyes on the road as he swerved around a Volvo. "Cassie – the friend who called? We went last time.

Helped her solve that case."

Yeah, Sam had kind of figured, given the details Dean had had on hand to pass on to Bobby. But he didn't exactly see how that figured into the situation with Max.

"How come, this time, she calls and we're already on our way to Max? You'd already seen him gas his dad."

The pre-law student frowned, starting to catch on to his brother's point. "Which happened first last time?"

Dean let out an annoyed growl deep in his throat. "I don't know, not for sure. But I think we wrapped the thing with Cassie first. Either way, they weren't on top of each other, not like this. I'd remember that."

Which made sense. Right now, they were separate memories for Dean, which made placing them in chronological order harder. If there had been overlap, Dean likely would be able to recall the thing that tied the memories together. But what could have changed?

"You think Cassie called later?" Sam asked, thoughts spinning with theoreticals and paradoxes. There was a reason people wrote entire papers on the concept of time and traveling through it.

"What would make her do that?" Dean countered, clenching his jaw. "Time travel ain't the clearest thing, but as I understand it, nothing should change that we don't change ourselves."

"So Cassie should have gone through the same actions at the same time," Sam reasoned out loud.

"Max too. At least until we got here."

Sam pursed his lips, mind racing. If both parties should have followed the same path before Dean and Sam interacted with them, then something else, another force connected to Dean's time travel, must have interfered to speed up one of them.

"Unless it's a butterfly effect."

Dean arched a brow his direction. "A what?"

"Butterfly effect," Sam repeated. "You know, a butterfly flaps its wings in California today, tomorrow there's a typhoon in the Philippines?"

Dean was staring at him like he was crazy, and the younger of the two rolled his eyes,

"It's the idea that the smallest of actions can have ripple effects, creating disproportionally larger reactions that are impossible to predict." Which could explain why Cassie or Max had changed their actions. It was probably far more complicated than they could ever track, with any number of degrees of separation between whatever Dean did and the end result of one of them moving up their time table, but it wasn't impossible. It was, however, really bad news for them.

That was one theoretical problem with time travel. If whatever they did effected non-local change, then there was no way they could keep those changes small. There would always be too many variables, too many ways the world was connected to avoid the domino effect.

"Well it better not be that," Dean groused, the vein in his temple twitching as he clenched his jaw painfully. "We've done a hell of a lot more than flap some butterfly wings here, Sammy."

The younger Winchester wisely didn't respond to that, instead turning his gaze out the windshield and silently urging the Impala to go faster.

-o-o-o-

Outside the apartment, Dean threw the Impala into park and reached for the door, but Sam's hand wrapping around his forearm held him up.

"Dean, you can't take your gun in there." Sam was staring at him like the statement was an obvious one, but Dean did a double take, glancing at the .45 in his hand.

"I'm not going in there unarmed, Sammy. And neither are you!"

"He's already taken your gun once," the younger Winchester argued back, "and last time you said he killed himself with it."

That, if nothing else, gave Dean pause, but ultimately he shook his head. "What the hell am I supposed to do? The guy can take a knife off me as easily as a gun, Sam, and I'm not going in there unarmed."

With that, the older Winchester climbed out of the car, tucking his ivory laid pistol into the back of his jeans. Sam gave him a look over the roof of the car, which Dean pointedly ignore.

"Look," he said as they moved around the car, hastily jogging towards the double glass doors that marked the front of the apartment complex, "I won't pull it unless I intend to use it."

The look his younger brother sent him spoke volumes as to what Sam though of that plan. He punched in the four digit code Dean could only assume he'd seen in his vision and the security box beeped, the sound of the lock releasing from the door. Dean pulled it open, gesturing his brother inside.

"He probably has to see it to use it, right?" the man from the future continued as they started through the halls, looking for the elevator. His brother shrugged beside him, still looking unconvinced. "So, I won't pull it unless I intend to use it before he can."

Sam drew up short even as they rounded the corner to the bank of elevators, staring at his brother. The older man didn't stop moving, reaching the wall and pressing the up button. Sam was slower to join him, but didn't argue his point. The young hunter knew they were quickly approaching the point where Dean's solution would be their only solution.

-o-o-o-

They burst into the apartment, Max spinning around to see them as Roger Miller pressed himself against the kitchen window, clutching his bleeding forearm. Glass shards clinked like a mockery of a peaceful wind chime as what was left of the beer bottle fell to the kitchen tiles under Max's shift in focus.

"Get out!"

Sam raised his hands in placation, but was already shaking his head regretfully. "We can't do that, Max. We can't let you kill him."

"It's none of your business!" the traumatized man yelled, face reddening. "I won't let you stop me!"

Max spun back to the kitchen to find Roger pushing open the window, intent to escape through it. He let out a howl, jerking his head to the side and back. His uncle yelled as he went flying back into the kitchen, skidding across the kitchen tiles straight towards his nephew.

Dean's fingers twitched against his thigh to draw his gun, but he held back. He'd made his brother a promise, and one born out of a damn good point. No reason to give the kid a faster method of killing his

uncle. Or himself.

Sam took a step forward, knowing his brother would intervene more forcefully if it meant saving Roger Miller's life. "Listen to me, Max. This has to stop."

"It will," he growled through clenched teeth, staring down at the man who had beat him for so many years, who had been the source of every nightmare, waking and asleep. Roger Miller curled up on himself, sobbing like a pathetic bully that he was. Max held out his hand. "After my uncle, it'll stop."

"No!" Sam moved into the kitchen and Max's field of vision, staying clear of his uncle but still with those hands raised and his eyes pleading. "You need to let him go."

"Why?" Max balked, staring at the man who knew nothing about him. Who had no idea what his life was like, the hell he had lived through. Who dared to take his revenge – his justice – away from him.

"What they did to you growing up…They deserve to be punished, Max, I get that-"

"Growing up?" Max stared at Sam with wild eyes. Suddenly, he straightened, reaching for his shirt. Dean, who had been moving in behind him, froze with his hand wrapped around the hilt of his gun, but Sam shook his head as minutely as possible. Max pulled up the hem of his shirt, well above his pectorals to reveal a hell of a bruise, blossomed across his side, over his ribs and up towards his collar bone.

Sam suddenly found himself struggling to breathe at the myriad of colors and suffering that covered the kid.

"Try four hours ago," Max bit out, lowering his shirt back down. "Guess old habits die hard."

"Your uncle wasn't at your house four hours ago," Sam tried to reason weakly, licking his lips. Even he knew it was a pathetic excuse.

"You think he's any different? So it was my dad this time. It's been him plenty of times before." Roger flinched as Max pointed at him with a shaking finger. The glass on the floor of the kitchen started to rattle around them.

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered, and meant it. "Why didn't you just leave?"

Max shook his head at him, eyes filled with the betrayal of yet another person failing to get him. "It wasn't about getting away. It was about being…not afraid anymore. My whole life I've been helpless…not anymore. Now I'm strong."

Max turned back to his uncle and Dean moved in, drawing his gun and pressing the muzzle flush to the man's back. Sam sucked in a breath, expecting to see the misunderstood, mistreated kid hit the floor with a bullet to his spine. But the moment came and left, his older brother standing there with the gun against Max's back and a fierce expression on his face that belied the fact he couldn't pull that trigger.

"It's over," Dean said instead, false bravado and confidence in his voice. "You're not gonna kill him."

Max tilted his head to the side, glancing from his periphery at the man behind him. He raised his arms out to the side slowly in a mockery of surrender that was anything but. The fake FBI agents both tensed, and for a single moment, Max reveled in their fear of him.

"I won't have to."

Dean swore as the gun was ripped from his grasp once more, a single shot cracking off but veering wide. He was sent flying through the air seconds later, crashing atop Roger and rolling off of him with his momentum. The man grunted beneath him, but the hunter was fairly sure he'd live.

Sam moved to tackle Max, but the gun came to a frozen halt between them, barrel aimed straight at the taller man's head. Sam glared down the length of the gun at the kid controlling it. Max smirked, holding out one hand towards Dean and his uncle. Sam tensed, expecting him to go after Roger, with nothing he or Dean could do to stop him.

Instead, his older brother let out a grunt of surprise as he straightened upright on his knees on the kitchen floor. His body was rigid and stiff, and his eyes blown wide in confusion.

"Dean?"

The hunter made a strangled noise as he suddenly bent down and landed a solid right hook straight across Roger Miller's face. The man cried out, arms coming up to his bleeding, busted nose.

"Shit!" Dean swore through gritted teeth as his broken left arm came

down right after, cast splintering with a solid crack as he caught the wounded man across his cheek. Roger's head snapped to the side as Dean let out a painful cry. Fist after fist reigned down as the hunter screamed out against it. "I'm not doing it. Damn it, Sam, you gotta stop him!"

Sam took a forceful step forward but Max snapped his attention back, head tilting in a daring motion as the gun cocked between them. The hunter drew up short, teeth gritted and bared as he stared at the gun and the boy, wondering if he could get to one before the other went off.

"Sam!"

Roger Miller was barely fighting back anymore, arms weakly held up to stop the barrage of fists that hit every inch of available flesh. Dean was going to end up killing him if Sam didn't do anything.

"Damn it, Sam, knock me out!"

Max turned at the command, surprise lighting his eyes and Sam took his chance. He might not have made it to Max before the gun went off, but he could easily dodge to the side, to Dean, and out of that path of that gun, which is exactly what he did. Max didn't even have a chance to fire the weapon before Sam was tackling his brother with a right hook of his own.

Dean went down hard, head cracking against the kitchen tile loud enough to make Sam flinch. But he didn't get back up, which had been the whole idea.

Sam straightened slowly, posture stiff and dangerous, as he turned back to Max. The kid's face had a hardened look all his own, the enjoyment of this gone from his eyes. Now Sam was only in the way.

The youngest Winchester threw out his hand on instinct as soon as that gun rounded on him once more, and the weapon twitched and shook in the air as the two psychics fought for control of the device. Sam grit his teeth against the strain and put all of his focus into keeping the gun aimed away from himself, his brother, and Roger Miller. The trigger trembled beneath their opposed strengths. Max had a lot more practice, but Sam was quickly losing any reason to hold back.

"You know the difference between us?" Max asked, voice shaking from equal parts mental strain and anger. "You don't have the guts to do it.

To take what you want."

The gun waivered, and then slowly but surely started towards Dean, groaning on the kitchen floor as he started to come to. Sam clenched his teeth, fingertips curling as he fought to hold the gun back but lost ground, one centimeter at a time.

He could once more feel the vibrations beneath his skin which were becoming terrifyingly familiar. Sam knew he was holding back; he could hear them singing for release, for the freedom he had granted them once, when they faced off against a lifeless hunk of metal.

The gun slipped another inch closer to his brother, coming within firing range of the downed hunter.

"You know the difference between us, Max?" He tore his eyes off the weapon to meet the watery, rage-filled gaze of the kid he could have become so easily. "I don't need a gun."

Sam released his grip on the weapon and on himself. His hand dropped and the gun went flying into the kitchen wall under the sudden pull of only one master. It fired off with a thunderous crack, the bullet ripping through the air and shattering the window. Dean weakly covered his head, limbs disoriented and only half-responsive, as glass reigned down around him.

In the same movement, Sam raised his other hand and curled his fingers into a tight, aching fist around an invisible object. Across from him, eyes still wide in surprise at the one eighty turn of events, Max suddenly choked on his own throat. His eyes bulged as he scrambled for his neck, the air within his chest turning against him as Sam squeezed his power around the man's lungs and windpipe. A torn gag ripped from the kid's throat as he started to asphyxiate on nothing, fingers clawing at his skin.

Sam knew what he had to do. Max wasn't going to stop, he couldn't be talked down. And Sam had to end it before he could kill anyone else, especially Dean.

The blood in his veins sung in release, vibrations humming through every limb as they stretched across the space between predator and prey and wrapped their icy hands around Max Miller.

"S'm…" Dean made it onto his back on the kitchen floor, hand pressed weakly against his aching jaw as he stared up at the multiple swaying men looming above him. He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision

with little success. "S'm, don't."

The young hunter didn't answer, his focus entirely on Max. He honed in past the shallow surface of the world, beneath skin and blood and muscle, searching for something deeper. Max shuddered, a gasp caught in his sealed throat and escaping only as a pained gurgle. Sam found his target – a weak, shuddering glow at the center of his prey. The edges flickered grey, and streaks of slimy black perforated the light like blackened veins.

If Sam could pull those out, Max would never hurt anyone ever again.

He tightened his hold on the boy, reaching his other hand up and towards the frozen man. Curling his fingers, he could feel the same slimy darkness that had wrapped around the Baku's center. Just like then, Sam moved more on sense than knowledge, clenching his power around a sliver of that taint.

Max writhed in his grip, what were surely screams cut off by his sealed throat escaped only as squeaks, but Sam was too focused to see or hear the world around him.

"Sam!" Dean was upright now and struggling to stay that way through what was no doubt a concussion. "Sam, stop, yer killin' him."

But Sam didn't stop, or perceive his brother's words beyond sound that existed out *there*. He was inside, beyond the physical world, a layer deeper. The power within him thrummed with that connection, and he breathed with each powerful surge sent through his body.

Max's face was turning a dangerous shade of purple and his struggles starting to falter. The edges of the light in his chest flickered further, grey beginning to crawl its way towards the center. Sam didn't pay it any attention, focused on the dark veins, the poison the demon Azazel had left behind.

"Sammy!"

The young psychic was suddenly ripped from that other world by a very physical hand wrapped around his calf, fingers gripping into jeans tight enough to bruise. Sam blinked, hands dropping as he stared down at his brother, half collapsed on the floor with his arm stretched out, hand clenched around Sam's leg. Injury-glazed eyes searched up at his own pleadingly.

"Yer not a killer, Sam." The words were slurred, but desperate. Sam

could tell his brother was about half a second from passing out, yet that grip on his leg never waivered. "That's not…what those powers mean."

Max stumbled onto the floor of the kitchen, barely catching himself against the counter as he hacked and coughed. The full force of what he'd almost done hit Sam like a semi to the chest and he stumbled back a step. Dean's fingers slipped from his jeans as his brother let his head fall back to the cool tile. He was still conscious; the long, moaning groan was proof of that.

Sam stared, horrified, as Max tried to right himself using the counter as support, but it was clear he was struggling to breathe. He clutched at his chest and throat, and the young hunter paled at the deep, red finger marks starting to purple around the boy's throat. Sam hadn't even touched him.

He looked down at his hands, knowing that he hadn't needed to.

"Sam," Dean mumbled, head still pressed to the floor but he made a momentous effort to get back to his knees at the very least. Dazed green eyes started up at three tilting versions of his brother, and he tried adamantly to stay on the one in the middle. "It's okay."

It really wasn't.

Sam lowered shaky hands back to his side, the sight of them causing nothing but nausea in his stomach. He'd been trying to help. Consciously, he knew that. He'd known if he could somehow pull that darkness from Max, he could fix him. But in doing so, he'd almost killed him.

And he wouldn't have even noticed.

Hazel eyes flickered up. Max lifted his head, face still an ugly red, to meet his gaze. There was terror in his eyes that Sam had put there. The youngest Winchester opened his mouth, no clue what to say, but desperate to say something.

Max Miller's head suddenly snapped a hundred and eighty degrees around with a terrifyingly loud crack. His body slumped to the floor beside his equally unmoving uncle.

Sam stumbled back in shock, hitting the counter on the other side of the galley kitchen with legs that weren't going to hold him up for much longer. Dean scrambled back, succeeding only in falling over

more than moving away. His eyes traced over the floor to the pair of dusty boots standing just past Max's now lifeless body, up past the old jeans and flannel shirt, to the pale yellow irises of the demon standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Sam, Dean," Azazel greeted with a cheerful smile on his borrowed face. "I think it's time for a chat."

Chapter 29: Season 1: Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Repeat of last chapter's warnings. Depictions of violence, bit of gore, and torture. Solid T rating here. But it wouldn't be a Supernatural worthy story if there wasn't some humor in there too ;)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

Season 1: Chapter 28

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam's head was heavy, chin swaying against his chest with each slow breath and the back of his neck aching at the harsh angle. Waking was a slow thing, his mind groggy and not particularly motivated to leave the cocoon of darkness that surrounded him. It was the invading cold, starting with his toes and crawling up his legs, mirrored in his arms and neck, that finally forced him to open his eyes.

Blobs of grays and blues swayed slowly into recognizable, if not confusing, shapes. The switch over only took a second; the moment of realization that this wasn't a hotel, that he wasn't lying in bed with the covers having slipped off, turned Sam's mind from tired and groggy to alert with whiplash-worthy speed. The hunter jerked forward, constricted lungs drawing in a sudden and forceful breath that was cut short when his ribs had no leeway to expand.

Sam's mind stumbled for a second as he looked down at his chest. Chains looped around his heaving torso, cutting each breath shallow. Both of his arms were included in the bonds, links digging in at his elbows and pressing the limbs tight to his upright body. The hunter quickly glanced over his shoulder at the thick, wooden support pillar he was strapped to. He gave a fierce tug to the chains, straining his muscles against the restraints with little success. The pillar behind him, despite being old and covered in several questionably growing things, was sturdy.

The well-trained hunter turned his gaze to the rest of the room, immediately searching for something to help in his escape. He was in an old building – possibly a hunting cabin – that was poorly lit and succumbing to what looked like years of abandonment. It was a one-

room, wooden structure from what he could tell. The majority of the windows were broken, probably from rocks given the shatter patterns of what glass remained. Most of the furniture that was left standing didn't look like it would stay that way for long. Several walls sported graffiti of various forms, from spray paint to splatter that looked a lot like blood, but given the obvious teenage hangout vibe of the abandoned building, Sam guessed was nothing more than red paint.

If there was a door into the cabin, it was behind him where he couldn't see it. There was nothing within reach that was going to help against chains, and nothing he could reach either way, restrained as he was. The stillness of the world beyond the cabin – the rustle of pine trees and leaves, the occasional twitter of a bird or the scuttle of a ground animal – suggested yelling for help was going to be just as useless.

His best bet at this point was his brother.

"Dean."

Sam strained against the chains once more just for good measure as he called out to the older man, who was collapsed, unbound, by the wall opposite Sam. He was slumped against the bare structure, neck tucked to his chest at an angle that suggested someone dropped him without much care. Sam clenched his teeth when his brother didn't so much as move.

"Dean!"

The fact that he wasn't tied up should have encouraged hope. It was probably orchestrated to, actually. But Sam felt the exact opposite. If Dean wasn't tied up, it was because the demon was coming back. Or already watching them. Sam turned his head against the pillar once more, straining to see the rest of the room behind him. But the pillar was the central support for the roof of the large, open room. It was wide, almost as wide as his shoulders, and just as deep. He couldn't see past it.

"Dean, come on, man. At least tell me you're alive."

Sam already knew he was from the steady rise and fall of his chest. But it had never been beneath him to use his brother's hard-coded protectiveness to get what he wanted.

"Dean!"

"'M alive," the man mumbled against his chest, hand twitching where it laid across his chest. The movement distracted the younger hunter for a second and he stared at that hand, knuckles busted, blood scabbed over but fingers still splattered with the evidence of what he'd done. His brother's other arm was motionless on the floor beside him, the white medical cast now covered in streaks of dirt and dotted red with Roger Miller's blood. A crack ran up the side from the force of each punch.

Sam shook himself, pushing his focus back on the problem at hand. Regret could be dealt with later. He glanced over his shoulder again, then back to his brother. "Dean, you need to get up. Right now."

"Kay," came the muttered reply, though his brother didn't move for another second. Sam's leg started jiggling anxiously, but Dean's arm twitched again and then he was struggling upright with a momentous groan. "'M up."

Glazed green eyes opened to slits, taking in the room around him slowly and with the rote movements of someone not fully awake.

"S'm?"

"Over here," he supplied, watching his brother closely. Sluggish movements, delayed reactions, slurred words; he looked drunk. Concussion then. Sam wasn't surprised, given that Dean's right cheek was a blossom of vibrant purples and blues, swollen twice in size and constricting at least some of his vision out of that eye. Sam remembered the way his brother's head had bounced off the linoleum tile of Roger Miller's kitchen.

He swallowed heavily. Well, at least Dean had woken up at all.

"Wha's goin' on?" Dean sat on the floor, upper body swaying as he stared up at his younger brother.

"We need to get out of here," Sam answered softly, not trying to baby his older brother but aware how unpleasant loud sounds were for a head wound. "You're not tied up, but I am. Think you can get me free?"

"Not a child," his brother muttered moodily, climbing to his feet in a single movement that made Sam grin. The way he swayed and stumbled back into the wall after coming to his feet was somewhat less encouraging. But the hunter knew his brother was tougher than nails and he had every faith in him.

"Whoa," Dean mumbled as he righted himself against the wall. His eyes narrowed as he stared at his brother, who seemed miles away given how much of a challenge standing had been. "Concussion?"

"Concussion," Sam confirmed with a twitch of his lips.

His older brother gave a firm nod, then immediately groaned in regret of the action. Muttering about head wounds, he made his way across the ten feet of distance separating him from Sam. The younger of the two tried not to rush him, knowing he was probably seeing three of everything, at a minimum. Not to mention the room would be swaying like a ship on rough seas.

Dean managed the voyage in a few long strides, and Sam was relieved to see a little more clarity in his eyes as he got to him. Calloused hands ran over the chains briefly, giving a quick tug before following them around to the back, where Sam assumed they were locked together.

"What happened?" Dean asked, words still slurred but sounding stronger.

"Azazel." Sam grit his teeth, closing his eyes against the memory of Max Miller's neck snapping and his lifeless body hitting the floor. "He must have knocked us out."

Dean grunted from behind the pillar, hands wrapping around the key-release padlock that hooked together two ends of chain. He scanned his still blurry vision around the room in search of a key, but came up empty. The yellow eyed bastard probably had it on him. Alright, plan B. He scanned the room a second time for anything he could use to pick a lock.

"Why don't you wear hairpins?"

Sam frowned, out of sight of his brother. His worry for Dean's mental condition ratcheted up another level. "What?"

"Hair's long enough for 'em," Dean continued mumbling as he moved away from the pillar and back into Sam's vision. He was patting himself down even as he crossed over to the half-standing dresser, and Sam realized he was looking for his lock picks. Dean mentally catalogued what he found - car keys in the wrong pocket *(if that fucking bastard touched my car I'm gonna make him glad demons don't have a god damn afterlife)*, phone, and wallet. No lock picks, no weapons. "Would keep that shit out of your face at least."

"Gee, I'll keep it in mind for our next hunt," Sam answered back with an eye roll his brother didn't see.

Dean started pulling open drawers, running his hands along the surface top, and then dropping to the ground with a grunt as he searched for anything – nails, a thin piece of wire, a sturdy enough splinter, an old bobby pin left behind by some teenage girl losing her virginity to a pimply jock in an abandoned cabin in the woods. Anything. All the while, he muttered about his moose of a younger brother getting a haircut if he wasn't going to at least hide lock picks in that bird's nest he called hair. He then proceeded to ramble, more to himself, about how they could get him some real pretty ones. Sparkly. Dress him up right.

If looks could kill, Sam would have murdered his only chance at escape some time ago.

"Ha!" The hunter stumbled back to his feet with a noise of triumph immediately followed by a noise of pain. Dean swayed dangerously for a moment before he righted himself and headed back to his brother like he was right as rain. He was holding an old hair clip in his hand, a small bejeweled butterfly at the end suggesting it was less likely lost by some blushing virgin and more likely a pre-teen or single digit who'd come with her big sis or bro to the creepy cabin in the woods where the big kids hung out.

Dean disappeared back behind the pillar again, and Sam heard the telltale clicks and scrapes of his brother picking a lock. The larger man fidgeted in the chains, trying and failing to exercise patience. Dan knew what he was doing, and Sam would be free in just another couple seconds.

"Oh shit."

Sam tensed at the shaky whisper that came from his brother, all sounds from behind him ceasing. He tried to turn in the chains, to see past the pillar. "What? Did you drop it?"

He didn't know what it was; if it was his hunter's instinct suddenly screaming at him; if it was how well he knew his brother and the way Dean's breath shuddered as soon as the room had silenced; or maybe it was the way his brother had gone absolutely still. Whatever it was, Sam knew before his brother said it that they weren't alone in the cabin anymore.

"He's here."

"Well, look who's up and at 'em!"

Dean suddenly yelped, but before Sam could ask what happened, he felt an intense heat around his middle. He let out a cry of his own as the chains flashed burning red for a moment, sizzling against his flesh. The intense, burning heat vanished as quickly as it had come, but it accomplished Azazel's goal. Dean stumbled into Sam's field of vision, away from the padlock and his restrained brother.

Despite the fierce sting across his arms and chest, the sight of his older brother, mostly unharmed, added a modicum of relief to Sam's ratcheted tension. Dean stumbled another couple feet back, eyes darting around for a weapon.

"I should have known better than to underestimate that Winchester gumshoe."

Sam tried to turn against the pillar once again, straining to see the owner of the disembodied voice. Dean's hardened, slightly panicked gaze over his right shoulder told Sam the demon was probably just past the pillar, barely out of his view. There was something about not being able to see the bastard that made his helpless situation all the worse.

"Dean," he cautioned, voice strained. His brother was in serious danger here, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to help. The fact Azazel had left Dean untied once more poked at his attention and he tried to ignore all the very dark reasons his brain supplied for why the demon would do that.

His older brother had only a moment to shake his head minutely in Sam's direction before he was blasted back, flying across the length of the cabin to crash into the wall he had woken up against.

"Dean!"

The hunter managed to protect his head from the impact, forcing his chin to his chest to avoid adding another bump to the skull. His neck protested fiercely, but at this point he would take whiplash over a secondary concussion. Dean's vision still darkened momentarily and he started to slump forward, sliding off the wall, before an invisible pressure caught him and splayed him against the surface.

Azazel strolled across the room, bending down a few feet away from Sam to pick up the hair pin Dean had dropped in the sudden attack. He whistled merrily as he twirled the device in his hand. Both

brothers watched, eyes wide, as the little pin lit up as red as the chains had, metal softening and then liquefying in the demon's grip. The molten material slipped through his fingers and splattered on the ground, butterfly jewel bouncing off the wood seconds later.

"That would have been inconvenient," the demon mentioned casually as he strolled across the room towards the pinned hunter. He paused before he reached him, glancing over his shoulder at the equally straining younger brother. Sam snarled at the sudden attention. Pale yellow eyes faded out to normal human pupils and darted down to the chains wrapped around his captive. "Sorry 'bout those, sport. Couldn't risk you biting the hand that feeds ya, and all."

Sam frowned at his words, but the glare in his eyes never lessoned as Azazel turned back to his brother. Dean tried to lean away from the demon, but his pinned position didn't allow for much movement, and all he managed was turning his head ever so slightly away from the yellow eyed bastard. Azazel reached out and Sam's heart leapt at all the ways the monster could hurt Dean.

"Why?" The words were out of his mouth before he'd registered them. All he had thought was he had to keep Azazel's attention on him. If he was talking to Sam, he wasn't hurting Dean. Hand still splayed towards his brother, the demon paused, glancing over his shoulder with a questioning brow. Sam swallowed thickly, his brother catching his eye and shaking his head. He ignored him. "Why did you kill Max? Wasn't he one of your…your kids?"

Azazel laughed, turning back to Dean. Sam's heart pounded, mouth opening to try again, but all the demon did was start rooting through his brother's pockets. "That sniveling brat?"

Dean squirmed under those hands, body twitching in result against the power pinning him to the wall. The demon ignored him for the most part, movements halting as his hand slipped into the human's front jean pocket. Dean stilled, body freezing up as the bastard grinned up at him with a malicious smile that absolutely did not make every muscle in his body shake and his stomach twist unpleasantly. He still had all those memories from Hell, he reminded himself. There was nothing this bastard could do to him that hadn't already been inflicted a dozen times over.

Azazel smirked as he slowly pulled out the hunter's phone, purposefully dragging out the movement before he spun back around to his real interest in all of this. Dean sagged against the wall and Sam

glared fiercely at the demon who flipped open the device and started keying through the various menus.

"Sure, he was one of mine," Azazel continued, speaking directly to Sam though his gaze remained on the phone as he started scrolling through contacts. "But that whining mess of a human never stood a chance. I had hoped abusive parents would bring out some anger in the boy – real sociopathic tendencies, you know?"

Sam clenched his jaw as the demon prattled on about Max's life like it was an experiment gone wrong. Max had turned into a murderer, but Sam couldn't help but sympathize with what had driven the kid there. To listen to the yellow eyed monster so callously disregard the hardships *he'd* put Max through…

How many more lives had that creature ruined?

"He couldn't even kill those abusive bastards without a push. Multiple pushes!" Azazel threw his arms out, as if he was the victim here. "I spent more time trying to train up that sniveling brat... Ah, well. He had his use in the end, mmh? Got you going, Sammy."

The demon waggled a finger in his direction, the same glee in his eye as had been there in the muddy church parking lot. But Sam wasn't paying attention to the demon. He turned wide eyes to his brother, breath slowing with realization. Azazel was the reason Max had moved early. Why Sam had had his vision sooner in the timeline than was right, why Cassie had called while they were already on the road. Azazel was their butterfly.

Sam could tell by the panic in his brother's gaze that that was absolutely not good news for them.

"Why?" Sam asked again, voice doubled in anger and desperation. He hated the latter, the plea that was included in the rage. But he wanted to understand, to comprehend what could possibly be worth running their lives twice over. Even if he already knew the answer, and still couldn't understand.

"Because I need that anger," Azazel responded easily, oblivious to the silent exchange between brothers. He was downright elated, like the answer was obvious but no less exciting. He pushed away from Dean, crossing the distance between the two. The phone was still in his hand, but Sam had captured his attention away from it for now. "That's the problem with you humans. You're like kicked dogs; always crawling back to daddy for approval. Too many of you spend years

sniveling, begging for treats, scrambling to please the guy beating the crap out of you."

The demon laughed, inches away from the hunter's face. Sam had never wanted to punch someone so much in his life.

"I need someone who won't take it. Someone who's got the anger, the drive, the *balls*, to stand above all that. Bite that hand that feeds you. Rip it right off." The demon turned away from the boy again, though didn't leave his side as he brought the phone back up. "Someone like you, Sammy."

"What?"

"Sure, the kid had spunk enough to ice his family, but it took him so damn long to do it!" Azazel kept on as if he hadn't heard Sam's breathless question. "I'm looking for someone whose anger always trumps the family card. And that's you, Sammy-boy."

He tapped the phone against the hunter's chest with a wink.

"Walked away from your father – your brother – more than once. Not afraid to take what you want, do what needs to be done. Blood ties be damned." Azazel sucked in and released a breath of air like a father would in the middle of a speech about his oldest son's recent achievements. The grin on his face was so sickeningly proud that Sam had to turn away from it.

"You're wrong."

"Am I?" The demon tilted his head, brow raised. "Demon blood don't add to you, Sammy. It only brings out more of what's already in there."

"Don't listen to him, Sam." The barked command drew both hunter and demon's attention back to the wall, where Dean remained pinned. His anger was focused solely on the demon, but his fierce gaze flickered to Sam, a promise in his eyes that the younger Winchester hardly understood, but instantly believed.

Azazel clucked his tongue in a moment of silence, then flipped the phone shut and strode across the room towards the older hunter. Dean pulled back as the murderer drew closer, pressing himself more into the wall than the demon already had him.

The grey blue eyes of his human form disappeared, replaced in a blink

with the pale yellow irises that had been the last thing Mary Winchester ever saw. Dean clenched his teeth, staring at the demon that he swore, no matter what it cost this timeline, he would kill again.

A smile broke out across Azazel's face, and he raised the phone in his hand, waving it tauntingly. "You'll see soon enough."

He flipped the device open, standing back from the pinned hunter. With a single button press, he raised the phone to his ear, glancing over his shoulder at Sam and waggling his eyebrows in the younger Winchester's direction.

-o-o-o-

John spread the map across the hood of his truck, staring down at the continental United States and the maze of back roads and highways he'd endlessly traversed for twenty-two years in search of his prey. He slammed his fist down on the center of the map and the metal underneath vibrated with the hit. Tilting his head back, the former marine took in a deep, calming breath and forced himself to release the tension in his shoulders that crawled up his neck like a cancer.

He'd lost Yellow Eyes' trail. The last omens after he'd left his sons had been four states over in Ohio. But by the time he'd arrived, it was nothing but a regular demon, mulling about the town. John made swift work of it, but not before the hell spawn had spat that he knew all about his son. All about Sam Winchester, the boy with the demon blood.

'You don't even know what's coming, do you?'

The thing had gone to hell laughing at him. John took in another breath and added a ten count. It should have gone screaming.

The hunter straightened his head slowly, rapping his knuckles against the map instead of punching it like his bunched up muscles wanted so badly to do. Part of him had thought, with the Colt tucked against his side as a reassuring weight, that his hunt was almost over. But now, it was like starting all over. The demon was making himself scarce. It had only been a couple of days, but in the last six months this thing hadn't stopped for even twenty-four hours, let along almost a week.

John gritted his teeth, hand resting on the hilt of the Colt, tucked into the waistline of his jeans. It was like the bastard knew he had it, and was purposefully hiding from him.

A ringtone cut through bitter thoughts, and John pulled his phone from his coat pocket with a sigh. Dean's name flashed on the small screen as he stared down at the device. He considered ignoring it, even turning the thing off. He knew his eldest would have nothing but angered words for him, and he didn't need to hear them right now or waste time getting in another fight.

But Sammy was traveling with Dean, and if something had happened… John huffed a breath, counted to ten, and raised the phone to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"John? Is that you?"

The coy, taunting voice that rang slightly tinny through the small speaker was not his oldest son, and John straightened, fingers digging into the plastic edges of the device.

"Who is this?"

"Oh, I think you know. Still, I'll give you three guesses." The smug grin coming down the line was sickening to the hunter and he grit his teeth. He sure as Hell did know. Only question left was what that yellow eyed bastard was doing with his son's phone. *"Though, each guess you get wrong, Dean-O here's gonna pay for."*

"You touch my son and I'll kill you."

The demon laughed loudly, a false sound that turned John's stomach. *"John, John, John. You were gonna do that anyway. Or do you think I don't know about that special gun you have?"*

The hunter swallowed, hand curling around the hilt of the Colt protectively. His mind raced. Had the boys told the demon about it? Were they coerced into talking, or had the bastard already known about the gun?

"Word travels fast about things like that," the demon drawled, answering the hunter's unvoiced question. *"Now! I'm sure you can imagine what comes next, Johnny-Boy. I want the gun; I have your children. Let's…make a trade, hm?"*

"I want to talk to Dean."

"Oh, I don't think Dean's earned speaking privileges. Hasn't been the model

prisoner, you know. Tried to help his brother escape, keeps talking back." John's fist tightened on the hood of the car, map crinkling beneath his aching grip. *"I can still give you proof of life, though."*

John's breath left him like a punch to the gut as his eldest son's voice came through the line in a harsh, cut off grunt. The old marine could tell his son was holding back a hell of a lot more than some pained groan, and his heart hurt to think what that bastard could be doing to him.

"I don't think that was loud enough, Dean-O. Your dad wants to know you're alive. Let's try again."

"No, wait-"

There was a distant crack down the line and this time Dean screamed. John had to lower the phone away from his ear. He raised his fist to his forehead, knocking against his own skull several times as he fought with every fiber of his being to stay in control of the mounting rage and panic.

"Hear that, John?"

The hunter counted to ten and let out a breath, before he opened deadly calm eyes and raised the phone back to his ear. "Yeah, I heard."

"Good. So, Dean's alive and well. Mostly. And Sam's obviously fine; no need to hurt my favorite boy just yet."

John clenched his teeth around his tongue, the sharp pain the only thing keeping him from promising that son of a bitch that it didn't matter where he went or who he used as a shield. He was going to die. Instead, he bided his time with his silence, despite every second of it that killed him.

"I want the Colt," the demon soon enough continued once he realized he had the hunter's attention. He rattled off an address in northern Michigan, about four hours away from John's current position.

The hunter stared at the map still spread across the hood of the truck, corners curling in the gentle breeze. He tapped the phone with a single finger, plans rolling through his head.

"Did you hear me, John?" Dean made a pained noise in the background.

"Okay! I heard you. I'll bring you the colt." The hunter licked his lips, running a hand through his hair. "It's gonna take me about a day's drive to get there."

On the other end, the demon just hummed and his son cried out again. He could hear Sam yelling in the background. John's hand shook around the phone, but he willed his voice to remain steady and silently apologized to Dean for the bluff he would bear the brunt of.

"I'm halfway across the country, and I can't just carry a gun on a plane!" The thing about a bluff was it was only good if you played it all the way through, no matter the cost.

"That's okay." The demon sounded genuine, which immediately set off warning bells in the hunter's head. Dean stopped making that noise, though. His barely audible panting in the background at least confirmed he was still alive. *"Take all the time you need. I'll just be here with Dean. I'm sure we'll find ways to pass the time."*

The line clicked dead and John slammed the phone as hard as he could into the hood of the truck, denting one and shattering the screen of the other.

-o-o-o-

Sam clenched his teeth and kept his mouth shut, though just barely, as he searched the room desperately again and again for something – *anything* – he could use to get the demon away from his brother. If he could wound Azazel enough, distract him enough to get Dean back up, maybe his brother could get away. Unfortunately, the demon had all but eliminated a repeat of their last escape attempt and Sam had little hope of them getting out together.

He would happily give his freedom if it meant that bastard didn't lay another hand on his brother.

The demon stepped away from Dean as he shut the phone, letting the hunter slide down the wall and crumple to the floor in a heap. Sam bit his tongue, straining against the chains as his brother groaned and didn't try to get up. His good arm was awkwardly wrapped across his chest to hold onto his left. The cast lay in pieces several feet away, and his previously injured arm now sported two breaks. The first fracture, having spent the last week healing as much as it could from the hunter's prior demonic encounter, had given easily beneath Azazel's tight grip. The second, clearly visible in the unnatural angle of Dean's wrist, had been delivered when the re-break was not been

enough to make the hunter scream.

Dean didn't bother getting off the floor. Instead, he rolled onto his back, clutching the ruined limb as hard as he was clenching his teeth and focused on breathing through the pain. He'd had far worse.

"Well, that was fun." Azazel set the phone down on the dresser. He glanced over at Sam with a winning smile, and the hunter jerked in his chains.

"I'm going to kill you!"

"That'd be a neat trick." The demon turned his full attention on the young psychic, leaning back against the wobbly furniture and crossing his arms. A mock idea lit his face with all the sincerity of a lying rat, and he leaned forward far enough to reach behind him and pull a gun from his back. It was Dean's, the ivory laid grip a dead giveaway. He held it out in his open palm. "Here ya go. Make the gun float to you there, psychic boy."

Sam clenched his teeth, raising his chin against the demon's taunt. He couldn't help his eyes darting down to the weapon and back to steel blue irises.

Azazel just shrugged when he didn't take the bait. "Wouldn't have done you much good anyway, o' course. This here ain't a special gun. Not like the one your daddy's bringing me."

"Still would have put a smile on my face."

The demon turned slowly to Dean, who had managed to right himself up against the wall. He was still holding his broken arm – no point in pretending it wasn't what it was. But he looked up at Azazel with a glare and a grin that was practically trade-marked Dean Winchester.

"Bullet straight through one of those ugly ass eyes?" Dean let out a laugh, masterfully hiding the wince that followed as he jostled his limb. He kept that cocky grin locked on the demon looming above him. "Woulda done me some good."

"Is that so?" Azazel wrapped his hand around the grip of the gun, leveling it at the downed hunter. Dean stared straight down the barrel, aimed perfectly between his eyes.

"Dean." Sam pulled against his chains again, gnashing his front teeth together. He desperately switched between the yellow eyed bastard

and his brother, praying to God he wasn't about to watch his brother take a headshot.

Would telekinesis work on a speeding bullet?

Sam tried to take a deep breath. The rational part of his brain fought for control over the panicking side. Dean had said they were both needed for the apocalypse. Sam by Hell, Dean with Heaven. That meant that the angels, even if they were dicks (Dean's words, not his), wouldn't let his brother die.

They couldn't. Right?

Only Dean had definitely skimmed over some things in the car on the way to Max's house. He hadn't been wrong – Dean, that is – about the trip being too short to cover it all. And it was more than just the twelve hours he had to explain it. It was the time Sam needed to assimilate it.

The younger hunter hadn't asked much more after the bare bones of the apocalypse were laid out before him. He'd had his questions about it, absolutely. But honestly? He needed half that ride just to process what he'd been told. Sam knew there were parts he didn't understand. Hell, he didn't understand most of it. He'd just wrongly assumed he'd have time to talk to his brother about everything he didn't know.

Like the fact that they both would obviously survive long enough to start the end of the world and then take down Lucifer. Dean had been clear on that part. They were both there to take down the devil they'd set free. So that meant they would be fine up until that point. They had to be. Neither Heaven nor Hell could afford to kill them if they were the only ones who could get that show on the road.

That was why Dean knew he could piss the demon off as much as he wanted, and he wouldn't take that shot. Right?

Azazel clucked his tongue and released the hammer of the gun. He grinned down at the older Winchester, who didn't so much as blink as the weapon was lowered away from him. Sam got out a single breath of relief before his big brother opened that damn mouth of his again.

"What? You don't have the balls if I'm not pinned the ceiling?" Dean let out a little laugh that was dark and dangerous. "Or is it cuz I'm not a woman?"

Oh, *hell*, who was he kidding? Dean would run his mouth whether or

not he had immunity. Dean would run his mouth right past immunity, do not pass Go, do not collect your free pass of *not dying*.

"Dean!"

Sam's warning went unheard as Azazel set the gun back on the dresser and Dean suddenly straightened against the wall, back rigid and head snapping upright. It was clear within seconds that he couldn't breathe, as his mouth flapped like a fish trying to suck in water where there was only air. Sam strained against the chains holding him. Dean's face started to redden, but it wasn't until his brother started sliding up the wall and towards the ceiling that true fear took hold.

Sam tried to tell himself again that this wasn't where his brother died, at least according to Dean and his 'first time around' crap. Of course, that voice was a tiny thing in comparison to the one screaming he was going to watch his brother die here and now if they kept making changes to the timeline.

Dean's head hit the ceiling, neck bending awkwardly as his body continued moving upward, transitioning onto the roof of the cabin. Sam thrashed against his restraints, his brother starting to panic. His face was an alarming shade of red, going purple and puffing up with the need for oxygen.

"Stop!" Sam finally yelled. "You can't kill him. You need him!"

The cabin silenced as Azazel halted, Dean stilling on the roof. The demon turned slowly to look at the younger hunter, a calculating and dangerous look in his eye. It was Dean's turn to utter a warning, though his was garbled by the fact he couldn't actually access any of the depleting air in his lungs.

"You need us both," Sam continued on, heedless of his brother's slightly panicked gaze in his direction. "John won't deal if you kill him. You won't get the Colt unless we're both still breathing, and you know it."

Yellow Eyes didn't respond, just continued to stare at the boy. Sam tilted his chin up, pushing back all those thoughts of alternate timelines and destinies. He focused all of his confidence into feeding the bluff, which really wasn't that much of a bluff after all.

"Without us as leverage, he'll just kill you instead." Sam narrowed his eyes at the demon, refusing to let so much as a tremor of adrenaline affect his voice or his body. "You need him."

Dean hit the floor, unable to hold back a sharp cry as he broke a ten foot fall with a twice-over broken limb. But he was breathing – hacking, really, after spending so long without oxygen – and that was all Sam cared about for now.

"Fair point, Sammy-boy." Azazel turned his full attention on his favorite kid, who sagged against the pillar in relief. The demon ignored the heaving man behind him. He'd deal with him in good time. "I can't blow the grand finale before the guest of honor shows."

Dean gave a grunt and a strangled, "oh come on" as he was flung back up, off the floor and pinned to the wall once more. He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'one-trick pony' but if Azazel heard it, he didn't bother responding. Instead, the demon moved right into the hunter's space, stopping only once his face was scant inches from the hunter's own.

"Dude, personal space," Dean mumbled, and winced as a spike of something angry flashed through his chest.

Azazel's gaze flickered yellow.

"But I bet," he continued on as if their conversation hadn't paused so he could toss the hunter around some more. He raised his arm and Dean's abused arm scraped up the wall in tandem, the hunter wincing with every jostle. "Big brother can take one hell of a beating and keep right on kicking. Can't you, boy?"

Dean set his jaw. He pulled his head off the wall as much as he could, fighting the demon's overpowering strength with sheer stubborn will. The man from the future locked eyes with the demon that had nothing on him when it came to surviving torture.

"Gimme your best shot."

Chapter 30: Season 1: Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Dean's back to swearing, but can you really blame the poor kid? Sam's not waiting on John Winchester for an escape plan, Azazel's got some peculiar things to ponder, and we finally find out what the hell is up with Dean's chest.

Actual Chapter Warnings: As you can imagine, similar to the last two. We're ramping it up a bit more. Still gore, torture, murder: the general dark, ugly things. Solid T rating!

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 29

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam's voice was hoarse and his throat raw by the time Azazel stepped away from his brother. He released Dean from the wall, and the hunter didn't bother trying to hold himself up. He crumpled to the ground with a soft sound that hurt Sam deep in his chest. But he pushed that to the side. Dean was still breathing. He could work with that.

Yellow Eyes had ignored every plea, scream, and demand sent his way while he gave his brother the beat down of his life. An hour in he switched from fists to what must have been psychic knives or claws of some sort, since the older Winchester's skin split with every rake of Azazel's fingers. Dean took it all with impressive reservation. Sam had never seen anything like it in all his years of hunting monsters and killing things, and he certainly had never seen it in his brother.

Dean was like steel; cold and clinical about the torture being inflicted on him like he was outside of it all. It obviously hurt, something the older hunter didn't waste energy hiding. He screamed when he needed to and didn't hide behind some macho bravado act like Sam expected. It only took about fifteen minutes for the young Winchester to realize that his brother – the Dean from the future – had been through this before. Perhaps not exactly this, as Dean definitely would have mentioned them being kidnapped by the yellow eyed psycho, but torture certainly.

What might have been comforting in any other sense – the idea that Dean could handle this – hand handled this before – only made Sam more desperate to get the demon away from him. He never wanted to hear those pained noises coming from his big brother again. But for all Sam's begging and threatening, Azazel refused to turn his attention away from the older Winchester. He took a break at one point to give Sam a wink and the reassurance that he'd never hurt his prize show pony. Sam had only screamed louder.

"Ha. H-He definitely has the m-mane for it," Dean chuckled, half delirious from the last round of headshots Azazel delivered without reserve.

"Dean. Shut up."

Sam didn't know how long they'd been in that cabin by the time Azazel finally backed off. He didn't know how much longer they had to wait for their Dad to arrive. If he had to guess, he'd say a couple of hours had passed, though it felt like days at that point.

"Entertaining as this has been, boys," Azazel began conversationally, a step back from the crumpled, bleeding hunter. "I need to step out for a moment. Gotta prep for the main event!"

He picked up Dean's jacket, which he'd cut off not long after the invisible claws came out, and wiped his blood splattered face with it. The hunter made a gargled sound at the action, glaring at the man with all that he was worth. That was his father's jacket, damn it. Not that there was much left of it now.

Yellow Eyes just smiled, dropped the battered material next to the hunter, and strolled past Sam and out of his range of vision. The sound of an old door creaking open and shutting hard rattled through the single room, and Sam finally let out a shaky breath.

"Is he gone?" he asked, just to be sure since he couldn't see the second half of the room. Dean nodded, though Sam took a moment to consider how good his brother's vision could even be, given one eye was swelled completely shut and the other kept blinking to keep out blood from a cut to his brow.

He trusted him, though, so he took his word. "Can you move?"

Dean made a sort of half-assed grunt that Sam easily translated into *'if I have to*.' Not the answer he'd been hoping for, but the one he'd been expecting. He knew at least one of Dean's legs was broken. Straight

through the femur, one of the most painful bones to break, and Azazel had snapped it like a toothpick. Dean took it like a champ, just groaning about recovery time, thigh-high casts, and damn it, not again.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked softly, unable to block the sound of his brother's leg cracking in two playing on a loop through his brain.

"I'll live," Dean mumbled, spitting out a mouthful of blood. He sent his brother a half grin, which lost most of its intended effect given his teeth were stained as red as the rest of him. "Had way worse than this, Sammy."

"Yeah," the younger man answered weakly. He'd figured that much out on his own, but was dreading the story behind it. "Any ideas on getting out of here?"

With Dean's leg busted and the rest of him on the sure path of eventual exsanguination, Sam knew the man wasn't walking out, even if he could convince his big brother to leave him behind.

"Dad'll think of something."

Shit . Sam stared at the man without bothering to hide the worry or the fear. Dean always had an idea, or the confidence of an idea yet to form but surely coming. It was something Sam had always admired about his brother; the stubborn mule didn't give up, no matter the odds. Admitting now that their best bet was waiting until John showed up meant the hunter knew he was benched.

"Yeah, okay." Sam didn't try getting any more out of his brother, whose wet breaths eventually evened out as he rested against the wall. He let Dean take the much needed, well-deserved respite. The younger Winchester watched his brother's bloodied chest rise and fall for several comforting moments that he desperately needed before he put himself to work.

Sam's gaze turned to the gun, still sitting atop the dresser beside Dean's phone. The restrained hunter didn't know how much time they had before the demon returned, but he wasn't going to waste it by waiting.

-o-o-o-

The dilapidated and somewhat listing shed stood – sort of – a good fifty yards away from the old hunting cabin. It had once been used for

storing a winter's worth of firewood and drying meats for the family that lived in the house. It got them through the desolate, freezing, deadly winters of northern Michigan. Of course, the last time a family had lived in that pathetic excuse for a home, it had been frontier land. Nowadays the shed had a gaping hole in the roof with rot eating away at what was left, a door that hung off its hinges and had to be roped closed if anyone bothered to close it at all, and the whole thing would, in all likelihood, collapse atop itself within a year.

However, it did still work as a makeshift holding cell for three humans dumb enough to spend a chilly May night camping out in an abandoned cabin in the woods.

Azazel unhooked the rope holding the shed door closed, allowing the monstrosity to swing open with a distressing groan of rusting metal and rotting wood. He stepped into the dark space, glancing down as his foot landed on a squishy, uneven surface that crunched beneath his boot.

The yellow eyed demon gazed down in distaste at the lifeless teenage male underneath his foot. The boy had attempted – valiantly, he supposed – to defend his girlfriend and the young child, a sister perhaps, that had been with them when the demon whisked into the cabin.

They'd been in sleeping bags, with a camping stove between them and marshmallows of all things roasting over the open flame. Azazel had allowed himself a moment to gag at the hallmark scene before snapping the boy's neck.

A whimper brought him away from the warm and fuzzy memory. He grinned at the frightened thing huddled in the corner of the shed. Tears streaked down her pretty little face and she turned away with a flinch as the demon transferred his weight to the foot pressed atop the dead boy's body. His ribs gave with a satisfying crunch, and Azazel stepped off the broken meatsuit and swept towards the girl.

She struck out, screaming, as he grabbed at her and hauled her off the dirty floor. The good thing about a dilapidated shed fifty yards from the house was the fact that its current occupants were unlikely to hear the fuss. Not that they could do anything about it, even if they did hear her mewling. But hunters were such pathetically noble things. He wouldn't put it past the Winchesters to figure out a daring escape just so they could save some crying bitch.

"What did you do with my sister?" The thing sobbed and squealed in his arms, snot and salt water slobbering up her face. She clutched a small hair pin in her hand, a bejeweled butterfly attached at the end. Azazel tilted his head at the trinket, then stretched his face into a grin.

"I had to make a call." He tightened his grip around the teen's bicep and hauled her towards the shed door. "Unfortunately for you, I have to make another."

-o-o-o-

John Winchester wrung the steering wheel beneath a white knuckled grip as he crossed the Michigan border. Another hour more. He closed his eyes briefly, thoughts focused on his sons surviving long enough for him to get there. They just had to survive another hour.

He glanced at the old gun sitting on the passenger seat, long barrel shaking with the vibrations of the engine and the bumps of the road as he flew down the I-75. The hunter wrung the steering wheel again as he turned his eyes back to the road. A light rain started, streaking drops across his windshield at eighty miles per hour.

Just another hour and he'd be there.

Hang on, boys. I'm coming.

-o-o-o-

The blood bubbled in its chalice a final time before going silent and still. Azazel set the cup down beside the unmoving body he'd drained for its contents. His daughter still hadn't checked in, despite her last call informing him she was closing in on the Winchesters. That was some time ago and he had no doubt she was dead, probably by way of that fancy gun John Winchester would soon deliver to him.

The Baku they hired to find that particular hunter hadn't been heard from for some time now, either. Crowley hardly seemed to care, but Azazel found curiosity in the beast's disappearance. He did nott often bother with the lesser things that roamed the earth, but even he knew the Baku were not killable, at least not by man. Not even by a man armed with the Colt.

Given how persuasive a salesmen the King of the Crossroads could be, when properly incentivized that is, Azazel found it unlikely the dream beast would wander off, job incomplete and sans whatever promised reward.

Which meant that peculiar things were happening. Too many, he believed, to be of coincidence. His best daughter was dead, the eldest Winchester was being fed information on Hell's movements faster than Hell was able to collect information on his, their carefully laid and almost fool-proof plan to spring Lucifer from his cage continued to derail at the simplest of steps, the Colt surfaced with perfect timing for both themselves and their enemies, and a dream beast the Winchesters had no way of killing seemed to be quite killed.

Azazel stared at the blood, silent within its chalice now that Lilith was no longer on the other end of the call. What was even more peculiar was the recent development she relayed to him. It had taken time for their scattered demons to regroup and report in - more time of course to torture the real story out of them and confirm its legitimacy - but apparently that pesky Pearly White Gate was no longer shut. It had creaked open, just for a moment, earlier this week.

Of all weeks, really, *this* week was...well, it was more than peculiar, that was for certain. Unfortunate, really. It was going to be problematic if Heaven joined this fight early. It did not, however, explain how they seemed to have already had a hand in it for six months.

The Prince of Hell rubbed his hand along his chin in thought, but pulled away when his fingers ran across something cold and wet. He stared at the digits in the moonlight; Dean Winchester's blood was smeared across the tip of one. He must have missed some when he'd used the kid's jacket as a wipe down. Pale yellow eyes gazed past his fingers, focusing on the blood sitting in the silver cup next to the corpse it once belonged to.

A silly little thought occurred to him. One might even call it peculiar.

"Tasted like righteousness, huh?" He wiggled his fingers in the moonlight. With possibility niggling at his brain, Azazel raised his hand to his lips and took a taste of the Righteous Man's blood.

-o-o-o-

"Dean. Wake up."

The voice was far away, but still loud enough to disturb his peaceful lull of oblivion. First, he tried to ignore it. But the voice was insistent, and growing worse. What had started soft was becoming demanding, then indignant. So the second thing Dean did was try to turn away from the sound, an action that instantly provided the opposite effect

he was hoping for.

Pain flared through… shit, *everything!* Green eyes snapped open – well, one snapped open and the other painfully reminded him that his face was currently hamburger meat. He hissed as multiple fractures flared up throughout his body, which tried to react to the pain in his face by raising his arms to it. The pain in his arms made him jerk forward, and he really quickly came to the conclusion that there wasn't a single part of him that didn't hurt.

Well, he thought as he groaned and leaned back against whatever surface had been previously supporting him. His toes didn't really hurt. His head definitely did, given the downright giddiness that came with realizing his toes were fine.

"Dean."

The hunter suppressed another pained sound and lifted his head – *slowly* – to search for his brother's voice. It took a moment, head still swimming and vision absolutely fucked between the swelling, the blood, and the concussion. Concussions. Pretty sure he'd compounded them by now. Eventually he settled his single eye on his brother, chained in the center of the room a good ten feet away.

"Hey, Sammy." He had the brief thought that he should say something cooler than that. Maybe poke at the fact his brother was strapped up like a dungeon bondage porno gone terribly wrong, nose dribbling blood like he'd been sucker punched by a pussy who couldn't even hit hard enough to bruise. But chuckling hurt, as he was now learning, and something vaguely resembling self-preservation whispered in his head that mouthing off meant more pain.

"You're taking damsel in distress to all knew levels." Right, like he had *ever* listened to that voice when it did decide to pipe up.

Sam rolled his eyes, but there was relief in the twitch of his lips. His eyes were serious, though, and Dean tried to focus for their sake. His kid brother was holding himself really stiff, one hand fisted at his side, the other extended as far as it could go with the chains pinching at his red, irritated elbow. The kid's hand was splayed out and trembling.

Dean frowned at it. Something clawed at his foggy brain but failed to break through.

"I need you to focus," Sammy was saying, and it took a moment and a heavy blink for Dean to realize he was talking to him. "Do you

remember where the padlock is on the chains?"

The man from the future frowned further, stopping only when pain pushed through his head at the pull of those muscles. Instead, he stared at his brother as his thoughts swayed like his vision.

"Padlock?"

"Yeah." Sammy sounded a little desperate, like he did when they were on a time limit. "Can you describe where it is? Exactly."

Dean frowned again, despite the pain that came with it. He wasn't really following, but sure, he could do that. He remembered making his way across the swirling room after the first concussion – definitely sure he had a second one now – and following his brother's restraints around to the back.

"Dead center, about….an inch above your bellybutton?"

Sam's eyes slid away from his brother, focusing on something else. His hand twitched and that thing trying to claw at Dean's memory doubled its efforts. There was a familiar click and the sound of metal pressing against metal. Dean's curiosity peaked and he turned his head to follow the sound. He couldn't spot what made the noise, though. Sam frowned, head tilting slightly. He move his hand again, and the sound came once more, but heavier this time. Thicker metal, Dean's ailing mind supplied.

The kid suddenly grinned. "Found it."

Dean was about to ask what he'd found when the sound of a gun going off ripped through the room. The older Winchester raised his arms on instinct, head turning to the side as he closed his eyes. The movement ended up half aborted as pain flared through both limbs and he gasped, pressing himself back against the wall as his vision whited out for a minute.

Fuck the gunshot, the only thing a bullet could do to him now was end the goddamn pain.

Hands were grabbing at him before his vision cleared, and he stupidly tried to fight them off, resulting in more agony. He was doubled over trying to breath and repeating a mantra of '*don't move your arms, dumbass'* by the time he realized it was Sam's hands gripping his shoulders – some of the only undamaged parts of his torso currently – and his voice urging him to get up.

"Oh, fuck," he mumbled as he managed to clamp down on the waves of agony going through him and instead forced his eyes open.

"We gotta go," Sam spoke urgently right next to him, but his voice sounded apologetic. Dean's concussed brain couldn't quite grasp why, but the answer came to him a second later when his brother hauled his broken body up.

"Oh, *fuck*!" he cried again, gritting his teeth. Forget waves of agony, this was pure hell.

You've been through worse. Suck it up, Winchester . The voice in his head was cold and harsh, but it also spoke the truth and Dean knew it, even if he didn't know much else in that moment. So he took a heaving breath and did as he was told. Sam slung Dean's unbroken arm around his samsquatch shoulders, pulling on his bruised torso and broken ribs, but he sucked air through his teeth and fought through the pain.

Things weren't making much sense to him right then, but he knew Azazel was coming back. Sure, it took him a few moments longer than it should have to remember who the hell Azazel was, but bite him. Two concussions, people!

"Now, that *was* a neat trick."

Both hunters froze, half because Sam had been all of their driving motion, and half because a little voice in Dean's head supplied the identity of the owner of that voice and the rest of him supplied the swear words and sudden muscle rigidity.

Sam raised the gun in his hand – when the hell had the kid gotten his gun? – and fired repeatedly into the demon. Azazel didn't bat an eye or bother dodging. His shirt and flannel ripped with every bullet, but there was no blood and he barely staggered a step. Soon enough, Dean's chamber was empty and Sam lowered the gun, the fierceness in his eyes hiding the panic beyond.

"Ouch." Azazel tilted his head and the gun flew from Sam's hand, skidding across the room and into the far wall. Dean went next, with Sam crying out as his brother was ripped from his grip and pinned back to his favorite spot in the whole cabin.

Yellow Eyes flicked his wrist even as Sam spun to face him. The kid was dragged back to the pillar and pinned to the wood. The chains and busted padlock, bullet still lodged in the shattered metal, remained limp on the floor. Azazel kept both boys restrained with his

stupid demon powers alone, strolling into the room and up to the dresser.

He set a large mason jar of dark liquid on the surface and Sam stopped struggling, breath stolen from his body at the sight of another container of demon blood.

-o-o-o-

"What is that."

Azazel had given them a moment to gather their wits, standing beside the dresser with neither words nor expectations. Yet, at least. Dean used his minute to try and remember how to breathe without throwing up. Sam needed every second of the allotted time to rip his gaze from that sickeningly red liquid.

Now Yellow Eyes focused his attention on the young man in the center of the room. The hunter looked for all the world like he wanted to push himself straight through that pillar and disappear entirely. Azazel wouldn't be surprised if Sam stayed pressed to that surface, demonic power holding him there or not.

"Come on, Sammy," he admonished lightly, a single brow raised at the boy. He placed a light hand atop the jar. "You already know the answer."

He delighted in watching the hunter's Adam's apple bob up and down.

"No." Sam lifted his chin, lower jaw trembling but expression resolute despite the obvious fear and, Azazel suspected, slight withdrawal.

"You sure, kiddo?" The demon looked him up and down, and Sam clenched his jaw until it ached. Azazel made a face, bobbing his head back and forth in thought. "That last bout with the gun and the chains? I'm betting that about drained the tank. Am I right?"

Sam held firm, refusing to blink or even think about how keeping that pistol afloat long enough to find the padlock and fire had almost made him black out.

"You know how I know?" The demon grinned, nodding slightly as if encouraging Sam to play along. When he didn't, the demon went on anyway, tapping the side of his nose. "You're bleeding again, sport. That stopped for a while, didn't it?"

He kept right on grinning and nodding, an ecstatic look in his eye. He tapped his fingers along the lid of the mason jar. "See, with a dose like this, you're getting strong enough to survive those pushes. But without more…"

Azazel clucked his tongue and shook his head slowly, gaze once more admonishing.

"No."

The demon sighed and turned away from the young hunter. "Alright, then. You're smart enough to know how these things work, Sammy."

Sam's heart stuttered as Azazel reached out and wrapped a hand around Dean's arm. The man had been silently recuperating from his most recent reintroduction to the wall. While following the conversation the best he could through an addled brain, ears ringing for reasons he didn't even know any more, and the pain of his broken body subjected to the steady, heavy pressure of Azazel's power, Dean wasn't fully paying attention. His focus did shift a little more to the present when that cold grip dug into his fractured forearm though.

"Stop!" Sam yelled as his brother cried out. The sound swiftly cut off and all Dean did was groan and huff through clenched teeth. Some focus returned to his brother's eyes as he glared at the demon with everything he had left. Which, Sam was terrified to admit, wasn't much.

"I may need him breathing," Yellow Eyes continued conversationally, glancing over his shoulder at his real interest, "but he doesn't have to be in one piece."

"I'm already not in one piece," Dean muttered, though he instantly regretted it when Azazel applied more pressure. Still, never let it be said that Dean Winchester backed down from a fight. Or an opportunity to piss in the face of the demon who destroyed his family. "I swear to God if you force that shit down his throat-"

"What are you and *God* gonna do about it?" Azazel tightened his grip and Dean had half a mind to tell him that God might not do much, but he sure as hell would. Soon as his dad showed up with that gun. "And I'm not gonna have to force anything. He's going to drink it all on his own, aren't ya Sammy?"

Sam tried to keep his focus on the demon, but he couldn't help his eyes sliding to that jar of blood and back again.

"Sam, no." The distressed command from his brother was more of a plea than anything, but Sam ignored it as he glanced over at the blood once more. He didn't need the older hunter to tell him what to do, whether or not future Dean thought it was the right call. Still, Dean shook his head from his position against the wall. "I can take it."

He didn't need the order, or the reassurance, or the decision made for him. All Sam needed was the memory of his brother's voice telling him everything he would come to be, everything he'd come to do, and all because of that viscous red liquid sitting ten feet from him. He didn't need Dean to make his choices for him; he was *not* going to become that Sam.

"You heard my brother." Sam tilted his chin up defiantly. "No."

Across the room from him, Azazel hummed, hand still poised around Dean's forearm. Sam prepared to hear yet another bone snapping in two, but the demon just stood there, a thoughtful look on his face. "I did hear him. Really, I've got some questions about that."

Dean let out a surprised little yelp as he was suddenly released from the wall. Yellow Eyes took a step back and to the side as the hunter's feet fell the inch or so to the ground and he staggered under his own weight. Dean hissed, immediately shifting off of his broken leg, though the other was a mess of bedraggled cuts and wasn't much better. He ended up supporting most of himself with the wall, and some masochistic part of his brain wished the demon would go back to holding his body up for him.

"See, I've been thinking. You're taking this whole torture thing really well." Azazel crossed his arms in contemplation, demeanor totally at ease. Both humans struggled with the sudden civil and downright surreal turn to the conversation. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you've been through something like it before."

Dean practically swallowed his tongue, biting down on the muscle in order to keep himself from sniping back that if this is what Azazel called torture he should try an hour with Alistair. Cold fingers gripped his chin, lifting his head. Dean's vision swam but he blinked his way through it with his good eye.

"Only, I do know better." Azazel stared at the hunter like he was trying to see straight through him. It was like a perversion of Cas's angel gaze, and Dean's chest flared indignantly at the notion. "You've never been in this much pain before."

The hunter snorted, but caught himself with a hiss as the demon's hand tightened around his face.

"We've been watching you since Mommy ate it on the ceiling." Azazel smirked at the way that jaw trembled beneath his fingertips. He imagined Dean would like nothing more than to bite his hand clean through if he could. "We watched both of you. So I know what I'm talking about when I say this should be breaking you."

The demon pulled away with an air of displeasure, pushing Dean's chin to the side even as he released him. "At least, more than it is."

"You don't know shit about me," Dean spat, turning his head back to glare at the thing that dared to touch him, that dared to think he knew what could break him. "And that'll be one of the last mistakes you ever make."

The demon made a noncommittal sound, not really listening. "You know, my daughter told me something interesting."

"Your daughter?"

Azazel turned towards Sam, almost like he forgot the other man was in the room. "Yes, the demon I'm sure you killed sometime in the last week. She was mine."

Sam stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"What? You think you're the only one that can have a family?"

The broken hunter behind him snorted again, and he lashed out with his hand to deliver a strike to the man's bleeding torso. He cried out, but it petered into a hiss and then a full blown chuckle.

"I forgot about that," Dean muttered, lifting his head. He was smiling, teeth red with his own blood, yet the shit eating grin stayed firmly in place. Azazel regarded him with disgust. He struck again and Dean doubled over, sliding an inch down the wall.

"You think that's funny? That was my child. How would you feel if I killed your family?" Dean made a gurgling noise as Azazel caught him by the neck and hauled him back to his feet. "Oh, that's right. I forgot. I *did*."

The two stayed locked in a standoff, the hunter biting his tongue against every instinct to answer back, and the demon daring him to

with ever tightening fingers around his throat.

"What did Meg say to you?"

Both hunter and demon turned, Azazel's grip lessening ever so slightly. Sam stared at them, eyes darting from one to the other. Dean had killed Meg right after announcing he was from the future. So there was no way that's what she could have told Azazel. Right?

The demon pulled away again and Dean let out a frustrated grunt as he caught himself on the wall. Honestly, hold him up, don't hold him up. Whatever, man, as long as the damn demon just made up his mind already.

"She said your brother tasted like righteousness." The demon announced, rather randomly for the two humans who glanced at each other with equal expressions of confusion. "When she kissed you, Dean-O, that first time I sent her after you. *You* said she tasted like sulfur, and *she* told me you tasted like righteousness. Honestly, I thought it was funny."

He chuckled, genuinely amused. It died off, however, when he realized his audience didn't seem to be in on the joke. Azazel sighed. Inside jokes were no fun when only you and a handful of top ranking demons knew the punchline. Especially when said punchline was standing right in front of you.

"I didn't think much of it. She always was a bit whiney. But then, peculiar things started happening. And you," he flicked Dean in the forehead, causing the hunter to jerk back, "suddenly turned into Superman. At least for a hunter, anyway."

"He's always been a good hunter," Sam snapped back defensively, snarling against the pressure that kept him pinned to the pillar.

"Good, yes. But this?" Azazel raised a brow in the younger brother's direction. "Spotting our double agent before the big event? A magical gun no one's seen in a century? Let's not forget the sudden willingness to offer baby Sammy's soul as a bargaining chip for one little woman."

Sam hissed at the mention of Jess, face reddening as he pushed and pushed against the demon's power. But he could tell that his own strength, that vibration beneath his skin, was almost gone. His eyes darted to the jar blood once more.

"You've always been a good hunter, Dean. Better than your Daddy, for

sure." Azazel snagged Dean's chin once more, tilting his head up to meet his one eye. "But suddenly, you're just a little *too* good. And I have to wonder why that is."

Steel blue eyes blinked yellow, then drifted down to stare at Dean's chest. The hunter's swimming mind couldn't fathom what the hell the dude was looking at, and honestly couldn't put more effort into it than a quip about where his eyes were. If the darkening edges of his vision were any indication of his current state, he wasn't going to make it through much more of this scintillating conversation.

Azazel ignored his comment, eyes still focused on the boy's chest, searching for something he didn't have the power to see anymore.

"Do you believe in angels?"

Dean managed not to suck in a breath of air mostly through luck. His hearing was sort of going in and out, and while he'd love to claim he had super ninja spy skills and a hell of a poker face that kept him from giving away the spike of fear that shot through him, it was mostly because he registered the question several seconds after Azazel had already moved on. He didn't dare meet Sam's wide-eyed gaze, though.

"Our scouts on Earth reported one making a run for your friend's house. Bobby Singer, isn't it? Well, the halo didn't stay long – blasted out of there almost as quick as it came. Why do you think it would do that?"

The man from the future honestly had no fucking clue. Mostly because he had no idea what the demon was talking about. No angel had stopped by Bobby's for a visit - at least not one they were aware of. The hunter breathed through his nose, mostly to keep his burning lungs and aching chest cavity under control. His nose had pretty much gone to shit: almost certainly broken and definitely clogged with blood. It was just as good as a paper bag for his hyperventilating system and panicking brain.

Dean refused to look over at his brother. He knew the question Sam would be asking with his eyes and Dean honestly wasn't sure he could keep from answering it. Not that he knew the answer.

'*Cas?*'

His chest ached in response, and his uninjured hand twitched with the need to rub at his sternum.

"Yeah, sure, pal," he managed to say instead, pushing thoughts of the angel as far from his mind as he could. Personally, he should be getting a damn Oscar for the way his voice stayed steady and even sounded like his usual, sarcastic self. "I thought I was the concussed one. There's no such thing as angels."

"Ah, well. You may not believe in them." Azazel's yellow eyes tracked back up to his face. He licked his lips, as though remembering the taste of something. "But I think one of them believes in you. And I wonder what he could have left behind to make your blood taste so… disgustingly righteous."

The demon pulled his arm straight back, close to his side with his palm turned inward and hand flat and rigid. Sam had half a second to wonder what on earth Azazel was talking about – was he talking about Castiel? – before the demon plunged his hand and arm straight through his brother's chest.

Sam screamed, but it was nothing compared to what Dean did. The hunter's voice was raw and shattered with unmanageable pain. His eyes were blown wide and his body tried to double over, but had nowhere to go with the demon taking up new residence in his chest cavity. Sam all but started hyperventilating, certain that Azazel had punched straight through his brother's ribcage, maybe even going after Dean's heart like he'd seen a werewolf do on a hunt gone terribly wrong when he was eleven.

But Dean kept screaming, which meant he kept breathing, kept *living*. His voice eventually cut out due to the fact that his brain overloaded on the sheer amount of pain signals it was receiving and his throat closed up. There was no blood, no splatter that should have come naturally with a giant hole punched through a human's chest. Azazel didn't pull back, didn't rip out his brother's still beating heart like something out of a terrible sci-fi movie. Sam kicked and screamed against his bonds, but he kept his eyes locked on his brother's face. As long as Dean was clenching his teeth, skin reddening, and sweat and tears trickling down, he was still alive.

Dean, for his part, couldn't breathe. And yeah, that may be because a demon was elbow-deep in his chest cavity where his lungs normally resided, but he had a feeling it had more to do with the seizing pain rippling through every fiber in his being. His nerves were on fire, his brain could barely function under the onslaught, and he had one single thought circling his brain over and over again that he couldn't seem to shake.

Damn it all to hell, I actually feel bad for putting soulless Sam through this.

No one, not even dickless, soulless, robotic not-brothers deserved this level of agony.

He had no idea what Azazel was looking for with a soul-search. A panicking brain managed to remind him this could let the time-traveling cat out of the bag, but it wasn't like he could do anything to stop it. The clawing hand went deeper, and Dean honestly wanted to die. Frozen fingers that burned like dry ice rooted around in his chest, igniting flares and setting his torso afire. They wiggled where they didn't belong, where there wasn't room for them. The pressure started to build beneath his ribs as the demon went deeper into his being.

Abruptly, it all stopped. There was a single moment of peace; a revitalizing breath of air filled his screaming lungs; a second of eerie silence soothed his aching head. Dean's chest went cold, but not in the ghost right behind you going for the kill kind of cold. It was opening the freezer and sticking your head inside on a hot day. Refreshing. Invigorating. Relief from the fire and flames.

Then Azazel reached out and touched it and the calm exploded.

-o-o-o-

Sam didn't know what happened. One second, his brother was choking on screams so painful he couldn't get them past his throat. Azazel's whole arm was buried in his brother's chest in a metaphysical manner that only ghosts were capable of. Then Sam's vision – the entire cabin – was rocked by an explosion of white-blue light.

The hunter slammed his eyes shut against the onslaught, but the blast from the explosion caught him across the chest and he was ripped away from the pillar and the power holding him there. Sam went cartwheeling through the air, further back into the cabin. He landed hard, twisting in a way that made his back muscles scream. The light faded, leaving Sam gasping for breath on the cabin floor, fingernails digging into the dirt-streaked, rotting wood.

He looked up, limbs shaking from adrenaline and fading pain. It took a second for his vision to clear from the exposure. Azazel was sprawled a couple feet in front of him, just starting to pick himself up. He was laughing as he climbed to his feet. Dean was collapsed once more against the wall, legs sprawled out in front of him, arms limp at his sides, head lolled to the left. He wasn't moving.

"Dean!" Sam scrambled to his feet, but Yellow Eyes flung out a hand and Sam found himself careening through the air once more, slamming into side wall of the cabin. His back protested, but he hardly felt it. The young hunter struggled against his invisible confines that he was quickly growing sick of, desperate to get to Dean and at least confirm his brother was still breathing.

"Well, that was refreshing!" Azazel's eyes were still glowing yellow, but there was a crazed gleam to them as he raised his arm. Sam's heart stuttered along with his lungs. The limb was charred – blackened beyond recognition – from his fingertips to mid bicep. Where the sleeve of his shirt had been before there was nothing; charred bits of flannel stuck to his melted flesh like a sick rendition of a skin graph.

The hunter turned away from the grotesque sight, fearful eyes searching his brother. He stopped breathing altogether when the same burns were evident in a blast pattern across Dean's chest.

"Dean?" The whisper was a scared little thing coming from a nine-year old boy during his first hunt, when his brother had taken a hit from a ghost straight into a tombstone and didn't get back up. Sam shuttered his eyes, shoving that little boy back down. "Dean, get up!"

But he didn't get up. He didn't move, and Sam couldn't tell from his pinned position against the wall if his brother was even breathing. Azazel was still laughing, indifferent to the useless, crippled limb or the unknown state of his captive.

"Oh, I didn't know the haloes had it in them," he announced loudly, finally lowering his ruined arm that no amount of power short of a soul exchange could heal. He moved towards the downed man, towering over his slumped form. The last embers of blue light were fading from the hunter's chest. The glow died out, leaving cloth and skin blackened from the defensive blast caused by a sliver of grace hidden away in the kid's soul. "You may not be one of mine, bucko, but you're somebody's alright."

Chapter 31: Season 1: Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: This marks the end of season one! Honestly, some days I can't believe we made it. We rounded out with six more chapters and forty thousand words more than I anticipated. Go us! It has totally been a team effort, as I could not have been as dedicated to this story without fan support.

Thank you so much everyone who joined us this far, whether you were with us from the start, binged in the middle, or managed this beast just now. You ALL rock, and I appreciate your interest, excitement, and especially your comments.

Here. We. Go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Chapter 30

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The demon left them alone in the cabin once more, probably to address the fact that half his arm was burned to a crisp, scaly flesh hanging off his limb like some sort of sick Halloween yard decoration. He didn't go far; Sam could hear him just outside the cabin. The hunter's limbs came free of the oppressive pressure of Azazel's power the moment the door shut, and he stumbled off the wall he'd been pinned to.

Sam didn't stop to question his newfound freedom. At this point, their captor had demonstrated quite clearly that an unfacilitated escape was unlikely. It was something Sam could stop and consider after he'd made sure his brother was still alive.

The younger Winchester raced to Dean's side, sliding to his knees beside the felled hunter. He didn't immediately spot movement in his brother's chest, heartrate and tension spiking in response. Sam reached out, resting a finger beneath Dean's nose, his other hand searching for an undamaged spot to rest against the man's chest. God, his skin was as charred and blackened as Azazel's. Sam had to bite his cheek and look away from the edges of the blast, where his brother's

shirt had flash-burned right into his skin.

There's no way anyone could survive that.

Sam shook his head, trying to fight back the death toll ringing in his head for his brother. Dean could. Dean could survive all sorts of things.

"Come on," he whispered, fighting back the flood of water that blurred his vision and threatened to spill past his eyelashes. "We have- We have an apocalypse to fight, Dean. You can't leave that all on me."

His brother didn't stir, and Sam's fear went from hyperventilating in his lungs to sinking heavy in his stomach, cementing with realization. Dean's chest wasn't moving beneath his hand, and he'd detected no current of air on his finger. The death toll persisted and the hunter let out a frustrated cry. He hobbled on his knees to his brother's legs and grabbed his ankles. Sam pulled the older man away from the wall, mindful of his head hitting the floor too hard. He slid a cautious hand beneath his head, weary of skull or neck trauma. Nothing shifted beneath his touch, at least, and he thanked God for that thick skull if nothing else.

Dean's chest still wasn't moving and Sam started CPR. His brother's skin was still warm. Sam tried to silence the science-wise section of his brain that insisted it took time for a dead body to lose its heat. Dean wasn't dead.

Not yet .

Sam ground his teeth, muttering at his internal dialogue to shut the hell up. Dean's skill was pale and sallow. If- *When* he got his brother breathing again, blood loss would be his next concern. The beating had earned the hunter more bruises than broken skin, but some of the cuts were still sluggishly leaking, and Sam didn't even know how to triage the blast to his chest. At least any external damage he had taken from it seemed superficial. Mostly burns, which would have cauterized any potential bleeding. It spoke little to the internal injuries that would come with a ground-zero discharge capable of throwing a grown man and a demon across a room.

Sam tried to put it out of his mind. Fifteen compressions. The young hunter shut his eyes tightly against the way his brother's ribcage moved beneath each forceful push of his palm. Multiple broken ribs. From the beating or the blast was anyone's guess. Dean's sternum was intact, however, and that bore the brunt of the compressions and kept

his heart moving blood through his body.

Thirteen. Fourteen.

"Come on, man. Don't make me kiss you."

His brother didn't answer and Sam didn't wait for him to, instead tilting Dean's head back and sealing their mouths together. The older man's chest rose with the breath of air, and Sam delivered another. He immediately went back to chest compressions.

"I can't do this alone, Dean. Please!"

It took two more rounds of compressions and rescue breaths, tears falling freely to splash atop his interlocked hands, before Dean's chest rose of its own accord in a desperate grab for air. Sam practically collapsed atop the man, grabbing at the back of his head to keep him from falling to the hard floor again. Dean hacked and grabbed weakly at his chest with his one sort-of-good arm. He was too out of it to complain about his brother cradling him and pushing their foreheads together as they both just breathed.

"S'mmy?"

"Here, Dean," the kid whispered, shuttering his eyes and forcing his face and lungs back under composure.

"You huggin' me?" Dean's good eye was half-lidded, fingers twitching lightly, neurotically, against his chest in a way that suggested he wanted to rub it. Sam wondered if it was a leftover motion from before his torso decided to become a bomb, or if the burns itched.

"Kissed you, too," he muttered with a laugh, finally pulling away from his brother and lowering him back to the floor gently.

"Gross."

"Yeah." Sam scooted back an inch, trying to give Dean some space as the hunter took slow, measured breaths. They were shallow and looked painful, but were steady in their way. The two sat in silent reprieve, Sam listening to his brother breathe with just barely concealed paranoia and an impending adrenaline crash. Dean focused on inhaling, exhaling, not dying, and not thinking about the blinding explosion or the hollow ache in his chest.

"You figured…how to 'scape yet?" Dean's sentences were fractured,

punctuated with slow breaths and still slurred words. The bomb had done his concussion no favors, but while his vision and equilibrium were shot, his thoughts were at least semi-lucid for the time being. Coming back from the dead would do that to you, apparently.

"Nah. Thought I'd save your lazy butt, first." Now that Dean was at least not dead, Sam turned his eyes to the cabin door. Azazel hadn't come back in, but the hunter could see movement beneath the line of the door.

"Bitch."

"Jerk." He turned back to Dean. The older Winchester was breathing steady, hand finally settled atop his chest, eyes closed. "Dean, what was that?"

"S'plosion."

Sam couldn't help the laugh that bubbled past his lips, even if was half formed by hysteria. "Yeah, I figured that much out for myself, thanks."

"Sorry."

He didn't bother asking what he was sorry for. He suspected it was that he'd sent his kid brother tomahawking across the room with that little chest bomb of his. Not that Dean had likely been conscious for that. Or able to see past the bright light.

The younger hunter's brain took a misstep at that thought, then reversed to examine it. That white-blue light had been familiar, now that he reconsidered it. It was eerily similar to the weird, high-pitched explosion that had chased away the Baku nightmare and ended the dream world a week ago.

Hadn't Azazel said something about an angel at Bobby's?

Slowly, Sam's eyes moved down to his stare at his brother's rising and falling chest. The niggling in his brain was turning into a full-fledged idea, which brought with it both fascination and trepidation. He hadn't gotten very far in his research on angels (they had had *a lot* going on lately), but what he had read mentioned something about vessels needed for angelic possession. Dean corroborated the notion on the way to Max's, though in far less words, with Sam sort of filling in the blanks his brother hadn't wanted to say out loud. They were meant to be weapons of Heaven and Hell; rare humans capable of housing archangels. Vessels.

Could Castiel have been with them the entire time?

"Dean…" His brother slit open one green eye to stare up at him. "Was that Cas?"

A look of pain crossed the hunter's face and his fingers curled around the ruined edges of his shirt. It was clear from his shuddering breaths that he was fighting back panic and probably tears. Of course, given that he'd recently been tortured, had a demon's hand buried in his chest, and been technically deceased for at least forty five, fifty seconds, he was entitled to some manly crying. Even an emotionally challenged Dean Winchester couldn't argue with that, though Sam would never be so cruel (or suicidal) as to mention it aloud.

"I don't know." His voice was thick with something Sam could only compare to mourning, though he knew it wasn't quite the right fit. He didn't know what the story was with the angel, only that he had sent Dean back. But he recognized the emotion in his brother's words enough to know they must have been close.

It was weird to think of his big brother, staunch hunter and defender of humanity, caring for something so severely inhuman.

Dean was still valiantly trying not to think about it, and Sam's question was not helping. While he really didn't know what the hell that blast had been, he was seriously beginning to think it was Cas. The angel must have made the trip back with him, after all. What the hell his best friend was doing sitting in his chest, ignoring him for most of six months, was a whole other mystery for another time. If they ever got the time. Because what Dean didn't want to admit out loud – what he suspected was behind the harsh ache in his chest and the tightness of his throat and his burning eyes – was that if it had been Cas, setup with a nice Dean Winchester Sternum Condo, the angel was sure as hell gone now.

He couldn't muster the strength (or the courage) to look at the floor or the walls. But he'd seen that white explosion plenty of times before, most often followed by wing prints seared into whatever surface was nearby.

"Sammy." His voice was croaky and broke mid word. He cleared his throat and coughed, wincing as his broken ribs were jostled and his prickly, stinging flesh disturbed. "Are there…Are there, uh…"

Oh, man up, Winchester!

"Are there wing prints?"

Above him, Sammy frowned at the question. "Wing prints?"

Dean tried not to let the fact that Sam had no idea what he was talking about spark any significant amount of hope in him. "On the fl-floor. Or wall."

Sam's puppy-brown eyes tracked away from Dean's body and up the wall they were camped out next to, searching for something he clearly wasn't seeing. There was nothing there but old graffiti, hints of mold, and the evidence of Azazel's torture. Sam looked away.

The floor was equally bare of whatever Dean was fearful of seeing. The young hunter scanned the rest of the room, but his eyes stopped on a spread of crimson not far from them. Sam's brilliant brain completely faltered, ending all attempts to parse what wing prints would be doing on the floor. Instead, he sat by his brother's side, mind blank, staring at the spilled demon blood two and a half feet away.

The jar was in shatters among the thick liquid; it must have been knocked off the dresser in the explosion. Iron filled his nostrils suddenly, and then it was all he could smell. The metallic cloy of the blood was everywhere. Breathing became hard. Air hitched in his lungs as he tried to take in more of the precious oxygen, but none seemed available. He couldn't tear his gaze away from that puddle of red as it grew ever closer. Expanding. Creeping.

Sam didn't know what was happening to him. He couldn't look away. The vibrating hum beneath the surface was burning. His fingers twitched on his thighs. His mouth salivated and his heart beat like a freight train.

He *wanted* that blood.

"Sam?"

The young hunter startled, snapping his head back at his brother's low, panicked keen. He looked on the verge of an anxiety attack of his own for very, very different reasons.

"They're there, aren't they?" he whispered hoarsely. He pulled his gaze away from Sam, staring up at the ceiling as he tried and failed to keep a blank face. "God, he's dead. *Again*."

What?

Sam realized he had never answered his brother. However angels died, they must leave behind some sort of wing print. The kind of charcoal impression left by a massive explosion, he thought, as images of nuclear shadows came to mind. Oh, God.

"N-no," he stuttered, realizing his silence had done no favors to his brother, who was now sure that bomb had been his friend… exploding? Sam could ask questions about angelic death later. "No wing prints, Dean."

He staunchly kept his eyes on his older brother and didn't dare look back at that puddle.

Dean stared up at him, disbelieving and suspicious of his brother lying for only a moment before his face cleared and he sagged against the floor. Cas wasn't dead. The unhelpful voice that was his inner self quickly supplied the fact they weren't entirely sure Cas was ever alive or there to begin with. He told that voice to shut it, though, because no wing prints meant the angel wasn't dead, and that was a good enough place to start for him. Whether Cas was capable of being dead or dying in the first place was an existential question beyond Dean's emotional and mental capacity to handle for the time being.

The door to the cabin swung inward with a bang, and Sam instinctively moved himself between the danger and his brother, as best as he could while staying on the floor. Azazel strolled in, a new flannel covering his crispy arm. The shirt made him look almost human again, but the arm beneath the fabric remained ugly. Yellow Eyes paid it no mind, though, as he marched towards the two. Sam curled his fingers against his Dean's shoulder and chest, jaw set and chin up. He would not let the demon touch his brother again.

"Time for the main event, boys!" he announced. He didn't bother using his powers, moving straight up to Sam and grabbing him by the back of his shirt. The large human fought with everything he was worth – punches and kicks flying. Sam's fists took more damage than Azazel's meatsuit and the demon dragged the hunter back to the pillar in the center of the room.

He was straightened against it and a single push to his abdomen assured he stayed there. Azazel, confident his power would keep the boy pressed to the wood once more, strolled back over to Dean.

"Don't touch him! He's had enough!" Sam kicked out against the power that only seemed to be holding his torso in place this time. Azazel

stopped by Dean's side, staring down at the hunter who glared right back at him. He didn't bother moving or trying to sit up – that strength was honestly beyond him now. Instead, he focused his energy into steady, even breathing and curled his hand protectively against his wrecked chest.

If Cas was in there, the demon was *not* touching him again.

But Azazel only bent down and hauled the hunter up, directing his words and attention more to Sam than the guy he was currently manhandling. "Oh, he's fine. Aren't ya, sport?"

The demon tapped him on the shoulder, half to push him against the wall – not that it took much to topple the hunter backwards against the supportive surface – and half in a sick mockery of comradery.

"Whoa!" Dean yelped when his one good eye focused on the hand currently giving his left shoulder a love tap. The hunter struggled away from the blackened skin and clinging flesh. "Uh-uh. No, no way. Keep those Kentucky Fried Fingers the hell away from me!"

Azazel's regarded Dean with an unimpressed look, the pat turning into a painfully tight grip just above his collarbone. The hunter still made a disgusted face at the crispy arm that settled him against the wall with the kind of firm push that said, *'stay.'* The demon stepped back, releasing him almost cautiously, eyebrows raised in a way that clearly expected the hunter to collapse without the support. Dean did slide down the wall a bit, but managed to wedge himself into a position where the surface bore enough of his weight to keep him upright.

"Well…mostly fine." Azazel grinned at him.

Dean doubled the power of his glare.

"I admit," Yellow Eyes turned away from him and bent over, scooping up John's jacket from the floor and giving it a quick dust off, "I wasn't expecting that little lightshow."

The keys to the Impala slipped free from the split pocket and rang out as they hit floor. The demon scooped them up as well and tucked them into the pocket of his jeans. Dean growled from his position on the wall, but the Azazel ignored him. His attention returned to John Winchester's jacket.

The article of clothing was beyond repair, ripped in multiple places and down both sleeves in the demon's efforts to remove it from the

hunter earlier that night. It was really more hanging rags than clothing now. Azazel glanced at the hunter, then his ruined chest, then the jacket, and seemed to make up his mind with a nod and a snap of his fingers.

Sam watched with wide eyes as the clothing was torn and bloodied one second, then whole the next. Azazel snapped a second time and the leather was suddenly snuggly fit around his brother's torso, good as new.

"I might have blown the fireworks a bit early. Didn't mean to bang you up quite that much, bucko." The demon stepped back into Dean's personal space and the hunter drew back as much as was possible with the wall already barely keeping him standing. Azazel pulled the jacket closed a bit more, particularly around his damaged chest.

"There. You can hardly even tell." He patted Dean's shoulder with a grin and stepped away. The demon turned towards Sam. He raised a finger to his lips with a conspiratorial wink. "It'll be our little secret, right, Sammy?"

"You son of a bitch!" Sam surged against the power holding him back, kicking out his legs because he could, though little good it did him. The young hunter opened his mouth to spit out something really unpleasant, but the rumble of a truck coming up a dirt drive killed the words still on his tongue. The kid turned his head, view of the front of the cabin blocked once more by the pillar, but the wall Dean was leaning against lit up as headlights pierced through the broken windows and moved along the surface.

Dad.

Sam locked eyes with his brother, meeting Dean's mixed gaze with his own.

"Show time!" Azazel clapped his hands together as the engine cut off outside, the light vanishing as a car door opened. There was tense silence in the room, the demon quiet in anticipation, and the boys in trepidation. Heavy footsteps preceded the cabin door banging open. Sam whipped his head around, again trying to see the rest of the room behind him to no avail.

John Winchester stood in the doorway, hand wrapped around the grip of an antique gun in one hand. Trained eyes assessed the single room before he strode into the space.

Sam met his gaze the moment he appeared beside the pillar, head turned to take in his son. "Dad."

John looked well-rested, Sam was relieved to see. He'd left before they'd been able to confirm the Baku dead, and some part of the youngest Winchester had chased after him not only to catch up, to maybe yell at him for being a stubborn ass, to give him a piece of his mind and aid in the hunt, but also to make sure he really was safe. Blood always did run thicker than water for Winchesters; a fact he'd tried so hard to escape.

His father gave a solemn nod in response. The young man took heart in that steadfast gaze. It had gotten him and Dean through many ugly spots, and he trusted it to get them through this one, too.

John turned back to the other two occupants of the cabin. The yellow eyed bastard stood beside his eldest, who was slouched against the wall looking for all the world like it was the only thing holding him up. The old hunter grit his teeth at the sight of his boy.

The way Dean favored his right leg spoke volumes as to the condition of his left. His jeans were torn to shit, stained dark with what John could only assume was his kid's blood. His own boiled in his veins at the rest of the boy. His old leather jacket was oddly clean; it still showed wear and tear from the years, but was unnaturally spotless on a bloody and torn body.

"Dad," Dean croaked, the twitch of a smile a reassuring sign for the struggling father buried within the steadfast hunter. His son's face was more swollen than not, though his one good eye was focused on his dad, pupil dilated but clear.

"Son," he whispered back, clearing his throat when the declaration was far softer than he'd intended.

"Is that my gun, John?"

The hunter's focus shifted to the demon, expression hardening to stone. John glanced down at the 1836 Colt Paterson he held in his hand, lifting his arm to chest-height to examine the antique weapon. With a deep, fortifying breath, he unwrapped his hand from the grip and held the gun out in his open palm, presenting it to the yellow eyed bastard.

Azazel strolled forward. Beside them, Sam tensed, every warning imaginable on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't bring himself to

speak any of them. It was that gun or his brother's life, and the choice was not a hard one for him. The demon plucked the weapon from John's hand and the hunter lowered his outstretched arm with the stiffness of someone barely holding back a punch.

Yellow Eyes curled his charred fingers around the grip of the antique gun, running his other hand down the barrel in admiration. He reached his thumb up to the hammer, lowering it back slowly and listening to the settling of the chamber and the click of a bullet lining into place. Azazel gave a hearty sigh. "What a pain in the ass this thing has been."

He turned his shoulder into the room, raised the gun, and leveled it straight at Dean.

"No!" Sam screamed as the report of the weapon cracked through the cabin like thunder. Dean jerked back in shock as the bullet caught him in his right shoulder, just beneath the collar bone. Blood splattered the wall behind him as the bullet pierced straight through, embedding into the wood. He slid down another inch, good leg scrabbling for purchase. The hunter's eyes were wide with surprise, his chest heaving despite the bursts of pain each breath caused, and his workable arm reaching shakily up for the new injury.

But he kept to his feet, and he didn't die.

Brown eyes spun back to the weapon, still smoking in the demons outstretched arm. It wasn't the Colt. Sam could see the differences now that he was looking for them. His dad had brought a fake – he must have picked up an antique Texas Paterson on his way to the cabin.

Azazel lowered the useless gun to his side, sending John a baleful glower over his shoulder. "You're lucky that wasn't the real deal, John. Now where's my gun?"

The hunter grit his teeth, fisted hands shaking at his side as he struggled to keep his composure. Luckily, the anger coursing through him was as good a cover as any for the tremors of fear and adrenaline running parallel within him. His eldest son slid further down the wall, energy and consciousness clearly flagging.

"You son of a bitch-"

"I'll shoot him again."

"It's nearby." He kept his tone even and impressively calm. If there was one thing John Winchester was good at, it was refusing to fall prey to emotions. "Let my boys go and I'll take you to it myself."

Azazel lifted the false Colt, this time aiming for Dean's head. The kid, mess as he was, met the barrel straight on, chest heaving, hand clasped to his bleeding shoulder, body barely holding itself up. Yellow Eyes just smirked down the sight of the weapon.

"*You* can go get it, Johnny-Boy, or Sam here becomes an only child."

The youngest Winchester snarled, kicking out forcefully against the weight still holding him back. John clenched and unclenched his fists in indecision, eyes flickering between the demon and his ailing son.

"It'll take two people," he finally said through gritted teeth. "I'm not stupid enough to come in here without insurance. So we can go get it together, or-"

Sam tumbled off the pillar as his invisible restraints abruptly vanished. He righted himself quickly, but moved no further. Uncertainty warred across his face as he glanced between the members of his family, both who needed him.

"You have twenty minutes." Azazel finally withdrew the gun, twirling it around his finger. "Dean and I will be making the most of every one of them, so I suggest you hurry."

Dean growled by the wall, but the look he sent his family clearly said to get out while they could. He'd be fine. Sam started towards him on that stare alone. He wasn't leaving his brother with that demon for another second. Dean wouldn't survive it – he was barely surviving it now!

"Sam!"

His father's sharp command made the boy flinch, but stopped him mid step. He turned to confront the older man, anger and defiance immediately flashing to the surface. Both died at the stern look on John's face. Sam knew that look. Sure, it looked just like the expression their dad always wore when reprimanding his boys. But the young hunter had spent years reading the subtleties of his father and brother, particularly in strenuous, critical situations. He knew that look.

So he stalked towards his dad with the right amount of moody anger

and hesitant glances over his shoulder at Dean. As soon as he was within arm's reach, John wrapped a firm hand to the back of his neck. It was possessive as it was comforting, as sure a paradox as the concerned but demanding look he gave his youngest.

"It'll be alright, son." John pulled Sam into a one armed hug. His eyes darkened as he locked gazes with the demon over his boy's shoulder.

The possessive gesture was an unmistakable challenge for Yellow Eyes. It was also enough to make him leer at the hunter and completely miss the way Sam reached around his father's waist, fingers finding purchase along the hilt of the Colt tucked in the waistline of John's jeans. He withdrew the weapon from his father's back, swinging his shoulder around. In one fluid motion, he brought his arm up, cocked and leveled the gun on the yellow eyed demon, and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet tore from the barrel, its aim true. It ripped through the demon's chest, only milliseconds after Azazel disappeared. A startled breath left the hunter's lungs like a punch. The bullet shot through the cabin unhindered and slammed into the wall inches from his brother's head.

Dean jerked to the side, instinct and surprise taking over his failing body. He wasn't able to recover from the sudden, violent movement, and he fell more than slid the rest of the way to the floor.

John was already moving. From his coat pocket he pulled out a thick leather sack, fingers hastily working the strings loose as he reached Dean's side. Dropping to one knee beside the unconscious boy, the hunter spun in a half circle around them. The old joint twinged from too many rough years spent on the job, but he ignored the soreness. Within the frame of thirty seconds, he had a thick salt line poured from wall to wall in a half ring around himself and his boy.

Sam had moved with his father and now stood a scant foot away with his back to his family. He scanned the room with focus and anxious fury. The hammer of the Colt was drawn back once more, weapon raised and ready to fire as soon as he saw the yellow eyed bastard.

"Sam!"

The young Winchester glanced behind him at his father's bark, spotting the completely salt line. He took a hasty foot back, careful to step over the grains without disturbing the line. The boy immediately went back to scouring the room as John set the leather pouch aside

and scooted up to his oldest. Dean didn't make a sound as their dad bunched up his own jacket and pressed it to the sluggishly bleeding shoulder wound. Sam could tell from his brother's breathing that he had finally lost the fight against unconsciousness.

"That line won't last forever."

Sam spun at the whisper, slimy and coming from their right. The demon was already gone, but the granules of salt shifted in the breeze of his disappearance. John managed to firm up the line and hold the makeshift bandage to his son.

"Neither will your brother."

This time Sam fired before he had line of sight on the demon. His aim was still good, drilled in by years of training to act faster than his vision allowed. But the demon blinked out once more and the bullet bit into the front wall of the cabin.

"Sam." Once more, his father's voice forced him to pull his gaze from the room and back to his family. The tone was far too familiar and set Sam's teeth on edge. The demon would be back at any moment, and this was no time for a damn lecture. John stared at him, then the gun with something fierce and warning in his gaze. Terrible realization filled the boy, turning his lungs and gut to cement. He turned his back to the room to shield the weapon from sight as he slid open the chamber.

Only two bullets left.

Damn it. The way his dad was looking at him meant they didn't have spare ammo, either. Sam had already wasted two in his anger and desperation, the bullet count the last thing on his mind in the face of his family's annihilation. He twisted the cylinder shut. The demon could vanish faster than his eye could even register. Sam knew his worth as a sharp shooter, and it wasn't that good.

"I can save Dean, you know."

Sam stiffened at the voice coming just over his shoulder. John stilled his ministrations on his oldest boy, turning sharp eyes to the Yellow Eyed Demon standing just outside the line of salt. Pale irises regarded the man whose son's life hung in the balance.

"Maybe in exchange for that gun." That sickening gaze slid from John to Sam like slime. "And a little something more."

John lashed his hand out faster than Sam could turn around with the Colt. Water arced through the air, splashing across the demon's chest. The liquid soaked into the flannel and both hunters waited for the sizzle and steam of the unholy. Azazel glanced up from his chest, a single brow raised in amusement.

"You think something like that works on something like me?"

Sam made to turn, raising the gun and the demon disappeared once more.

"Son, give me the Colt." The order was non-negotiable and John held his hand out expectantly. His youngest looked down at the weapon, eyes cloudy with thought and emotion that they didn't have time for now. John waved his open palm expectantly. "This is me. I won't miss."

Sam still stared at the gun. He knew his father's worth as a sharp shooter too, and it was better than his own. The boy's fingers tightened around the handle, considering his options. John was still holding his hand out, other arm cradling Dean. Dean needed a hospital, and he needed it *yesterday*. Sam's eyes roved over his brother, blood dripping from so many wounds.

The youngest Winchester closed his eyes briefly, making peace with the same decision he'd once before faced. Sam turned around, raising the Colt to his head. A sound he had never heard his father make before escaped the man's throat. He was watching his boy raise a gun that could kill anything – that would destroy his soul, if John Winchester believed in such a thing – to his own skull. Sam couldn't spare him any of his focus, eyes locked on the center of the room as he waited.

Azazel did not make him wait long. The demon reappeared right in his sightline, several feet away with a sour look. "Using the same bluff twice, Sam? I thought we were past this."

Sam flexed his fingers around the cold grip of the gun, but otherwise didn't move. He ignored the way his lungs begged for air like he wasn't breathing and his heart beat away at his rib cage like it was the lead drummer at a Metallica concert. "It's not a bluff."

"Sammy…" John's voice was quiet, probably the softest Sam had ever heard it. He couldn't look his dad's way, couldn't see the disappointment or concern. This *wasn't* a bluff, but it would turn into one if he couldn't keep his resolve rock steady.

Azazel took a step forward, head tilting to the side in an inhuman, calculative way that set Sam's nerves on edge. He struggled not to counter the move with a step back.

"What's it gonna get you, tiger?" Yellow Eyes flicked his gaze to the two men on the ground behind him. "I'm going to tear through them as soon as you're dead."

"No. You won't. You're going to let us walk out of here. Then my dad and I are going to drive my brother to the nearest hospital, and you're not going to follow us."

The demon snorted. "And they're not the droids I'm looking for, I take it."

There was a silly, irrational part of Sam, likely born of hysteria and stress, that wished Dean was awake because he was so much better at mindless banter and he would have *enjoyed* that line. But Dean wasn't awake, this wasn't a clever line in a movie, and Sam couldn't afford to falter.

"I'm not just your favorite, am I?" Because some of this *was* a bluff, and he would never pull it off if he didn't sound like he believed it. "I'm it. I'm the one. You already know none of those other kids have what it takes. They won't get the job done."

The change in the demon's demeanor was subtle, but his face twitched as a war between distaste and severe satisfaction started its way to the surface of his skin.

"Are you going to risk losing that? Waste twenty-three years of waiting – *grooming* – just to kill two hunters?"

Yellow eyes swirled back to their natural steel blue, and slid slowly over to the two men behind Sam. The unpleasant expression on his face broke as he gave a casual little shrug. "They are *really* annoying hunters."

Sam cocked the hammer of the colt with his thumb, and Azazel finally relented with an eye roll. His body language turned on a dime, tension fading in an instant. He let out a boisterous laugh and clapped his hands together. There was a swagger to him that hadn't seemed possible a tense ten seconds ago.

"You. You!" He waggled his finger at the hunter. "Still shooting straight down the center, slugger!"

Sam clenched his teeth as the demon all but danced before them.

"Oh, breaking you is going to be a pain in the ass, I can tell." Azazel's eyes slipped closed, his head tilting back with a deep and prideful breath. A smile played at his lips that made Sam's stomach clench. When he opened his eyes once more, there was a predatory gleam to their blue depths that hadn't been there before. "But it's gonna be a thing of beauty when I do."

The demon enjoyed himself a moment longer before simmering down. He regarded Sammy calmly. The young hunter still held the gun tightly to his head, almost nervously now. Azazel's smile smoothed out and he glanced past the staunch boy to the brother on the floor, shielded protectively – uselessly – by his father. The kid was getting a bit low on blood, the demon noted, and that chunk of grace in his chest didn't seem to be doing him any favors in the healing department.

Perfect.

Azazel locked eyes with his favorite kiddo once more and dug into the pocket of his jeans. Sam's hand flexed around the gun, but there was no need. The demon pulled out Dean's car keys and tossed the bundle at the hunter, who caught them one handed.

"Better drive fast, Sammy."

Then he was gone.

-o-o-o-

Sam dropped his arm and the Colt with it as soon as the demon disappeared. He had no guarantee that Azazel was truly gone; the demon could just be letting them think they were free. Either way, it didn't really matter. If they didn't get Dean medical help immediately, he was going to die. So they had to risk it; they had to try.

The young hunter turned his back on the room, tucking the Colt into his jeans and crouching beside his brother and father. This time, he couldn't afford to heed the shaking in his hands or the way his head spun with a rush of vertigo and nausea following his most recent, purposeful brush with death. Holding that damn gun to his head was worse than any close call he'd had on a hunt. It was so much worse because he had to accept, each time, that he was ready and willing to die, to pull that trigger and cease existing.

It terrified him just how easy it was, both times. It wasn't just Azazel hoping to never see that move again.

John was staring at him with an expression Sam didn't have the energy to decipher. He settled on his knees beside his brother, blurry vision feeding him the same conclusion Yellow Eyes had taunted him with. Dean was seriously running out of time.

"You should have given me the gun." That look his father was giving him didn't waiver. Sam filed it away as disappointment. It was the most likely conclusion anyway and the easiest for the beleaguered son to push from his mind. "We could have ended this!"

Sam was too tired to fight, he decided, curling his fingers into loose fists to hide the tremors from his father and from himself. "Dean doesn't have time for your revenge, Dad."

He studied his brother's injured body, trying to decide the best way to lift the broken hunter without injuring him further. There was no way of telling if Dean had suffered internal damage from that bomb blast, and he was loathe to move those broken ribs. They needed to get him to a hospital somehow, though.

Well, if CPR didn't puncture a lung, what more can moving him do?

Sam scooped his arms under his brother's shoulders, intending to push Dean into an upright position enough to gather his legs beneath him and lift the man into a bridal carry. If awake, his brother would protest fiercely. Sam could already hear the flustered, furious outcry that Dean wasn't anybody's bride, fuck you very much. But he wasn't awake, and Sam couldn't risk a fireman's carry with his brother's ribcage as it was.

John grabbed him harshly by the arm before he could transition Dean upright. The youngest Winchester managed not to jerk away, though the first degree burns on the inside of his arm protested angrily under the harsh treatment.

"Those bullets were made special for that gun, Sam. Once they're gone, it's *useless*! You have to make every one of them count."

Sam just stared at his father, eyes going dead to the reproach in his voice and the anger in every line of his body. "That's what you're worried about right now? Your son is *dying* and you want to lecture me about wasting ammo?"

"Damn it, boy, killing that thing comes first – before you, me, your brother. Before everything!"

A groan interrupted the argument. Dean was starting to come back around, good eye cracking open. The green iris was glazed with pain and confusion, and Sam doubted Dean knew where he was. But he knew that angry voice, even if his clouded brain couldn't process the words.

"Dad…" His voice was wrecked, and Sam slid his eyes closed in regret. Getting him to the car would have been far easier on Dean if he'd stayed unconscious for it.

Sam pulled away from his father's grip. He reached behind him for the Colt and pulled it free from his waist. The youngest Winchester all but shoved the gun at John's chest, the force of it causing his father to stumble back on his heels. John released his arm in order to catch the weapon before it tumbled into his lap.

"No, sir. Not everything." He said it straight to his father's face, daring him to choose the demon over his oldest son. There was still hesitation there, side by side with pain and what Sam knew was fear even if John Winchester would never own up to it. The young hunter gave him a pointed look, then scooped his hands beneath Dean's armpits and, with a silent apology, hauled his brother up.

Dean let out a breathless groan and what was probably meant to be an *"oh hell."* He spat a mouthful of blood to the side, words too garbled and wet to understand. He may not be very aware of what was going on outside his world of pain and spinning, but he knew his brother's presence by his side. That was the same as safe in his book, so he allowed Sam to start shuffling them forward and helped the best he could with uncooperative feet.

With his brother's least injured arm slung over his shoulder, Sam helped him hobble on one leg to the door of their prison. Dean was making a valiant effort, biting down on the pain that every step surely caused. Sam opted to honor his effort and not carry him until he faltered. The upright struggle was probably better for his busted ribs anyhow, even if it was hell on his broken limbs.

The youngest Winchester didn't wait to see if his father followed. He moved his brother through the front door, still open from John's entrance. Relief flooded him on an irrational level at the sight of the dirt drive, sans stairs, and the Impala parked only a half dozen feet

away. Sam had already been mentally preparing himself for up to a half-flight of stairs with his one-legged, flagging brother. What cabin didn't come with a rickety wooden staircase on its front porch? Just seeing the car – their home – so close, with no further obstacles between them, felt like a win.

It was the little things in life, really.

He heard John's heavy boots walking the inside of the cabin – what sounded like a perimeter sweep – as he hauled Dean towards the car. Sam was just trying to figure out how he was going to get the door open and his brother inside when their dad appeared at his elbow. John reached around his sons to pull open the back door of the Impala, and Sam slipped Dean inside as gingerly as possible.

His dad moved around to help pull Dean through the backseat so he could lay along the length of it. The boy mumbled something almost unintelligible that sounded a hell of a lot like '*Bastard did drive my car*.'Sam couldn't believe it, staring at his brother with the ridiculous urge to laugh right there. Their dad, almost gently, told Dean to shelve it and stop talking. He closed the driver's side passenger door and Dean settled his head against the interior of it as soon as it clicked shut.

John moved for the driver's seat automatically, but Sam was already pulling open the door and sliding in behind the steering wheel. The older hunter faltered for only a moment of genuine uncertainty before going around the back of the vehicle to the passenger side. The Impala wasn't his car anymore, and his sons weren't children. Sam started the old vehicle up with a deep, welcoming rumble.

Glancing at his truck parked to their side, John hesitated climbing into muscle car, instead considering following the boys to the hospital instead. One look at his barely conscious son in the back seat banished the notion from his mind. He climbed into the Impala and Sam reversed down the dirt road as fast as he could without jostling their cargo too much.

-o-o-o-

Dean easily lost time surrounded by the comforting, familiar rumble of his Baby beneath his hurting body. The first stretch of road had been torture, both in the slow progress they made and the tossing of the low-riding muscle car on a forest road. But they'd hit a paved path soon enough, the ride smoothing out and speeding up, and Dean

found himself mentally unfurling as his Baby bore them towards blessed morphine.

The thought of a hospital was one of relief, rare as it was in their line of work, and he found the idea disconcerting. At first, Dean blamed the uncomfortable weight in his chest on that. No hunter ever volunteered to go to the hospital. If you needed medical attention that badly, your odds of making it to the next hunt were slim. But the weight became a niggle in the back of his brain that wouldn't leave him be, so Dean next chalked it up to the numerous injuries, the explosion of light from his sternum that he was still refusing to think about, and multiple concussions. Yet, still it persisted. Dean frowned in the backseat as the nagging started to poke holes in the peaceful lull cocooning his brain. He just wanted to fall asleep in the back of his Baby with his family safe and sound with him. Was that so much to ask, damn it?

His train of thought stumbled and the worry became full-fledged panic. This whole thing was awfully familiar, wasn't it? And not in a good way. His dad in the passenger seat, speaking terse, quiet words. Sammy sitting rigid in the front, steering them to safety as fast as his Baby would go. The gentle give of the backseat beneath his bleeding, broken body. Dean knew, though it took his addled brain too long to peace it together, that they'd been here before.

The semi slammed into the Impala, t-boning it straight off the country road, before Dean could form the words to warn his family.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

END of SEASON 1

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I swear that's the last cliffhanger for a while. You guys have been champs through all of them; the amount of all-caps screaming in my general direction has been spectacular.

CPR: Current CPR guidelines list the compression to breath ration at 30:2 for a single resuscitator, but prior to mid-2005 the standard was 15:2. My guess is that in May of 2006, Sam would still be performing CPR the old way, especially as that's how John would have taught him.

AO3 Note: This wraps up Season 1. There are two interludes to post before we're caught up with fanfiction.net, though this story will continue to be on a break for another 3 to 4 weeks while I stockpile chapters.

Reviews: To be honest, I've been struggling lately with writing Season 2. I've been battling some low days lately, and I could use encouragement if you're out there. Please, if you're enjoying the story, let me know.

Thanks.

Chapter 32: Season 1: Interlude I

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Welcome to the first of two interludes. So sorry for the delay in posting this here; it's been a very busy week. Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy!

Reviews: Thank you everyone who left a comment or a kudos! You're all helping keep the muse in shape for Season 2.

Chapter Warnings: Cas and Heaven are up first! Disobedience, Crust-Side hospital hopping, bodiless demons, and a Baku. Off-screen tertiary character death (or is it?! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Interlude I

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Heaven came in many forms, far too many to count. God's paradise was an ever shifting land of light, color, and peace. To the angels that patrolled its halls, it presented shimmering towers, endless halls of white stone, and domed ceilings that reached for the heavens, painted in the ever shifting colors of the sky below. The stone with which it was built was smooth as glass and shone with iridescent colors of all the wings of the Heavenly Host. The high arches and open-air courtyards were perfect for resonating the voices so often raised in heavenly rejoice.

For the humans that resided in their individual paradises, Heaven was a mirror of the Earth they had spent their physical life on, enlightened by the divine. A paradise of their own making, etched from their happiest moments and most cherished memories.

Castiel often visited with the humans who resided in his Father's kingdom. Most did not take notice of him. Some mistook him for friends and family that would come and go in their reminiscing. His favorite soul to visit had not once noticed his presence, mistaken or otherwise, which was fine for the angel. He did not frequent Arthur Staten's afterlife for the man's company, but for the unique beauty with which he viewed his world.

Arthur was autistic. While his soul did not bare the same hardships his body had carried, the young man knew no other perception of the world than that which he had seen through a brain that processed visuals so differently than most of his kind.

Castiel had yet to find a word that accurately captured the human's exceptional perspective.

The visualization of Arthur's world was simultaneously muted and explosive. Colors were vibrant and overwhelming, but came in amorphous blobs that had more in common with watercolor masterpieces than the people, places, and things they were. The visuals were not important to Arthur, though. It wasn't how he saw the world. He visualized through sound and touch.

His mother was a gentle brush of the back of a hand or the playful nudge of an elbow to his side. She was the off-key humming of a song Arthur didn't know the name of, nor understood the need to label something that was already identifiable by the very sounds comprising it. The second chorus that was most defined as his mother was always off pitch in the worst of ways. Such a thing grated on the man's sharp hearing and perfect mathematical understanding of pitch and tone, but it was so familiar that it was one of the most comforting sounds in the world to him despite its blatant flaws.

Castiel liked Arthur's heaven. Today was one of his preferred memories from the man's life. As a child, Arthur's mother often took him to the park down the street from their house. He would count the cracks in the sidewalk as they went. The number never changed, and that always made him happy. The other kids would play on the colorful structures that squeaked with rust and clanged the way hollow metal does when barreled into by a forty pound ball of unleashed energy. Arthur sat with his mother and watched the way each shriek or giggle changed the hue and shape of the splashes of color that represented each child.

Castiel sat on the bench next to Arthur and his mother, watching the world around him shift from the touch of a breeze across Arthur's cheeks, the brush of his mother's hand to his forearm, and the barking of a dog impatiently waiting for her master to throw her favorite ball.

"Ah, there you are."

The angel turned to look over his shoulder at his approaching brother, who swaggered like a human even when he had no vessel. Balthazar

was considered by many in the Host as odd, but Castiel found his individuality curios and, dare he say, endearing.

"Thought I'd find you here," his brother said as he slid onto the bench beside him, wings catching the bright sunlight of Arthur's memory.

Castiel did not respond, turning his attention back to the children still playing. Many of his garrison knew he came here to seek solace and revelation. Like they did not understand Balthazar, many did not understand Castiel either. Perhaps that was what endeared him to his brother, and his brother to him.

"What's going through that head of yours, Cassie?"

That was another thing that set Balthazar apart from the rest of the Host. The way he spoke was quite…human. The angel had taken a fancy long ago to the different lilts of human language, and often expressed his many grievances that Enochian allowed for little deviation of its own. So he spent centuries tweaking their native tongue until he had his own, distinctive version. It was considered, by many, reprehensible. Castiel just thought it sounded vaguely British.

Given that the two of them were among the few angels who actually sought out humanity's various paradises on their leisure and even enjoyed the remembered worlds, it was not too peculiar that Balthazar had adopted some of the species' more acceptable quirks. Nor was it actually a punishable offense. Just…unorthodox.

"I am puzzled," Castiel answered his brother eventually, honest as he always was.

"Color me surprised," Balthazar responded in a tone Castiel did not understand but was beginning to identify as meaning the complete opposite of whatever was spoken. Quirks. "You usually are whenever I find you here."

Balthazar shifted, tucking a leg up onto the bench and turning his chest towards his brother. One brown and white speckled wing flapped, scattering the freshly fallen leaves across the ground around them. Arthur turned towards the two angels, the world growing quieter as he did so, but his eyes remained unseeing of their colors. His mother started up her gentle humming, and soon his attention was called back. Balthazar settled the wing over the top of the bench.

"What's got your knickers in a twist this time?"

Castiel did not know what knickers were, but he knew they were more twisted than ever before.

"There is a human – a man – praying to me." The stoic angel turned his full attention to his more charismatic brother. Perhaps this was a good happenstance. Perhaps Balthazar would have some thoughts as to how to address his predicament.

"A man, eh?" Balthazar's facial swirls shifted form and color in both interest and mockery. Castiel resisted the urge to glare. It would be rude.

"Yes. He prays quite often, and to me specifically." Castiel thought back to each of those pleas. He frowned, brow pinched in vexation. "Sometimes he's quite angry with me. Others, he requests my assistance: my guidance. Sometimes he just…talks."

Beside him, Balthazar shrugged. "Humans are strange, lonely creatures. They alleviate that loneliness with speech."

"But why to me?"

"Who knows? Humans have fads, and the supernatural is in right now. Some poor SOB probably stumbled across your name and decided you were the one to save his wretched existence." The way Balthazar put extra flourish into his words made Castiel doubt very much that was the case. "Maybe it was a Thursday."

The far more reserved angel was sure that if had conventional eyeballs as humans did, he would be rolling them. But he did not, and his brother *was* trying to help him in his own, unique way.

"He…" Castiel hesitated for a moment, unsure how to voice his supposition. Balthazar watched him expectantly, support coloring his face despite his often acerbic tongue. With only a slight shift to his celestial wavelengths – the equivalent of a flush – Castiel admitted, "It's foolish."

"Nonsense; nothing's foolish but fools, Cassie. And neither you nor I fit into that category." The angel paused briefly, then tilted his head in concession. "No matter what Zachariah says about me."

Castiel could not help the laughter that flitted across his face. Slightly more at ease, as he was sure was his brother's intention, he relented, "This human speaks to me as if he knows me, Balthazar."

His brother hummed in thought, turning his head away to stare at the shifting colors of the playground. "And you haven't taken any strolls crust-side lately? Mingled with the natives?"

Castiel tilted his head towards the other angel, expression chiding. "You know it is not permitted; the gates are shut."

"Well, only one thing to do then." Balthazar pushed up and off the bench. Castiel watched him in earnest. He was in honest need of an opinion beyond what he had formed by his own confused thoughts. Balthazar turned back to him with a flourish of wings and a grin Castiel immediately knew he would regret causing. "We'll just have to fix that miserable travel record of yours."

The angel blinked, staring uncomprehendingly up at his brother. "What?"

"Come on, Cassie! You've got a human begging you for your help. Let's go find out why!"

Castiel continued to stare. "Balthazar, it is *impermissible*. We don't have authorization for a mission on Earth."

His brother rolled his head in a manner Castiel suspected was much like a human rolling their eyes. Balthazar locked his gaze on the reluctant angel as he himself stood, bold and intrepid, with a challenge in his many eyes. "Come, brother. Were we not meant to be the shepherds of men?"

The angel hesitated. That was true… The Host had been tasked with the guardianship of mankind since its creation, to look after them and guide them. That was why man was able to pray to the Heavenly Host in the first place.

"But the gate is closed."

"Please," Balthazar scoffed, one hand on his hip, the other gesturing to himself. "You think I learned all this from old, dead wankers? The gate's not the only way out of this place."

His brother extended his hand, and Castiel shifted his gaze to it.

"Come on, Castiel. Your sheep is calling."

-o-o-o-

As their incorporeal feet touched down on God's green earth, Castiel took in a deep breath as he had not in almost a century. Beside him, Balthazar looked far too smug, causing a sheepish expression to filter across the angel's features. It had been far too long since he stood amidst his Father's many creations and admired them for their beauty as much as their flaws. He had not realized how much he missed it.

"Alright," his brother clapped his hands together, looking around at the small forest village they'd touched down in, somewhere in northern Germany. "Where's that human of yours live, hm?"

Castiel quieted his mind and grace to recall the man's last prayer. He had not spoken to Castiel in several days, but the angel could easily remember the last echoes of that voice. It had plead for assistance for another; his brother, named Sam. His appeals eventually turned to anger when 'Cas,' as the man often called him, had not miraculously appeared at the hospital the two humans resided in.

"Evanston Regional Hospital Emergency Room, in Evanston, Nebraska," he repeated the information the human had left him several times in increasingly distressed messages.

Balthazar raised an eyebrow. "A Yankee, huh? Alright then; US of A, here we come."

Castiel understood almost nothing of what his brother said, but considering Balthazar had been making unauthorized visits to the planet for some time now, he chose to follow his lead. The two angels took flight, soaring over forests, lakes, farmlands, and great expanses of ocean.

-o-o-o-

They landed in the hustle and bustle of an ER receiving area. Nurses darted to and fro, expressions harried, but every movement executed with terrifying efficiency. Doctors came in and out of halls, calling names from clipboards or escorting nurses with patients on stretchers through a set of double doors, disappearing beyond.

Castiel had not visited the earth since his garrison's last mission in the late eighteen hundreds. Back then, steam engines were considered the industrialized revolution of transportation and electricity a privileged commodity. Of course, he had seen the world change and develop through the memories of Heaven's charges. He was familiar with the advancements, though he had never taken the time to learn of them at a more hands-on level. Now, standing in the middle of the chaos that

was the twenty-first century, he was… overwhelmed.

Balthazar looked like a kid in a candy shop. "Amazing, isn't it? All this, in a hundred and fifty years. And Zachariah still calls them mud-monkeys."

Castiel cast a curious glance at his companion's scoffing tone in regard to their commanding officer. It was no secret that Balthazar and Zachariah had a…difference of opinions. However, Castiel was fairly certain humanity wasn't one of those. "I did not know you held mankind in such esteem."

His brother laughed, holding out his arms at their environment. "It's the luxuries I admire, Castiel! Not the humans. I mean, look around. They really know how to live it up!"

He then paused, tapping a finger to his chin in a very human way. "Perhaps a hospital isn't the *best* place to admire the finer things…. After we find your boy, I'll show you the high life, Cassie. Just you wait."

The conservative angel spared him a skeptical, if not very confused look.

"One word, brother: hot tubs."

"That is two words," Castiel countered as he returned his senses to the environment around them, deciding Balthazar was once more being… well, Balthazar. He concentrated on the many souls residing in this building. Several of them were fading, which explained the reaper also patrolling the floors. He did not, however, find the one he was looking for.

"You're no fun," Balthazar was griping, crossing his arms. "So, where's your man?"

"He is not my man," the angel answered automatically, but his face was pinched in thought. "Nor is he currently here."

Balthazar puckered his lips, entertainment at this adventure beginning to fade. Honestly, he'd assumed they'd find some pimpled up teenager locked in his room, gothed to the nines and praying to angels and the gods of punk rock. He'd have gotten a kick out of the horrified look on his brother's face, and then he'd show him what he was really missing.

"Humans move, Cassie. It's kind of their thing."

His brother spared him a scathing look. "I am aware of that, Balthazar. However, his brother was gravely injured; I did not think they would relocate so quickly."

"Perhaps the brother died." The angel picked at his hand. If he was human, he would surely be cleaning the underside of nails he did not have as an angel. Perhaps Balthazar was spending a bit *too* much time with humans. "Or your man found someone else to give him the miracle he went looking for."

Castiel flinched at the remark. Balthazar was not a cruel angel. Unlike others in the Host, especially in recent centuries, his brother did not speak to inflict punishment. Balthazar was remarkably non-judgmental in that regard. He did not, however, practice empathy either, resulting in sharp comments that were bitter only in the truth of them. His words often stung more than cruelty ever could because of that validity.

The angel, remorseful that he had not answered the human's pleas sooner, prayed to his Father that the man had not sought help in darker places. He added a second, silent entreaty that the brother had not perished, though he had less hope for it. Humans died. It was also 'what they did.' Castiel took some solace in knowing there was little he could have done, had he come. Preferential treatment was not acceptable, not against the natural order of things and not without authorization from higher up the chain of command than a foot soldier.

He closed his eyes and extended his senses, sure that he could find the soul that had cried out to him with just a little more effort. The task had seemed unnecessary previously, given he thought he had a location for the human. It may have been faster to do this from the start, he reasoned, but it would have been far more difficult from across an ocean.

"I've found him." Castiel pulled his senses away from Sioux Falls, South Dakota and focused back on the hospital waiting room and his expectant brother. "They are not far."

Balthazar made a gesture with his hands that Castiel interpreted as *'get going then'*, in a voice that sounded annoyingly akin to his brother, actually. He spared the other angel a glance that was bordering on annoyed – about as expressive a reaction one could ever hope to get out of Castiel – and spread his wings to fly.

The floor trembled, disrupting both angels in their pre-flight movements. The humans around them stumbled and faltered as the ground shook. Then the walls joined in and objects scattered throughout the room began to vibrate and rattle. The light fixtures above started flickering, and both angels exchanged perplexed expressions.

"Earthquake!" A nurse shouted as she wrapped herself across another human lying in a bed equipped with wheels.

"Here?" a male responded back, just as confused as the two angels who stood amid them, feeling the tremors through the waves of their incorporeal bodies and knowing it was no earthquake.

When the ground took on a finite rumble of the damned, Balthazar turned his surprised features to his brother. They felt it at the same time: the swarm of evil descending on the hospital. Castiel immediately took stock of the humans around them and knew, though he did not know where such evil in such proportion was coming from, they could not confront it here.

Balthazar apparently had the same thought, as he grabbed Castiel's arm and spread his wings. "Fly!"

The two angels launched themselves from the Evanston emergency room as fast as their wings could carry them. A mass of formless, writhing demons followed after.

-o-o-o-

The fastest of the beasts, the ones weighed down by less sin and years in the pit, gained on them as they fled to the nearest unpopulated area. Several straggles of black smoke managed to swarm around the tip of Balthazar's wing, clinging to the dusty brown feathers, and he went down hard with a cry.

Castiel banked immediately, dive bombing after his brother. He flapped his wings harshly at the demon clinging to his kin, sharp edges of his primaries a weapon all their own. The angel felt a swell of relief when the creature screeched and released Balthazar's wing, but the damage was already done. Castiel held tightly to his brother, helping the injured angel land on the ground far smoother than his previous trajectory would have permitted.

"Your wing," he said immediately, needing to know the extent of Balthazar's injury. He pulled his blade from the depths of his grace,

and brandished it at an incoming demon. The creature died quickly, little match for the wrath of one of God's finest. Castiel dispatched of two more quickly, earning them a moment respite as the fastest of the demons were all dealt with at the tip of his blade.

The rest of the hoard would not take long to catch up.

Balthazar spread the appendage experimentally, but immediately crumpled it back to his side with a flinch. He shook his head. "No good."

Castiel twisted his blade in his grip, worry gnawing at his internals. He had hoped the injury was not so severe as to hinder their flight. The strength of the demon stench seconds before it had swarmed the hospital indicated a large number of enemies. Flight was a far more favorable option than confrontation, especially with only the two of them. Where the hoard had come from or why there was such a presence of hell spawn on Earth, Castiel could not fathom.

"Very well, we will fight," he spoke calmly, a millennia of training and battle soothing his feathers and quieting his worries. There would be time for questions after they survived the battle.

Balthazar shook his head, pushing at his brother. "Go. Find that human."

Castiel's face pinched in confusion and clear disagreement. The human? He was hardly the angel's concern now. The incoming demons and his injured brethren were the clear priorities.

"Please," his brother scoffed at the look. "I can still fight, and it'll take more than a couple demons to take *me* down."

"Balthazar, the man is not of import-"

"He was important enough for you to come down here, wasn't he?" The angel folded his injured wing behind his back, blade sliding into his hand in preparation of the fight to come. "This amount of hell spawn won't go unnoticed. The Host will be dispatched, and you won't get another chance, Castiel."

The angel did not understand why Balthazar would push this, but there were many things he did not understand about his brother. Yet, he spoke the truth. Castiel was not disobedient by nature; to have disregarded the orders of his superiors to come to the aid of a human's call… Well, Castiel didn't know why he'd done it, but he could not

deny the pull that had led him to do so.

He offered Balthazar his blade. It was tied to his own grace, but his brother would be able to wield it. Hopefully, the addition of another weapon would guarantee his cocky words were not misplaced.

Balthazar just smiled and pushed his hand back. "Keep it. Your luck is terrible, Cassie. The beasties will probably all follow you and leave me alone."

The angel tilted his head, his features shifting in an unamused way.

Although Balthazar always took great joy in the way Castiel never did get a joke, he sobered some at his companion's unrelenting concern and equal rigidity. Wrapping his hand around Castiel's, he pushed his brother's blade more firmly to the angel's chest. "Go. Find that human. And I'll meet you in Zachariah's office for one of his rousing speeches on self-restraint."

Castiel waivered. Partly because of the reminder that there was no way they could keep their Earth-side jaunt a secret. Even if Heaven did not send a squad their way to disperse the demons, Castiel would have to report such a mass of hell spawn, as well as the troublesomely fast response to their arrival in Evanston. Another part of him hesitated, worry flickering through his grace that he would find himself standing in their superior's office alone, without his friend by his side.

"I'll be fine, brother," Balthazar spoke softly, knowing the other angel's thoughts as clearly as though they were written on his face. Castiel never had been any good at hiding the emotions he wasn't supposed to have. "Go. I'll catch you later."

Castiel spared his brother one last look before he took to the skies. The tips of his obsidian wings wrapped his sibling in a quick embrace of comradery and strength before he was gone. Balthazar turned to the south, where the approaching cloud of black was almost upon him.

"Sorry, Cassie," he whispered, raising his blade and sparing a quick glance back at his injured wing.

-o-o-o-

Castiel pushed his brother's strife from his thoughts as he flew across forests and rocky mountain ranges in the blink of an eye. Balthazar could handle himself, and it would take a large number of demons to

even hamper an angel, let alone take one down.

Instead, he focused on the soul that called to his grace, begging to be found even if its voice remained determinedly silent. Castiel touched down in the house the human's soul resonated from less than a minute after he had left his brother. The home was old, with stacks of books and artifacts of ancient, supernatural origins scattered here and there.

The home of a hunter, Castiel identified easily. Perhaps that explained the man asking for help from an angel that was listed little in scripture.

Voices drew him into the main room of the house, and Castiel's grace flared at the presence of a demon in the center of the room. She was safely contained within a devil's trap, and a human stood before her, gun trained on her human form.

Castiel stared in shock at the Colt, even as it fired on the demon and smote her being as succinctly as he himself could have. The man behind the special gun lowered it, a flash of anger crossing his face followed by a calm that any warrior who had lost soldiers in the field would understand.

The angel's grace reverberated with the man's soul, and Castiel stared, surprise coloring his features, at the man who had called out to him so many times in recent months.

He seemed…ordinary, really. A fine specimen of humanity, the angel supposed, but not what he had been expecting. Not that Castiel knew what he had been expecting. Perhaps someone…different.

The hunter crossed the room, unaware of the divine being watching him from another plane as he knelt beside the downed demon. Castiel had half a mind to stop him, but he could sense no demonic presence left in the young woman, or in the house at all.

He frowned, however, when he sensed something else. The angel tilted his head to the side, gaze roaming slowly through the room to settle on a doorway just past a desk and disheveled bookshelves. There was a door he could see beyond, partially cracked and leading to a set of stairs.

Castiel left behind the human who had prayed so fervently for him and descended those steps. There was something dark still residing within the house, but it was no demon. He found himself in a basement, navigating towers of boxes and more books until he came

to a surprising sight. There was another room within this floor. It was made entirely of iron, a heavy door left open to reveal a room designed entirely around supernatural wards and traps. The angel stepped into the space after confirming no angelic warding was present, admiration flaring for the human that had built such an ingenious safe-room.

His thoughts, distracted by the clever space, stopped altogether at the sight of two humans, asleep on various furniture against one side of the circular room. Castiel frowned as the darkness flared again, and he took a step towards the sleeping men. He held his hand out over them both, faltering when his grace flared in repulsion at the youngest. There was evil in his blood, writhing with the same black essence as the demons who had attacked him and his brother moments ago.

Castiel drew back in horror, staring down at a boy tainted by demon blood. How it had gotten there, he did not know, but the infection was growing. It was spreading through his being and beginning to seep its way into the man's heart and soul. It would take him over if Castiel did not cleanse him of it now.

The angel reached his hand out to do just that, but the boy frowned in his sleep, head twitching to the side, showing signs of waking. The process of removing the taint, if he even could, would not be a pleasant one. Castiel paused long enough to consider the options, before he reached out for the human's mind. He would ensure he was properly asleep and would not wake to what the angel had to do.

He cast his grace out in search of the sleeping man's conscience. Castiel's features furled as he realized it was not where it should be. The boy's mind currently resided in the other human lying beside him. That was…unexpected. They were dream sharing. Castiel followed the trail of the younger man's conscience into that of his father's and found himself in a darkened factory in a world that did not exist, built by the power of a Baku.

The angel stared in open surprise at the pipes and walls around him. The hunter whose mind they were in was collapsed on the ground. The young man he had followed here was standing with an arm outstretched at the beast that created this place.

Baku was quite large for its kind, body bloated from the nightmares, hopes, and dreams of many humans. Castiel's gaze hardened on this creature who had clearly lost its way.

The dream beast was born of a god other than his Father, but he had never been intended to do harm. The Baku were peaceful and aided humans in their sleep by eating the various forms of darkness that so easily gripped their fragile minds. This one had gotten greedy.

Castiel gathered his grace, intending to strike the beast. He would purify it and collapse the dream. But before he could, the creature started screaming, his soul crying out in pain as chunks of the darkness he had consumed – and which had consumed him – were violently torn from his being.

The angel transferred a stunned and horrified gaze to the boy with the demon blood, who stood mere feet away. His hand stretched towards the beast, eyes closed in concentration and soul yearning to do good, despite the anger and fear vibrating throughout his body. The terrible darkness within him flared and grew as the boy sourced it for his purpose, trying to cleanse the beast in the most painful of ways.

The angel did not know if he intended such harm, but he had to stop it either way. This purification was cruel. And it was destroying more than its intended victim. The darkness that gave the boy such powers would consume him too if he continued.

Castiel turned to the beast, who writhed and screeched and begged for death in a language the human did not speak. The angel could listen to it no longer. He gathered his power and struck the Baku, smiting the poor creature with the might of Heaven and an explosion of white light.

-o-o-o-

The angel came back to his heavenly body with a deep breath and an ache in his grace he knew no injury was responsible for. The boy with the demon blood woke with a gasp and staggered upright out of the chair he had been asleep in. Panicked eyes sought for his father, who woke far slower. That human had been asleep much longer, the angel could tell, and was the intended victim of the Baku's greed.

Castiel turned to leave, pausing as the boy's soul flared in relief at the first words his father mumbled. The angel knew he should be repulsed by the evil flowing through the human's veins and the manner in which he had sought that power and applied it. But the man's soul swirled with love and hope and care in a way that only humans ever did, and Castiel could not bring himself to be as revolted as he should be.

Evil once more flickered on the edges of his senses, and Castiel turned his gaze and grace upward. The house began to shake, and he knew he was out of time. With a quick look back to the two humans to ensure they were well and truly free of the Baku's hold, followed with a periphery search of the first floor for the humans there as well, Castiel took to the sky as fast as he could before the hoard of demons could overtake the house.

They swarmed the structure as he burst through the roof, clipping at his wings and launching themselves after his quickly fleeing form.

-o-o-o-

There were more of them than there should be. The formless demons giving chase were not only too many in number for Hell's limited presence on Earth, but the swarm seemed no smaller than what had first attacked the hospital. Castiel prayed to his Father that Balthazar had been right about his terrible luck, that their persistence in coming after him and their undiminished numbers were not a sign of his brother's demise.

Castiel flew northwest until he hit the great mountain range that split North America. He turned north and sped ever faster into the wilderness of his Father's creation. The angel raced as fast as his wings could carry him until he sensed no human souls for many miles. He dove into the untamed forests beneath him and landed on the ground in dense woods.

The trees would hamper his own fighting, but the lack of openness would hinder the demons as well, and bottleneck their attempts to surround him from all sides. It was not a great place for battle, but it was better than a human settlement or an open field.

Castiel pulled his blade from his grace, the celestial alloy manifesting atom by atom until it settled in his hand as a comforting weight. The cries and screeches of the approaching hoard filtered through the trees. The great giants rustled and shuddered in the presence of evil, giving Castiel a warning he did not need, before screaming smoke descended through the canopy and was on him.

The Warrior of God cast all thoughts from his mind but those of battle. There were more demons than he had feared, and thoughts of Balthazar facing this alone were terribly hard to banish. But he focused on the fight, knowing he could not learn of his brother's fate if he perished in the forest today.

Demons fell beneath his blade, others smote beneath his terrible, divine wrath. But it was not nearly enough, and the smoke persisted from every side. Castiel was beginning to tire. Their numbers were fewer, but now the formless creatures were hanging back. Those that had attacked with malicious intent and little thought lay dead beneath the angel's feet, black essence soaking the earth. What remained were wiser. Older.

Castiel turned slowly in a circle, regarding each hovering cloud with a glare that dared them to attack. To see what he was worth.

A trill broke the air. One of the demons vibrated, smoke shaking along its wisps and edges. Another joined in, and soon after all remaining demons were screeching with vibrations. Castiel winced at the mounting battle cry, but refused to let it intimidate him. He raised his blade, locking eyes with the leader of the haunt.

A demon broke formation and charged him from the left. Castiel swept his arm to the side, intent to cut the creature down but already knowing it was a trap.

Lighting struck through the forest, striking the demon with the brilliance of God. Castiel shielded his gaze from the smiting as the demons shrieked in sudden fear. Angels descended from the trees, slamming into the ground. A full flight of vesseled warriors, twelve in total, quickly dispatched the remaining demons.

Castiel finished off the creature who floated, dumbfounded, beside him and had intended to end his life only seconds ago. It went down with a gargle and a fizzle. The angel lowered his blade to his side, turning to the flight commander with military discipline.

"Ishim," he greeted his brother with a dip of his head, recognizing the vessel he had once fought beside when he belonged to this unit. The commander did not return the gesture, staring down at the smaller angel with stoicism that bordered on disdain. Of course, Ishim had never much liked Castiel, especially once he had been awarded his own division of soldiers. The commander stowed his blade, and Castiel did the same.

"Castiel. Your presence is not authorized on Earth," he began with no preamble, gesturing to two of his angels. They flanked either side of Castiel but he put up no resistance. The angel had no intention of denying his actions.

"Yes. I will return with you to Heaven to await punishment for my

disobedience," he answered by rote, unflinching in his duty. "But I did not travel alone. Balthazar was with me. We were separated and he was injured. We must find him and aid him in battle, need be."

The angel standing just behind Ishim on his left, in a vessel Castiel knew well, stepped forward. Her eyes were sympathetic where her superior's were cold. Benjamin presented Castiel an angel blade, regret coloring the grace behind her vessel's face. Castiel's chest swelled with grief, recognizing Balthazar's blade instantly and the grace dripping from its sharp edge.

"No," he whispered, accepting the weapon with numb fingers.

"Balthazar perished in battle. His blade was all that was left when we arrived," Ishim reported, tone never changing from the bored drawl. Castiel flinched at it, but buried the emotion down deep within his grace. It could be felt another time, when not faced with a reprimand and a garrison of his brothers who had likely saved his life, even if they could not save Balthazar's. "Perhaps it's as I thought, Castiel. You were not ready for your own command."

The words might have caused a flare of indignation and anger in the angel before. Castiel had earned his flight, and under the grueling and often cruel command of Ishim. But such words did not matter now. He barely heard them, staring at the blade of his fallen brother, missing the look of distaste Benjamin sent their superior on Castiel's behalf.

Balthazar was dead.

We should never have come down here.

"Come," Ishim ordered, turning and spreading his wings.

The angels on either side of Castiel took him by the arms, though there was no need. He followed willingly, more than deserving of whatever punishment awaited him.

-o-o-o-

Zachariah regarded the angel before him with distaste. Little upstart, really. But Castiel did not have a record of disobedience, at least not since he had come under the angel's command. He had always been quiet, removed from much of the Host due to his oddities. Unfortunately, most of the Host were still favorable enough towards him, despite those idiosyncrasies. Zachariah didn't much care for him, but, then, he didn't much think of him, either. He was an ant in the

farm digging what tunnels he was told to dig.

Unfortunately, his little flare of rebellion, while a relatively minor infraction in any other decade, could all but bring their carefully laid plans to a grinding halt. Things would be so much simpler for the higher ups if Heaven could play ignorant to the machinations of Hell as it stirred up the Apocalypse.

Now, now, Zachariah was going to have to reason out, in front of his men, why a swarm of demons were organized on Earth rather than milling about, causing individual, minor mayhem that Heaven didn't give a shit about.

"There were many," Castiel reported as stoically as the emotion-prone angel was able. He stood, stiff and formal, in the older angel's office. Zachariah could tell he was grieving the loss of his companion and was appeased some, knowing he could use that to his advantage. "More than should be present on Earth. I believe the forces of Hell are up to something."

Zachariah stood from his desk, irritation flaring at the angel's annoyingly accurate words spoken in front of multiple angels that did not need to know such things. "It is not your place to speculate on the movements of the enemy, *Castiel*."

The angel dipped his head in acknowledgement, but something about it set Zachariah's teeth on edge. Something about Castiel always did, though he'd yet to pinpoint just what that was.

"One of the Host is dead because of your little road trip." The angel flinched, and Zachariah decided to twist the knife to drive his point home. "Had you not endangered your brother, all of your brothers, Balthazar would still be alive."

Castiel's gaze dropped away from his superior, properly chastised. The guilt flowing off him was practically palpable. Perhaps it was the angel's flair for emotion that was the root of Zachariah's dislike.

He settled back at his desk, steepling his hands as he regarded the little upstart. Zachariah considered further punishment – perhaps something to help wipe those nasty emotions out of the soldier once and for all. But it was a tad extreme for a minor offense, and there were two angels in the room companionable to Castiel in ways that could rouse discussion among the masses should he be punished too unfairly.

"You will be demoted, for the time being, to second in command of your flight," Zachariah informed him nonchalantly. "Uriel will lead the unit in your stead."

Castiel dipped his head once more. Nothing in the shifting colors of his grace or the language of his being spoke in protest, and Zachariah was all the more pleased for it. Let the little upstart wallow.

"You will report to Malachi to show him this portal you traveled through and it will be sealed." The angel paused, pursing his lips in thought. "And any others you are aware of."

The angel shook his head in response. "I know only of the one we used. Balthazar was the one who found it."

Which meant he would need to order his men to find any other holes in their defenses and patch those up. When the truth came to light, there would be some in the Host who would surely disagree with Heaven's decision. When that happened, they needed to be locked up tight. Perhaps it was fortuitous that Balthazar had gotten himself killed. He had inadvertently alerted them to a potential security risk. He'd also been on Zachariah's list of angels likely to rebel when the time came.

"Dismissed."

"Sir."

Zachariah raised a brow in the angel's direction when he didn't immediately leave. Had his dismissal been unclear, in some way, or was the angel really just itching for more punishment?

"The demons?"

The lead angel frowned in general confusion. When Castiel didn't say anything more, Zachariah waved the question away for the useless inquiry it was. "They were dealt with. End of story."

"But their numbers-"

"Are not your concern," Zachariah reiterated through clenched teeth, incredulous at the angel *still* questioning his orders. Perhaps he did need to be reeducated after all. "The only reason demons showed up in the first place was because you and Balthazar decided to take a stroll downstairs. Since *that's* not happening again anytime soon, problem solved! Unless you plan to get another of your brother's

killed?"

The little angel paled horribly, losing all colors across his being. He dipped his head, the guilt that flooded across him in the absence of any other emotion was sadistically rewarding for Zachariah.

"*Dismissed*, Castiel."

The angel bowed swiftly to his superior and left the room with two attending soldiers. Zachariah watched him leave, something about the little upstart bothering him even worse, now.

"Ramael." He beckoned the angel standing beside his desk, nothing more than a paper pusher, really, but one that could be easily cajoled into loyalty and obedience. He liked that in an angel. "Where was Castiel picked up?"

Ramael straightened to attention and glanced down at the stack of forms he was holding, running a finger along the report. "The Northern Territories of Canada. North American continent. He was a far distance from any human civilization, in a place called the Tlicho Lands. Location: sixty three point three eight nine degrees latitude by-"

Zachariah waved him into silence, five of his six faces clearly telling the subordinate to shut up. He stared at the closed doors of his office the little upstart had passed through less than a minute ago. An unpleasant thought was mixing with that annoyed feeling Castiel always caused in him.

"And where are the Winchesters now?"

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Castiel sat on the park bench in Arthur Staten's heaven, but he could not bring himself to enjoy the beauty and splendor of the man's world today. The loss of his brother stung more than any wound, and the guilt of his death ran deep.

He had not told Zachariah the reason for their disobedience in the first place, because his superior had not asked. Part of Castiel wondered if that, too, was disobedience. An omission of the truth was not the same as lying, but it could be argued a crime all its own.

Still, the matter seemed behind them, and Castiel tried to leave it there. It was difficult, as his mind did not seem to be in tune with his

grace. Despite great efforts to move on from the tragedy of Balthazar, however honorable his death had been in battle, Castiel could not stop his mind from lingering. Questioning.

There were too many things not fitting into place. The number of demons present in one location, the swarm that acted more like bees in defense of a hive than demons on the hunt, the swiftness with which they were on him and Balthazar, and then again on him. It was like they had been waiting – ready – for the angels.

Which made no sense, given that he and Balthazar had not premeditated their trip to Earth before that day. So if not the two of them specifically, were the demons expecting angels in general?

Why would hell spawn be organized on Earth, awaiting Heaven's response?

Something dark and ugly rooted itself in Castiel's lower torso. He did not know what it was, and part of him did not want to know what it was, but he knew it was nothing good.

Obey.

That quiet, compelling voice which often spoke to him when he sought revelation had returned some days ago. It usually found him in places like Arthur's park, when he sat in the silence of a human's mind and looked for peace. Unless in the presence of Balthazar. It never had much to say, then. His grace ached at the realization that his brother would never again be there to quiet the voice that demanded obedience and silenced his questioning.

But not listening to it is what got his brother killed in the first place.

Resolve filled Castiel like a leaden weight and he stood from the bench. He pushed his worries and doubts, the ugly knots in his torso and mind, and the fragmented thoughts of disobedience far, far away from him. If the human prayed again, he vowed not to hear his pleas, not to feel the curiosity, or answer the yearning call to come to his aid.

He was an Angel of the Lord. A Warrior of God.

He served Heaven. He did not serve man.

The angel left the Arthur's paradise to return to his brothers and resume his heavenly duties.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns : Second interlude will be up tomorrow, and then we'll be caught up and on-break while I finish stockpiling for Season 2. Azazel and Hell are up next!

Castiel: This is my first time writing Pre-Dean Cas. I'm not quite happy with him (or Heaven) yet, but I'm confident I'll nail him down with a couple more chapters :)

Reviews: Thanks again for everyone who's left comments! If you have a moment, please continue to do so! Commentary and excitement spur the muse, and I'm still behind schedule for Season 2.

Chapter 33: Season 1: Interlude II

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Azazel's turn! Our favorite Prince and Princess of Hell are up to no good as we see the first of Hell's big change of plans.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 1: Interlude II

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

For the first time in the forty eight years he had spent on Earth, the last thirty four of which he had searched tirelessly and often fruitlessly for Lucifer's true vessel, Azazel wished he could be back in Hell. The pit was not a pleasant place, that was certain, and the Prince of Hell was no true fan of it. Not the darkness of its deepest layers, or the heat of hellfire, or the screams of the damned. Azazel held no love of his birthplace, only a love for Lucifer.

It was for his true Father, the angel who had given him a second birth, that he clawed his way through the depths of the damned to rise on Earth in search of him. He had tried the harder way – to burrow through level after level of Hell's infinite reaches in search of the cage. But he had wasted centuries looking and never come close.

Now, staring at his ruined arm, he wished to be surrounded by hellfire once more. Hell had a way of both amplifying and nulling pain. It was a land of paradoxes, and Azazel desired that most right now. Lilith could possibly heal the wretched limb without the power of a soul deal, or at the least lessen the annoying hindrance it had become. Crowley, at the very least least, would be able to coerce some human sucker into a deal strong enough to fix the blasted thing.

Azazel had considered summoning him for just such a purpose several times since he had let the Winchesters out of his grasp.

It would have to wait, however. He would not waste the time and effort spent capturing the boys or luring John in just to ease a

nuisance. The arm could wait. His demon had done as commanded, landing all three Winchesters in the nearest hospital almost the moment they'd fled from his grasp. The eldest son was lying in a coma on life support, unlikely to live much longer.

John would sell his soul to save him, Azazel was sure of it. He just needed to be patient. And, in case the hunter did not summon him directly, Crowley and his crossroad demons needed to be free to make the deal.

So, here Azazel was, forced to communicate with Lucifer's Firstborn through a chalice of blood once more. The situation may be sparing him some unpleasantness, actually, given Lilith's ungodly shrieks coming through the blood. Hers were not the only screams either, hence the unpleasantness he was likely being spared. She was pissed, and rightly so, given Azazel had just relayed that Dean Winchester was walking around with a little chunk of angel in his chest.

He was somewhat remiss to not be witness to the expression on her face, though. Lilith threw a bitch fit like no other, and it could be quite entertaining if you were not one of her intended targets. Another demon screamed for mercy through the blood, an unfortunate causality of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Is he a vessel already?" Once the cries had died out, leaving the blood silent but for her heavy breaths of exertion and rage, she managed to calm enough to speak with him.

"Nope," Azazel popped the last consonant. "Just a sliver of grace snuggled right up to that righteous soul of his."

No wonder his daughter had been ousted when she kissed him. His blood had been foul: completely unbearable, tainted with that righteous poison, created by the smallest of angelic influences. With an angel's grace sitting pretty in his chest, Azazel had no doubt Dean truly had tasted sulfur on her tongue.

"How the hell does an angel's grace get in a human?"

The words were spat with such disgust and fury it brought a lazy smile to Azazel's face. He shrugged regardless, not that Hell's Princess could see the gesture. She'd probably hear it in his words, though. "Not easily, that's for sure. I didn't think the cloud hoppers were that creative. They've been monitoring their vessel this whole time without ever leaving the pearly gates. Feeding him information. It's ingenious, really."

It was also damn close to what they had been planning for Sam. Which was infuriating, even if one could respect an opponent's cleverness.

"And pumping him up while they're at it!" Lilith screamed, pointing out that other tidbit Heaven was copying them on. Azazel wasn't sure if who in the lead, though. If he'd gotten Sammy to drink that last container of blood, they'd surely be winning the mini game.

It rankled him that he hadn't managed it, but the Prince of Hell was nothing if not patient, and he knew they had time yet.

But if the angels were introducing bits of grace into Dean Winchester over time, he was going to be just as powerful an archangel vessel as Sam would be once he reached his peak on demon blood. So much for their little one-upper plan. Heaven and Hell were back on even footing for now.

"It doesn't seem to be doing much in the way of protecting him," Azazel reasoned out loud. A little silver lining, perhaps. "It's not enough grace to heal him when injured or shield him from attack. But if they start doing some more cloud-seeding before we can get to him…"

"They'll interfere with our plans, and we'll be fucked." Lilith always did have a way with words. "We're going to have to change it. All of it. From now on, our backup plans will need backup plans."

"What of the prophet?" The Prince of Hell idly picked at the dead flesh on his arm, peeling away a chunk of blackened skin like a discarded scale. "Did Crowley do as I asked?"

"Yes. For a demon who never shuts up about his numerous connections, he sure is slow at getting the simplest of information." The young voice was pouting and seething at the same time now. "He has a man watching the prophet, but there's an archangel tied to his ass. So even if he is helping the Winchesters, there's nothing we can do to stop it."

"For now." Azazel filed the information away, intent to speak more in depth with Crowley once John was secure in Alistair's capable hands. ""We'll start with the Hell Gate. We can't move forward with the plan until we get you topside, anyway."

The silence of the slowly bubbling blood was agreement enough from the Princess. After a moment, she asked, much more reasonably than

any previous tone so far in the conversation, "What are we going to do about the angels?"

"Angel," Azazel corrected, eyes going unfocused as he thought back to that explosive power that activated the second his twisted essence made contact with the celestial purity. Angels and demons really weren't meant to mix. It had hurt like hell, for them both he figured. The boy was lucky to have survived it at all, but those were angels for you. Holier than thou, self-righteous bags of dicks. No better than demons; they just thought they were. Which, in the Prince of Hell's humble opinion, made them far worse. "It's only the one, and not even that. An infinitesimal percentage of an angel."

"If it's guarding Dean Winchester, one percent or one hundred doesn't make a difference. We'll never get his soul in Hell."

"Oh yes, we will." He was not prepared to give up all their years of planning and careful execution because one unpredicted chunk of grace now stood in their path. "One angel can be dealt with; we'll find a way. Until then…I think if Heaven wants to play dirty, it's only fair we join their game."

The silence was a curious one this time, and though Lilith's response was drawled, it was also full of the scaling malice that was their birthright. "What did you have in mind?"

"I think we need to get Sam a little guardian of his own. Turnabout is fair play, and all that."

"A demon?" Lilith sounded thrilled, the excitement in her voice already suggesting she had the perfect one in mind. "I have a girl for the job. I've been grooming her for this for decades."

"No," Azazel interrupted before she could get going. Lilith was excellent at cultivating the cream of the crop of demonhood. Truly, she had a gift for it, which is likely what Lucifer had first seen in her thousands of years ago. But hell-spawn was not what they needed to win this game. Not *yet*, anyway. "The grace in Dean's chest will spot a demon a mile away. Save your girl, we'll need her still."

"If not a demon, then what? A human? They'll never stay loyal. Even a soul deal won't be enough leverage to assure their cooperation."

By the disgust in her tone, Azazel could already tell that anything other than human or demon would be immediately nixed. She didn't much care for the pagans or their monsters, and trusted them even

less. But Azazel thought he had good odds of persuading her to see things his way this time around.

"No. Not a human." The Prince thought back to a conversation they'd had long, long ago. "For this, we need to go with something less… biblical. Something Heaven isn't prepared to deal with."

Now Hell's Princess was clearly frowning so sharply it came through every word. "We are *not* opening Purgatory. We're having enough trouble with one Hell Gate!"

Azazel barked out a laugh, though it curled into a purr at its tail end. "Now *that* is an interesting thought. Not the one I was thinking, but veryinteresting…"

Oh, the things the Leviathans could do to upset an Apocalypse… *Very* interesting indeed.

On the other end of the conversation, Lilith growled low in her throat, tiring of this game. The blood rippled and spat with her growing impatience, and Azazel didn't need his Hell-born sixth sense to know he was wearing thin his tolerated presence.

"There are still things on this Earth yet that can give even Heaven's finest trouble. You told me once you thought you'd found where one of them was buried."

The blood went so still that the Prince of Hell, had he not known Lucifer's firstborn so well, might have thought their conversation cut short. Then it began bubbling ecstatically. Lilith didn't even have to say anything for the crimson liquid to relay her malicious grin as she caught on to his train of thought.

"You don't happen to remember where that was…?"

-o-o-o-

Azazel picked his way through the long-settled dust and dirt of the forgotten city. Occasionally, a solid crunch beneath his boot signaled a stray human remain, one of the few bones that hadn't disintegrated completely in the thousands of years since this settlement had been buried deep beneath the earth's crust by the wrath of a God.

It took time, working his way through crumbling structures, barely recognizable for the ancient things they once were. Most were gone completely. Only the edges of this city had survived annihilation by

fire and brimstone. But the edges were all he needed, and eventually Azazel found his way to one of the few buildings still standing above the others, built with solid foundations and thick walls, meant to last through the ages. A tomb. A burial place for the kings and nobles and priests that once oversaw this great city.

The Prince of Hell entered through the half-collapsed doorway, a malicious grin on his face. Stairs led him down, down, down into the darkness until even his Hell-spawned eyes struggled to see the depths. He pulled out and twisted on a flashlight, amused at the modern technology lighting his way in such an old place. He ought to have brought a wooden stick and an oil-slicked rag. Done this Indiana Jones style.

Hey, even demons were entitled to their flights of fancy.

The flashlight lit his way down, level after level of buried, honored dead. Tombs lined the high-arching hallways he passed, some entombed in the walls, others built in the centers and sides of the rooms as stone coffins, impressive and ageless.

Finally, Azazel's feet touched the stone depths of the final floor. The deepest that the burial tomb went; the oldest of the kings concealed here. He shone his light throughout the circular room that stretched beyond the reach of the flashlight. Massive stone pillars supported the underground cavern, and the demon weaved his way between them, checking each erected tomb and sarcophagus.

It was on the twelfth stone entombment that the Prince of Hell found the first signs of what he was looking for. Etched in a ring about the walls of the sarcophagus, just beneath the lip of the heavy stone lid, were ancient symbols of a language long dead to the likes of Azazel. His face split with a grin as he reached out a hand, running calloused fingertips across the warding. The ancient spells lit faintly blue to his touch, glimmering in the castoff of his flashlight.

"This is it." He nodded to himself, agreeing out loud in a room filled with nothing but the dead and what he had come for. The demon dug a knife from his hip, tracing slow steps around the perimeter of the stone coffin, eyes scanning the carved symbols. "Ah-ha. There you are."

He reached out with the tip of his blade and made a careless, insignificant little flick to one of the heavier lines dug into the stone. The knife ate at the old work, catching on the stone and adding a thin

little scratch of his own to the existing warding.

It flamed blue for a second before fizzling out with a pathetic pop. The words did not light again, and Azazel grinned, putting the knife and the flashlight on the lid of another tomb just behind him. He turned back to the sarcophagus and, now with the warding dismantled, dug the full weight of his demon-enhanced body into the stone lid. The Prince of Hell pushed with his mind as well as his hands, and the thing groaned and grumbled inch for inch as it slid and stuttered to the side until, finally, it toppled off of its stone walls and hit the floor with a thunderous crack.

The bits of dust and old death things that clung about the place, stirred by more movement than it had seen in millennia, subsided with minimal affair. The demon paused by the side of the sarcophagus, eyebrows raised as he stared at the lip of the stone and the dark, cavernous depths beyond. Nothing moved.

With a frown, Azazel hauled himself up onto the base step of the coffin, forgoing caution and any scrap of decency or decorum that he'd never had to begin with. He hoisted himself with a groan, swinging a leg up and over the erect stone wall to straddle the top of it and peer down into the tomb.

His eyes lit yellow, glowing in the unnatural light of the flashlight in that very dark place. He grinned down at the body that lay, unmoving at the bottom of the stone grave, staring up at him with distrustful, angry, unnaturally green eyes.

"Well hello, Beautiful."

Azazel reached into the tomb, clasping at the lithe, feminine hand that reached back.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Start. Your. Guesses! I'm excited to hear where you think this is going.

AO3 Note: This now officially catches us up with ff.net. From here on out the story will be on a short break while I stockpile chapters. Please drop a comment if you're enjoying the story so far, fan interest is what keeps me writing! After we start up again mid March, this story will update once a week on Sundays, switching to every two weeks if I'm low on chapters or behind schedule.

Cheers!!

Chapter 34: Season 2: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Reviews: Thank you so much for the support and wonderful, amazing, encouraging comments you sent my way. I needed them, and though they didn't kick me out of my stupid writer's rut of darkness and misery, they kept me chugging at the story, even when I was so weighed down worrying about posting schedules and keeping you all waiting. You all pulled for me, and I'm going to keep pulling for you. I will spend some time this week trying to catch up with all the amazing comments you beautiful, beautiful people sent my way. Thank you so much for the support and encouragement.

Chapter Warnings: Uh...I'm gonna mess with your heartstrings for the next... let's say three chapters. At least. #sorryNotSorry?

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 1

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean sat up slowly. His shoulders slumped in a manner as foggy and slow as his brain. He surveyed the space around him just as slowly, taking extra time to translate the white walls and beeping machines into recognizable information. Hospital. His mouth was a land of cotton, and he wet the roof repeatedly to get some saliva going. The room he was in was empty of other people. A private room, which didn't bode well, but Dean felt oddly uninjured, which was weird.

The only times he'd ever woken up in the hospital were the ones where he wasn't usually conscious upon arrival or damn near bleeding out if he was. Hunters didn't mess with government-funded medical aide unless they had no other choice.

Dean rolled his shoulders, wincing at the tightness of heavy muscles. He took in a deep breath, rubbing absently at his chest and the funny feeling there. It was like he couldn't get enough air in for how big his lungs felt, how empty his torso seemed. He added it to the list of weird he was making in his head.

"Sam?"

The hunter grimaced as he swung his legs off the side of the hospital bed. Dean catalogued the rest of his body. He felt banged up and heavy in a groggy sort of way, but overall nothing seriously hurt. He rose to his feet cautiously, but they held him with no complaints and he frowned at the white walls around him.

Why the hell was he here if he wasn't hurt?

Dean glanced around for his clothes, his bare feet abnormally cold on the hospital tile. All of him was abnormally cold. What, did nurses here not believe in heat? He was clad only in blue scrub pants and a white t-shirt, which really didn't seem enough for the chill in the air. But his civvies weren't anywhere in the room, and the hunter really hoped that didn't bode ill for the condition of his clothes, especially his dad's jacket.

Although if he was up and at 'em, he couldn't have come in too bad.

Dean made it to the door, which was open to the corridor beyond. There wasn't anyone immediately in the hallway as he stuck his head out, checking either direction. Not unheard of, but still kinda weird. He added it to the list as flashes of zombie movies stuck in his brain; opening and closing scenes of flicks like *Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later* running through his head. The rational part of his brain chuckled. He watched way too much television. The hunting part of his brain knew how crappy his luck could be and was busy thinking, '*it's 2006, dumbass; demons are still developing the Croatoan virus and a Zombie Apocalypse isn't off the table yet.*'

Dean swallowed a little more heavily than he'd intended and turned back into his room. Maybe the hallways could wait until he saw some normal, living, non-decomposing humans wandering around. A hot nurse, even.

He froze, now facing into the room, and he blinked at the unconscious body lying on the bed he'd just climbed out of. *His* unconscious body, intubated and covered in wires connected to a dozen beeping machines. There were casts around multiple limbs, and what wasn't wrapped in plaster was covered in thick layers of gauze. Chest, leg, shoulder, free arm. Patches of a bruised and swollen face were covered too.

Holy shit, that poor SOB looked dead.

One of the machines beeped, drawing his stunned attention to it. An EKG readout was beeping faster, numbers flashing higher on the

monitor just over his body's head. Blood pressure and brain activity relayed blips and graphs on other machines on either side of the bed. The brain activity display was as smooth as the horizon in the middle of the Utah salt flats.

Dean was staring at his unconscious, unresponsive, dying body lying in a hospital bed ten feet away from his current self.

That made him a ghost – or a soon to be ghost.

"Son of a bitch!"

-o-o-o-

It took him another floor and several room searches later to find his brother. Sam was walking down the hallway in the same street clothes he'd worn when Azazel had taken them. Dean felt immediate relief at the sight of him upright and mostly uninjured.

"Sammy! Thank God, man-"

His kid brother walked right through him, causing Dean to shudder and ripple with sweeping cold. He stumbled backwards into the wall and had to physically shake the terrible sensation out of his not-body.

Right. Ghost.

Dean chased after his brother, catching up so he could circle him for a once over and assess whether he was actually okay or not. Sure, the kid was upright, but it wouldn't be the first time Sammy had neglected medical treatment when his family was hurting far worse. Martyrdom ran thick in the Winchester blood.

He was a bit more banged up than Dean last remembered him, though to be honest, the hunter was a bit hazy on everything after the demon decided to get personally acquainted with his soul. The kid had a cut above his left eye which was stitched closed, a couple scrapes on his face, neck, and the backs of his hands. There was some bruising spread across his left temple and cheek, and Dean surmised that he'd taken a bash to the head from a wide object.

Or maybe a wide object had taken a bash from his brother's head. Dread pooled in Dean's stomach. A car crash. Those injuries looked like the kind you got in a car crash. There had been an accident, with Sam driving in the front seat and…

"Dad."

He followed his brother down the hall, urging him to move his giant body faster and frantically hoping the cup of coffee in his hand was for their missing father.

"Tell me Dad's alright, Sammy," he begged his brother, already knowing the kid couldn't hear him but talking anyway. "Tell me he got us away from that yellow eyed bastard."

Sure enough, the sasquatch turned into a room a couple doors down, and Dean let out a hearty breath of relief at the sight of John Winchester sitting upright in the room's only bed. His right arm was done up in a sling and he had similar cuts and bruising as Sammy along the opposite side of his body.

Car crash for sure then. Dad had been sitting passenger side. It was hazy, but Dean remembered needing to warn them.

Right. Warn them, because he'd known the semi was going to plow into his Baby. Because it had happened before. Because he was from the future, it was 2006, and a demon had run them off the road. Dean looked around the room, then down at himself. Which meant this had happened before too.

Crap, he didn't remember being a ghost. He vaguely remembered waking up in the hospital after the crash, Sam telling him he'd totally been a spirit and they used a Ouija board of all things to communicate. Dean snapped his gaze back to his brother. Crap, he needed a Ouija board and he needed it right fucking now.

The next thing that was going to happen was their dad selling his soul to bring Dean back.

"No," Dean sputtered, fists tightening as he stood in the doorway. Dread filled his stomach and panic flooded his chest, because the last time John had been lying in a hospital bed with his son dying a floor away, Dean had woken up and his Dad never did again. "No, not now. Not *now*! What the hell, we should have *months*!"

It was May. John Winchester died in July – July nineteenth, ten-forty-one a.m., two thousand and fucking six – and it was *May*.

"What else did the doctors say about Dean?" John pried the lid off the coffee cup, blowing gently against the rising steam and wincing as the expansion of his lungs jostled his bruised torso and broken collar

bone.

"Sam, man, tell me you can hear me!" Dean moved right up to his brother, standing across their father's bed from him and waving his arms uselessly. "You gotta stop him. Sammy!"

He yelled at the top of his lungs, but he already knew it wouldn't make any difference.

Sam was quiet, staring down at the edge of the sheets. There was anger on his face, along with fear. "Nothing. Just that there's not… He's in a coma."

There was a tense pause to the room as Sam shuffled on his feet and John stared at him expectantly. The young hunter stood awkwardly for a moment before he sunk, slowly, into the plastic chair beside John's bed. "The, uh, damage to his chest coupled with the blood loss… They don't think he'll wake up."

Their dad looked away, emotions of his own warring across his face. Dean wished he could remember the last time he'd landed himself in this position so he could skip out on watching his family fall apart again, knowing he was the cause. If he could remember that nothing in the conversation was vital, or if he knew whatever they might say that was, he could just leave. He could focus on getting back in his body so his father didn't sell his soul to do it for him.

But he didn't know, because he couldn't remember it. And there was no way in hell was letting John Winchester out of his sight for the next forty-eight hours. Nevermind that he should have had *months* before this happened. Nevermind that Time seemed determined to screw him at every turn. Dean clenched his teeth and fought back the overwhelming wave of *it's not fair* that screamed from every muscle.

Whining about it wouldn't do him any good now. He had to save his dad, and to do that he had to get a Quija board.

"Okay. Okay, think, Winchester, think. How do I get you to hear me?" Dean paced along his brother's bed for a moment before the lightbulb hit. He didn't need to make Sam hear him, he just needed to get his attention. And doing that, as a ghost, shouldn't be that hard at all.

Dean might not remember being a spirit the last time this happened, but it wasn't the only time he'd been one.

The hunter focused on the cup of coffee his dad had just set down on the little bed table. Dean didn't hesitate, pulling back his arm and swinging his fist right through it. He spun with the force of the punch he'd fully expected to land. Nothing. Dean stared back at the unmoved coffee cup, then the hand that had gone right through it.

"What the hell?" He let out an exasperated noise and tried again. And again. "Son of a bitch, I forgot how hard this was."

He hadn't spent time as a spirit in years. He resumed his earlier pacing, staring at the coffee cup and ignoring the conversation his father and brother were having. He tried to remember what that kid – Cole – had taught them back when death had decided to take a holiday for a couple weeks. That kid had been as Amityville-badass as ghost kids got.

Dean stopped moving as memory turned into realization. He and Sam had turned themselves into ghosts so they could talk to the kid whose spirit was left behind. Their only lead in the case, actually. Cole had been haunting his childhood home and driving his poor mom to the brink of emotional sanity all because Death wasn't around yet and the town reaper had been nabbed by demons. One of the seals. Dean remembered being with the kid when a second reaper had come to town to rectify death's little holiday.

Tessa.

The hunter spun around, scanning the room. He may not remember much of their first meeting outside of what she had shown him that day in Cole's bedroom, but Dean could put the pieces together. He was damn sure *this* was their first meeting.

So where was she?

Dean popped his head out of his dad's room, looking up and down the hallway. When no petite little thing with black hair and a cold smile showed up, Dean turned back to his family and put the MIA reaper on the backburner – for now. She'd show eventually and he'd tell her to shove off whenever she did. He had more important things to worry about than Death's messenger.

John was handing his youngest a list of supplies to have Bobby wrangle up and Sam was staring down at the piece of paper with a frown. Dean read over his shoulder even as his brother listed a couple of the things aloud.

That dread immediately came back as he recognized the ingredients, clear as day.

"Protection," John answered with a small, weary smile.

"Like hell," Dean growled back, glaring at his dad and then looking up at his brother, anger shifting to panic. "It's not for protection, Sammy! That's stuff's for summoning a demon. Don't you bring him any of it!"

But Sam was already moving for the door.

"No, Sam, don't listen to him! He's gonna make a deal, damn it!"

Sam left the room, completely deaf to Dean's warnings. The spirit followed after his brother, panic rising as he tried to catch his attention, swiping left and right at anything in the hallway he could knock into. His fist went through every time and his desperation mounted.

He needed more time.

Sam stepped into the elevator and Dean raised his arm to punch his brother straight in the face, uncaring if the damn move didn't do a thing to touch him. At least it would be cathartic to the building frustration.

A flash of tan caught his attention and the hunter froze, staring down the hall to his left. The doors of the elevator closed with a ding, Dean still standing there with his fist raised.

"Cas."

The angel stood at the end of the hall, staring straight at him. He was wearing that damn beautiful, familiar trench coat, his dress shirt askew and blue tie still missing. Dean lowered his arm, a weird mixture of relief and sorrow filling him so quickly he was soon overwhelmed, feeling like he couldn't handle any more surprises without just about losing it.

The angel turned and walked around the corner.

Shit.

Dean shook himself, stowing his emotional crap, and headed after him, calling the angel's name.

-o-o-o-

"What else did the doctors say about Dean?"

Sam stared at the edges of the thin hospital blanket draped over his father's legs as he mumbled something. He wasn't even sure what; his mouth was working while his brain lagged eons behind.

Dean was in a coma. Dean was in a *coma*.

Had this happened last time? Sam closed his eyes against the swell of terror and damn near insurmountable loss. He hoped it had. He prayed to God it had, because that meant Dean pulled through.

A hand landed on his forearm, the weight of the cast heavy against his skin. Sam looked up at his father, leaning forward painfully on the bed, a clear wince in his features, as he tried to comfort his youngest son.

"He'll pull through, Sammy. Your brother's tough."

The youngest Winchester cleared his throat, looking up and away to clear the water from his eyes. John didn't mention it, just settled back into the pillows with a grimace. He reached forward with his unbroken arm, swiping his wallet off the small table attached to the bed.

The coffee cup rattled slightly on the table, and Sam frowned at it before his father held out a card for him and drew his attention back.

"Here, give them my insurance."

Sam took the card, looking down at it with a disbelieving smirk, feeling a momentary bit of laughter in the dark. "Ellroy McGillicutty?"

John returned the same silver-lining, world-weary smile. "And his two loving sons. Are they asking questions?"

Sam blew a humorless breath of air out his nostrils. "The cops asked a few. They wanted to know why you had a gun with an empty clip and a recently fired antique."

The EMTs that had pulled them from the crushed car found John with both Dean's .45 and the Colt. Sam hadn't realized his father had retrieved Dean's gun from the cabin, but he wasn't all that surprised. John had given each of them an ivory-gripped gun when they'd been old enough. When they'd become true hunters. It was Dean's favorite weapon and one of his most cherished possessions he never went on a

hunt without it. The fact that John had taken time to retrieve it caused a swell of emotion and a surprising amount of forgiveness in the youngest Winchester.

"Where's the Colt?"

And there went those happy feelings. Sam tried to ignore the flare of hurt and anger that sprung up as his father inevitably asked about that damn gun. At least he had asked about Dean first.

"Cops have it in evidence. I told them about the cabin." He looked away from John at that, burying down the memories he didn't feel like dealing with at the moment. The cops had needed answers and the best lie Sam could think of was the truth. "I told them me and my brother were kidnapped. That you were a former marine and came after us once you got the ransom demand."

His father chuckled, a wry smile on his face as he leaned back against the pillows. "Dean would like that. Sounds just like a movie."

Sam smiled back, having had similar thoughts when he was spinning the tale for the local law enforcement. "It helped explain his injuries, too. Doctors tend to have questions when you come in looking like you went a dozen rounds with a serial killer."

Silence settled on the room again like a shroud, the roller coaster of emotions between both men a sad reminder of the state of all three of them. Sam chewed on his lip the moment he realized it was trembling. John was silent as he watches at his youngest son, feeling his pain but never showing it.

"I need you to get that gun."

Sam closed his eyes and pretended he hadn't heard his father say that.

"Sammy."

Brown eyes flashed back open. "Your son is dying and you're worried about the Colt?"

John's jaw clenched against the insolent tone, but he fought through the anger that surged at his youngest's flagrant but oh-so-common insubordination. "That demon is hunting us as surely as we're hunting it. The gun may be our only card."

Sam ground his teeth and spoke through a clenched jaw. "They'll

release it back to us as soon as they clear the cabin. A day or two, tops."

"You wanna give that bastard two days to catch up to us? Or time to steal it from the cops? You and I both know a demon could waltz right into a police station without breaking a sweat." John skewered him with a pointed look. Sam held firm for stubbornness alone, at least until his dad started pulling back the covers. "Fine, I'll get it myself."

The youngest Winchester had half a mind to let his stubborn, suicidal father do just that, but reality and the fact that he didn't want his dad dead (or arrested) any more than he did his brother, made him finally relent. He agreed to break into the police evidence locker after nightfall. Luckily, it was a small town and the local LEOs seemed pretty friendly as far as cops went. Security would most likely be lax, and the station less manned while officers were out looking for a kidnapper and torturer.

Thanks to Dean, it wouldn't even be his first time breaking into one.

"You gotta clean out the trunk of the Impala before some junk man sees what's inside, too," his dad added, picking up his wallet and pulling out a piece of notepaper, the type you write grocery lists on.

"I called Bobby already," Sam replied with a bitter smirk. When Dean saw the state of his car, he was going to kill every demon in a three state radius. Sam would gladly be there to see it. "He's going to tow the car back to his place."

John raised surprised eyebrows. "From Michigan?"

Sam shrugged with a huff of breath. "Dean would kill us if we left it here. Doesn't matter how bad a shape she's in."

His dad nodded with a knowing smile. "Alright, well, you go meet up with Bobby. Get that Colt, and bring it back to me. And watch out for hospital security."

Sam almost rolled his eyes as he stood and made his way around the bed. After stealing a gun from a police station, smuggling it into a hospital would be the easy part. "I think I've got it covered."

"Hey, here." The younger hunter paused as his father held out that piece of paper for him. He grabbed it with a curious frown. "I made a list of things I need. Have Bobby pick 'em up for me."

Sam read through the list, some of them aloud. He looked at his dad with a raised brow. "What's this stuff for?"

"Protection," John answered with a smile that only made Sam more suspicious. He glanced down at the list again before turning on his heel and exiting his father's hospital room. Mentally, he was going through the things on the list, trying to recall what spells some of them were for. But John had never let the boys mix with that stuff. If the hunting family needed spell work done, John had been the one to do it, or find someone else who could. Sam cursed not ever digging more into magic, especially now that Dean was dying and some hoodoo priest or witch may be their only option at recovery. He resolved to ask Bobby for a book or two. He'd certainly have the downtime for research with both brother and father out of commission.

As he got in the elevator, a chill racked through his body briefly, and his brow furled at the familiar, ghost like cold that surrounding him for only a second.

The doors closed and it was gone.

Sam stood frozen within the elevator, a crazy thought occurring to him. And once he'd thought it, he couldn't seem to let it go.

"Dean?" Brown eyes scanned the space almost nervously, as if expecting his brother to flicker into existence like the many ghosts he'd seen in his life. He checked behind him, spinning a quick circle in the elevator. "Dean, are you here?"

The elevator pinged and the doors opened to several expectant people. They stared at him, half turned around in the small space and talking to no one. Sam cleared his throat, smiled at them weakly, ignored the pull to his split lip and numerous cuts and bruises, and pushed through into the lobby of the hospital.

He turned and watched the elevator fill up with nurses and visitors, none of whom seemed cold in the slightest. Disappointment tugged at his chest. The doors closed and Sam was left with nothing he could do but go meet Bobby and break into a police station.

-o-o-o-

Cas made it six doors down the new hall before Dean caught up, curling his hand around the angel's bicep to pull him to a stop. It was a crazy relief when his hand didn't sink right through him, and Dean

rejoiced for a second of feeling *real* again. Castiel turned with a stoic look, as though he hadn't heard Dean call his name several times in his chase to catch up. For a moment, Dean struggled against that piercing gaze. It was easy to forget how ridiculously, over the top blue those eyes were when you hadn't seen them in a while.

"Hello, Dean."

The hunter was still trying to get his brain to function with his tongue beyond *"holy crap, it's really Cas,"* when the familiar, gravel-gargled voice beat him to it. It was all Dean could do not to grin like an idiot. He totally failed and his face splint in an ear-to-ear smile. Man, the angel probably had no clue how good it was to hear that stupid, simple greeting that had become something of a catchphrase between them.

He pulled Cas into a tight hug, gripping the back of that damn trench coat with all that he had. It was rare for Winchester men to really hug. It usually took one of them almost dying. Or, more commonly, actually dying and coming back. The angel returned the gesture slowly, stiff arms coming up to wrap around Dean's back in an awkward pat that only made the hunter laugh.

Dean pulled away, keeping the angel at arm length, but still in contact. There was an irrational hunch in the back of his brain that said the guy might run again if he didn't keep a tight grip.

"Man, Cas, is it good to see you." The hunter did a quick once over of his friend, making sure he wasn't injured. The angel seemed fine – solid and whole as he ever was. Not a hint of an explosion in sight. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Dean's brow pinched in thought before he'd gotten the question fully out. He glanced around. The hallway wasn't a particularly busy one, but there was still the odd visitor or nurse passing through, none of which paid any attention to the two of them. "Are you…Are you a ghost, too? Can angels even be ghosts?"

"No. I'm a…" the angel paused, looking for the right word that the English language clearly didn't have, "…shadow. I'm not here, Dean. Not really. And it's almost time for me to go."

Blue eyes shifted down the hall, and Dean followed the gaze on instinct. There was nothing there, though Cas seemed to be intently staring at something. The hunter shook his head, confusion and fear weighing with one another. He had about a thousand questions, and

no time for the angel's frequent disappearing acts.

He settled his hand on Cas's other arm, firmly locking him in place without realizing that's what he was doing. The angel turned back to him. "Go where? What the hell are you talking about, man?"

"To move on, of course."

Dean blinked at the straight up response. Then he blinked again, and pulled a bitchface that would have made Sam proud. "*What*?"

"It's my time, Dean."

"Like hell it is." The refusal wasn't just adamant, it was downright fact, as only a Winchester could say in the face of…what, death? Is that what Cas was talking about? Honestly, the hunter didn't even know. The angel certainly wasn't making much sense. "Look, we can deal with whatever…this is, after we stop Dad."

The angel tilted his head, brow finally pinching in some expression beyond that wide-eyed, vacant look he had once been famous for. "Your father?"

"Yeah, Cas," Dean answered, somewhat exasperated. But he reigned it in, taking a deep breath, counting to ten, and using the time to remind himself that maybe Cas was about as confused as he was. They needed to get a baseline going – get them both on the same page. The angel knew who Dean was, so it wasn't present-day-Cas. Which meant maybe the angel didn't realize he'd hitched a ride back with him to 2006.

Speaking of.

"Cas, do you know where you are?"

The angel tilted his head to the side. "McLaren Flint Hospital, fifth floor."

Dean blinked. Wait, they were in Flint? He hadn't actually bothered checking where they were – ironic, considering what he'd just asked the angel – because anything beyond the general 'hospital' conclusion he'd come to had seemed unnecessary at the time. Hospital was all he needed to know.

Flint wasn't that far from Saginaw, he reasoned. But Azazel had had them in the middle of nowhere. He was sure of it. Even concussed,

Dean figured that cabin they were held in was north of Saginaw. It had been colder, for one. Not by much, but the hunter had plenty of experience picking up the subtleties of an unfamiliar environment. He'd figured they were closer to one of the lakes, given that crisp humidity in the air that always seemed present around bodies of water – miniscule ponds to vast oceanic expanses – and the way the cabin screamed eerie-haunted-lake-with-guaranteed-monster-legend nearby.

Of course, Michigan was riddled with a hell of a lot smaller lakes than the Great ones. They really could have been anywhere. He just figured north because it made the most sense, and it was where he would have carted off a prisoner for some loud, messy forms of questioning.

Not that being in a hospital in Flint meant he was wrong about where they were being held. Only that they'd been helicoptered to the nearest trauma center, rather than an ambulance ride away to a local hospital. Given his body was lying in a coma, more plaster than man at this point, he really shouldn't be surprised that they may have been air-lifted from wherever that truck had slammed into his Baby.

Suddenly he was glad to have been out cold for that bit. As Bruce Willis as an emergency helicopter flight would have been, Dean had enough issues with planes. He really didn't need to experience an even less recoverable form of flight.

The hunter focused back in on Cas, who was still staring at him with a little frown, unmoving beneath his grip. "No, I mean what year."

The brows on Jimmy Novak's face went up almost to his hairline in a moment of expressive emotion that Dean was far more used to from his best friend nowadays (or, uh, ten years in the future?) than that vacant stare that reminded him, creepily, of Naomi's control.

"The year?"

"Yeah, buddy, the year." Dean was trying to ignore the worry eating at his stomach now. He had thought, given that bomb in his chest that he didn't fully understand and Cas standing here now, visible to him but unseen by everyone else, that maybe the angel had caught a ride after all. Maybe Bobby had been right and not all of him had made it.

Dean couldn't fathom any other reason he would be seeing Cas, like a ghost, while he himself was a spirit and his body lay dying after the Yellow Eyed Demon had definitely mentioned angels and been blasted away from him in an explosion of light not unlike a smiting.

God, he had so many questions his head hurt.

The least of which was *are you possessing me/am I a vessel/why have you ignored me for six months/are you really here/what the hell Cas?* Okay, that was more than one question, but they were all equally vying for attention that he'd rather just group them together and get one solid response for all of it. Because he was kind of drowning, and it only got worse every time he let himself think about that explosion or the warmth in his chest. A warmth that, for the last six months, he'd figured was the absence of friggin' Hell weighing on his soul. Now he was starting to think it might have been a chunk of his best friend lodged in his sternum the entire time.

Only angels didn't hitch rides in human chest cavities. Not without permission. And the world may have been ending, but he liked to think he'd remember something like that. Cas hadn't asked, and he hadn't given anything. Not that he wouldn't have. Maybe. Probably. If it meant bringing Cas with him to the past, then yes. Or saving his life. Yeah, okay, maybe he somehow had given him permission without saying it aloud.

Was that a thing? Could he have even done that?

A small flash of panic flared at the thought. Crap. He was a vessel. Was he a vessel? Shit. He didn't even know, nor did he know how to feel about it, either way. It had been a while since the Winchester boys had dealt with angels trying to get all up inside either of them, but the thought of '*hell no*' and '*that's bad'* and *'over my dead body'* were still pretty permanently ingrained in his being after that last year of the apocalypse. Not to mention the whole Gadreel incident and that last year with Lucifer back.

But it was Cas, so it couldn't be that bad, right?

Dean gave himself another mental shake. None of this mattered right now! Cas wasn't using him as a vessel. Yes, maybe the hunter would have let him ride around in *Taxi a la Dean* if it was the only way he could have made the trip back, but he *hadn't* and the angel *wasn't.* Dean had clearly been in charge of his own actions for the last six months, and it's not like he could be housing a halo without realizing it.

Except…this wasn't the first time an angel had gone subterfuge on the possession thing before. Sammy went months without knowing he was hosting a co-pilot. Distress flared throughout Dean's mind. Sam had

been *pissed* when he'd found out. And this wasn't the first time Castiel had played the game of staying out of Dean's life for Dean's sake.

Had Cas been with him the entire time and said nothing?

"It's 2006, Dean."

The hunter blinked as the angel brought him back to the present. Er… past. Whatever. Point was, the angel knew the year, but was clearly in no hurry to go stop John Winchester from selling his soul to save his son. Nor did he seem to even know that was a thing that was going to happen, and lead to much, much worse things in the long run.

What the hell is going on?

Dean shook the question – all of the questions – off for the time being. It didn't matter; he could sort where the angel stood – where he and Cas stood together – after they saved his Dad.

"Look, I don't know what's going on with you," Dean started, giving his best friend a light shake through his tight grip on the angel's arms, "but I need you right now, buddy."

The angel seemed torn for a moment, eyes drifting back down the hallway to stare at nothing before he refocused his piercing gaze on Dean. That gaze that had never been able to deny Dean Winchester anything, and now was no exception. Slowly, he nodded. "I will help you."

Dean let out a breath and nodded in relief. He released the angel, taking a step back. "Great. Awesome. Okay."

The two then stood in the hallway as nurses passed by – sometimes through – them. Seconds ticked away as they stood in awkward silence, each waiting on the other. Finally, Cas shifted, uneasy, from one foot to the other.

"Where do we start?"

The hunter blew out another breath of air at the angel's question. Great. So Cas didn't have any ideas, either. "I have no friggin' clue. We gotta get Sam up to speed, but he's gone to meet with Bobby. So… until he gets back, we make sure Dad doesn't summon any demons, and we keep an eye out for Azazel."

"Demons?" The look Cas gave was shrewd and suspicious; it caught

Dean by surprise. The angel stared up at him like *he* was the one not making any sense.

The hunter regarded his friend with a frown. Okay, Cas's brain must have been more scrambled then he'd thought. Another thing to shove aside and deal with later. "Yeah. Dad's gonna summon him and make a deal to save me. We have to stop him."

Intense blue eyes regarded him severely, and Dean kept right on frowning. "If you stop him from saving you…you'll die."

Yeah, okay, there was that. Honestly, Dean hadn't gotten that far. Dying was second to stopping Dad from sacrificing himself. He'd figure out what to do about his own not-dying problem after they'd solved John's.

"We'll figure it out, alright?" Dean offered his friend a weak smile. "We always do, don't we?"

Cas tilted his head to the side, and the hunter found the familiar gesture comforting, if not amusing. The angel held his arm out in an 'after you' gesture, and Dean took a deep breath, then plowed on ahead, down the hospital hallway, back towards his father's room.

They were on Winchester Guard Duty until Sam got back. And in the meantime, Cas could probably teach him how to move stuff in ghost-form.

Chapter 35: Season 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Oh. My. Chuck. Guys, I can't even. I'm like...type-stuttering. The amount of crazy support for last chapter was (not to be redundant, but) crazy. I kept getting e-mail alert after e-mail alert, and each day further into the week I would think, 'It'll die down soon, I'm sure' and it just didn't! The excitement that this story was back, the joy of Cas's first appearance, the suspicions at his weirdness, and the many guesses as to what would come next had me fighting tooth and nail against posting this chapter every day last week. Every day! I wanted to hand it over to you all so badly. You beautiful, beautiful people. So thank you, truly, from the very bottom of my Muse's heart :)

Chapter Warnings: We continue with the dramatic angst and the heartstring pulling. Dean's (re)learning lessons on being a ghost, John's dodging the results of ghost-lessons, and Sam's just about running all over the place.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 2

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"It's not going to move if you just keep punching it."

Dean huffed out a frustrated breath, straightening up from his last attempt at taking on the empty coffee cup. His opponent just sat there on his dad's bedside table, mocking him in all its papery not-moved-ness.

The hunter threw an arm out at the thing in frustration, and it sunk right through. He whipped his head around at the angel with a glare, daring him to say anything more. Cas was sitting on his dad's bed, heedless of the man's legs going straight through his incorporeal butt and thighs. The angel looked bored, of all things, as he stared at the hunter, unimpressed.

John Winchester was oblivious to their presence. He was reading

through a mindless magazine a nurse had left him after he'd flirted his way into getting his cell phone and clothes back. He'd really had to work it, too, since the items were in police custody. Dean stopped watching the sickeningly sappy scene rather quickly, growing increasingly uncomfortable and feeling like a right down voyeur. It was particularly off-putting as it was his father doing the flirting.

John was a widower; he wasn't dead (yet) (*Shut up, Inner Dean*). Dean knew that, as a man, he had needs. He'd always been discrete around his kids though, particularly sensitive to the fact that he had two young boys who lost their mother very early. Maybe he'd been a little *too* discrete, given he had a third child that neither Sam nor Dean had ever suspected existed, let alone heard about.

Dean wondered if he should reach out to Adam earlier this time, or try to keep him out of the whole mess entirely. He really didn't have a clue which one would result in the bigger catastrophe, but, given how things had turned out so far, one of them certainly would. Still, he'd make sure when those ghouls rolled around that either the Milligans weren't in town or the Winchesters were.

Secret siblings aside, the nurse had come back, pep in her step, fifteen minutes later with his phone, clothes, car keys, and a magazine tucked right on top. *Men's Health* of all things. Dean had snorted so hard he was sure his dad heard it.

But back to the damn coffee cup.

"By all means, show me how it's done then!" The hunter took a step back, haughty words hanging in the air between the human and angel. Dean turned his back on the innocent paper cup and regarded his friend with a challenge in his eyes.

Castiel raised a single brow, but the spark in his own blue gaze suggested Dean's tactic to get the angel to just do the work for him had been spotted easily. Cas shook his head. If Dean didn't know any better, he'd say the bastard was amused. "You're trying to attack it physically, but you don't have a body."

Dean huffed again, but continued to stare at the angel, ignoring his lesson just like Cas had ignored his challenge. "You telling me you can't move one tiny little cup?"

The angel's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Dean knew he won, and the next second Cas flicked his hand and the paper cup tumbled off the small table. It landed on the floor, rolling in a lazy, slanted circle

due to the lid before eventually settling on one side.

John Winchester's head snapped to follow the movement and silence reigned in the room.

"Hell yeah!" Dean cried out, raising his arms in a mock 'field goal' cry. He turned back to the angel, ignoring the hunter in the bed regarding the room with tense suspicion now. "Why do I even need to learn this; you can just catch Sammy's attention for me!"

Cas did not seem to share in his friend's victory or amusement.

"Dean?" John's voice was tight, sharp eyes casting about the room slowly. His hand twitched atop the blankets, itching for a weapon of any sort. No hunter was stupid enough to blindly assume a ghost – or any supernatural creature making objects fly about a room – was a friendly, even if they could put two and two together and assume it was their own kin.

Dean glanced at his father, then back to Castiel. The angel stared at him with blatant expectation, glancing between the elder and younger Winchester with a pointed look.

The hunter sagged, casting his friend an annoyed glare of his own before he cast about for something else in the room he could try and move. He zoned in on the magazine in his father's lap, still held loosely but mostly resting against his thighs. Dean narrowed his eyes on a single, glossy page. His brow furled in concentration, jaw clenched and pulse point in his temple flaring.

The corner fluttered, but nothing else happened.

John relaxed slightly, a little bit of the tension in his form fading out as nothing else in the room moved.

"Argh!" Dean turned away from the magazine in frustration. He couldn't even move a friggin' flimsy piece of paper. Cas was back to looking amused.

"I told you. You're attacking it physically."

"Well how the hell else am I supposed to hit it!" The hunter gave up, settling in the plastic visitor's chair his brother had occupied earlier that afternoon.

"You don't have fists to hit things with. You're a spirit, Dean. You're

nothing but a soul right now." Castiel turned his gaze to the older hunter, and he reached out his hand. With palm up, he slowly turned his hand over, and the top page of the magazine lifted and turned.

John stiffened once more, staring down at the paper as it flipped again and again. He breathed out his son's name shakily.

The angel turned back to Dean. "You're not a being, you're an essence. Your power is not in force, but in presence."

"Alright, Gandhi," the man from the future groused, crossing his arms. "Give it to me again, in layman's terms."

The angel huffed a little sigh of his own, but the look he bestowed on the frustrated human was almost fond. "Think, don't act."

Dean frowned. That was hardly any better. But he remembered the ghost kid, Cole, telling him to get angry, right before he'd goaded him and his brother into a twelve-year-old fight club (which had been, he could now admit, downright hilarious). He turned back to the magazine. John was alternating between it, the coffee cup, and the rest of the room, clearly indecisive about how to proceed when the possible hunt staring him in the face was his own son.

His own son who was doing a terrible job at getting a message across. Not that that's what Dean was doing – this was just practice. But if Dean had been the one sitting in a hospital bed with a dying Sammy next door and crap flying through the room, he'd be expecting a friggin' translatable message, damn it.

So he tried not to act. He tried not to move his body at all in response to the very physical action he was trying to perpetrate. Instead, he focused on the single page he was trying to turn, and kept at it until he was able to picture it moving up and folding over again and again and again.

The page fluttered, struggled, and then flipped over.

His back straightened, delighted shock clear on his face as he looked back at Cas. The angel chuckled at his success and mockingly clapped his hands slowly at his friend's achievement. Dean could even ignore the uncharacteristic sarcasm in the move, since John had finally made up his mind as to what to do next. In a flurry of movement, he reached for the phone sitting atop his pile of clothes on the table beside him. It was dialing and pressed to his ear in seconds.

"Sammy?" John sounded almost desperate, slightly watery eyes still staring down at the open magazine. If anyone else walked in, it would be damn near laughable to see the staunch, hard-ass marine almost in tears over a full spread of Usher discussing his fitness and nutrition secrets. Dean was feeling pretty damn giddy himself. "I need you to pick up one more thing for me."

-o-o-o-

Sam raced back to the hospital in his dad's pickup in the early hours of the morning. The cops had turned the vehicle over to him shortly after he'd been cleared by hospital staff earlier that day. The young man had given his report about the cabin and the 'kidnapping' only an hour after the chopper had landed on the roof of McLaren Flint trauma center. Sam walked away without even getting checked in, cleared with only minor injuries from the crash. The eighteen wheeler had hit the passenger side of the car, damaging his dad a lot more than him, and he hadn't been injured beforehand or unbuckled in the backseat like his brother.

Local law enforcement found the cabin almost immediately after he'd given them a rundown of events. It wasn't hard to backtrack the road they'd been on to the abandoned building once they knew to look for it. They'd found additional bodies – two young girls and a boy – out in the wood shed. Both girls had bled to death, and the young man's neck had been broken. Given what the police had told him, the bastard had killed those kids while Dean and Sam were less than a hundred feet away, tied up and bleeding to death in the cabin.

Sam tried not to let guilt eat away at him over the fact that Yellow Eyes had added more bodies to the death count in his pursuit of them, but his fingers ached around the steering wheel just thinking about it. God, that blood had probably been one of the girl's. Why else would a demon bleed a human to death? All Yellow Eyes would have had to do was possess one of the girls as he'd bled her dry, all to force it down Sam's throat in the end.

His trip back to the hospital, hurried as it was, was interrupted for the three and a half minutes it took the boy to pull off the road and empty his stomach into the bushes.

Although the cabin wasn't cleared yet, the cops hadn't found much reason to consider any of the Winchesters involved negatively. They were clearly victims, and with the testimony of the truck driver – who the cops concluded was, at best, drugged – they were pretty much

scott-free. The biggest thing they'd have to do was clear the guns, and John and Dean both had licenses to carry and registration for their respective firearms. At worst, they might be slapped with a permit fine for the Colt, but Sam knew his dad could talk his way out of that easy.

Which made breaking into the Denton Police Department to retrieve the gun even more frustrating. The little township where they had been held – Backus, Michigan – was pretty shaken up over the horrific scene. The nearest police force, one town over in Denton, didn't see torture and triple body counts all that often (or likely ever). Except for a lack of suspect in custody, the case was open and shut in terms of the three survivors lucky to alive. If his dad could just wait another twenty-four hours, they'd get everything back from the cops, no further questions asked, and Sam wouldn't have had to break into an evidence locker in the middle of the night.

But John had a fair point about Yellow Eyes grabbing it before the police released it. Given that Sam had forced the demon's hand twice now with that gun, he was somewhat surprised it was still in the evidence box once he got into the storage locker.

Sam parked the truck hastily at the hospital, wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and shoved the evidence box with Dean's .45 and clothes under the passenger seat. It wouldn't be long before the police realized it was missing, and he needed to be sure they didn't suspect him or his family of taking it. He tucked the Colt into the bag of supplies Bobby had given him – anger sparking at what the gruff hunter had told him those ingredients were really for – and grabbed the last item his dad has asked for.

Tucking the large Ouija board box under his arm as inconspicuously as possible, he shouldered the small duffle and headed into the hospital, hopefully to talk to his brother. After he had words with his father.

-o-o-o-

When Sam entered the room at the start of visiting hours, laden with a duffle and a thin board game box, Dean stood from his father's bed, having pretty much spent the night camped out atop it alongside Castiel like they were sixth graders at a freaking summer camp sleepover. They hadn't quite gotten to braiding each other's hair yet, but boredom had driven Dean pretty damn close.

"Sammy, tell me you brought the Ouija board!" he called loudly in

greeting. Sam crossed right in front of him and set the duffle bag on the bed where his brother had been seconds ago. He didn't say anything, placing a large, thin box beside it. Dean let out a whoop at the bold, white text and picture of a wooden board with a swirly set of letters. "Atta boy! Come on, let's crack this thing open and get talking."

Castiel slid off the bed, tilting his head to the same angle as the Ouija box, observing the photo across its front.

"You're quiet." John hadn't said anything when his youngest came in, but the silence combined with the tension in his son's tight shoulders were setting off alarm bells.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Sam couldn't quite look at his father, worried he'd lose the calm he was barely holding onto; a calm that was maintained only by the possibility that his brother was around, waiting on them. Counting on them.

"What are you talking about?"

"The stuff, Dad." Sammy gestured emphatically to the duffel bag resting on John's legs, finally locking eyes on his father and unable to hold back the anger there. "You don't use it to ward off a demon; you use it to *summon* one."

Both Dean's and Cas's eyes drifted to the zipped up bag and Dean sucked in a slow breath, trying to keep his pulse even. Okay, so Dad had the means to summon Azazel. Didn't mean anything. They could still stop it. He just had to tell Sam what was happening and his kid brother would take care of it. Easy-Peasy.

"Come on, Sam. Don't do this right now. Just pick up the board and *talk* to me."

John went quiet, not quite able to meet his son's accusatory stare either, but Sam wasn't done. "You're planning on bringing the demon here, aren't you? Having some stupid, macho showdown!"

"No, he isn't, Sammy!" Dean stood in front of his brother, completely unseen, and begged the younger man to hear him. "Don't do this right now, man. You gotta talk to me! We can stop it."

"I have a plan, Sam."

John's words sent a spike of ice through Dean's chest and he clenched his fists against his sides.

"That's exactly my point! Dean is dying, and *you* have a plan!"

Dean tucked his chin against his chest as he struggled to control the panic flaring through his body. They didn't have time for this, and the more Sam argued with their dad, the more surely he drove the final nail into John's coffin.

Not that this was Sam's fault, nor had it been the first time. John was a stubborn bastard, and he had always intended to throw himself on that yellow-eyed grenade. But right now they had a chance to stop it, and that chance revolved entirely around Sam dropping this argument and picking up that Ouija board.

"Sammy, please. *Please*."

The youngest Winchester tossed his head in disbelief, anger breaking down into disappointment. "You know what? You care more about killing this demon than you do saving your own son!"

"Stop it."

"Do not tell me how I feel!" John bellowed back, grip on the bedcovers tightening. "I'm doing this for Dean!"

"I said STOP IT!" Dean slammed his hands down on the small, attached bed table. The whole bed shook with John on it, and the table and its contents rattled dangerously, metal protesting the abuse. An empty cup of Jell-O jittered right off the side, falling harmlessly onto the hospital blankets. The living hunters in the room froze as the metal arm sung out the last of the vibrations before settling into silence.

Dean stared in surprise at the table, drawing his fists off the pseudo-wooden surface. He glanced at Cas, who stood at the foot of the bed with something between surprise and approval in his blue eyes.

"You see that?" Dean asked with a weak chuckle. "I full on Swayze'd that mother."

Sam and John stared at the table, then each other, both knowing exactly who else was in the room with them. Sam's hand shook slightly as it reached out for the Ouija board. He stared down at the thing hopefully before glancing around the empty space.

John cleared his throat. He seemed both embarrassed and exhausted, and Sam fought back the twinge of guilt at seeing his dad so worn

down.

"You, uh… You go see if you can get anything off that. They wanna do another round of X-rays on me in a minute anyway." He lifted a shoulder, indicating his busted arm with a half shrug. "Doc wants to make sure there's no nerve damage."

Sam's shoulders fell a bit but he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. If Dean's really around I'll…uh, I'll get us all on the same page. Maybe he'll have some ideas or something. A hoodoo priest to lay some mojo on him." He let out a weak chuckle. "Or another faith healer."

"That was one in a million, Sammy," his father returned, not unkindly. The words might have been crushing, but the regret in his expression softened them. "We may not find another."

Sam sniffed, refusing to look up from the board in his hands. "I know. But I'm not gonna stop looking."

"Me either, son. We'll turn over every stone. I'm not giving up on him." His youngest nodded and headed for the door, likely back upstairs to Dean's room in the ICU. "And Sam? I promise. I won't hunt the demon until we know Dean's okay."

Sam nodded, trying for a smile but it felt weak. He left the room, leaving behind the unseen ghost of his older brother to stare, cautiously, at their father. Did he mean it? Was John going to wait, give Sam time to find another way – give *Dean* time to get back in his body himself – or was he just saying it to keep his youngest at bay? Again, Dean wished he could remember how this went down last time. Had they had this exact conversation before John Winchester sold his soul?

Not that it mattered either way; he *had* to speak with his brother. That was the first step. Since his dad had more appointments with the doctors, Dean couldn't do that *and* keep an eye on John Winchester. So he started for the door. Sam would be in his room trying to talk to him, and he didn't want to see how long his brother would hold out before deciding the Ouija board was a stupid idea.

Still, Dean hesitated again at the threshold to the hallway, turning to look back at his father once more. John sank into the pillows, closing his eyes with a deep, world-weary sigh he *never* would have allowed his sons to hear.

"Cas?" Dean turned his gaze to the angel, who was still standing at the

foot of the bed, staring at John Winchester with a curious expression. Blue eyes met his. "We gotta go."

The angel nodded and crossed the room, passing him in the doorway to follow Sam up the couple of floors. Dean paused again, eyes lingering on his dad, who didn't look like he was planning on getting up or sneaking away anytime soon. He looked more likely to take a nap than summon a demon.

"Just wait, okay? Please, Dad. I'll figure something out and come back on my own. Just give me time." It was a whispered plea he knew his father couldn't hear, but maybe someone else – something else – would. Dean turned and headed back to his comatose body, trailing just behind Cas.

-o-o-o-

When they got to his room, Sam was talking quietly with a doctor who must have been in for a checkup when the younger Winchester arrived. The conversation was quiet in that nothing-good-is-being-said sort of way, and Dean didn't bother listening. He was dying, no hope, all they could do, yada yada yada. Instead, he settled cross-legged on the floor, waiting for his brother to inevitably shake off the doctor and join him.

God, why hadn't he just told Sam everything days ago? Then they wouldn't be in this mess, with the only one who knew anything lying useless in a coma, and their main form of communication a friggin hoodoo board set that was as likely to end them in a horror movie as it was to actually convey anything useful.

"Why do you think your father is going to make a deal to save your life?"

Dean looked up to the angel who had settled, rather relaxed, against the edge of the bed. It was weird to see his friend so…not-stiff. Even after years spent on Earth, Castiel carried himself like he didn't feel comfortable in his own body. Which, considering it didn't start out his, Dean had always written off as normal Cas.

The hunter wondered if being nothing but a shadow of what he was – like a memory somehow housed in his chest – had finally freed Cas of that physical limitation. Huh. Maybe Chrysler-Building-Tall, Real-Cas was, of all things, laid back in his true form.

Dean almost snorted at the thought of Castiel, Warrior of God and

Savior of the Righteous Man, ever being anything close to *laid back*.

"Because he did it last time," the man from the future answered, eyes drifting over to his brother. He tapped his fingers impatiently on the tile floor.

"Last time?"

Dean focused back on the angel, a light frown pulling at his forehead as his friend continued to be sporadically confused and cynical. Cas definitely didn't remember the time jump, but what he did remember was inconsistent and the muddy mix of memory issues and skepticism was a foreign sight on the usually tolerant angel. Unfortunately, unpredictability was really inconvenient right now, and just about the last thing Dean needed in addition to kind of dying, being incorporeal, and having no way – at least no quick way – to warn his brother or stop what was coming.

He didn't exactly have time to address any of it accept the last one, though, so Dean shoved the rest aside for now. They could dig into it later. As long as Cas didn't start acting like Lucifer-Possessed-Cas had acted, Dean would forgive him some changes until they had time to talk about this whole shadow-memory-chest-taxi-bomb thing.

"Yeah, Cas. The last time this happened." Dean gestured to the hospital room around him. "Which is why we need to stop it."

The angel was silent for a moment more, eyes drifting to the far wall and down to the floor in deep thought. When he spoke, his gravelly voice was soft, but leading. "You're ready for death, then?"

Annoyance flared at the question and Dean snorted. The look his friend sent him was a serious one, and he remembered the terrible expression in those blue eyes when Cas said it was his time to move on. The acceptance and lack of fight. Like they were talking about the weather. The hunter swallowed forcefully, suddenly realizing that Castiel wasn't joking here. He glanced at the floor, picking at the hem of his blue scrubs as he considered the question.

"Am I ready to die?" he echoed, actually giving the question his attention. If he stopped his dad's deal, he might not make it back. Honestly, he hadn't gotten that far. Current planning extended to 'save Dad' and no further.

Dean supposed he was okay with it. He probably had been for a while. Honestly, he was tired; he'd been tired for years. And while that didn't

qualify him for calling it quits in his book, he supposed he'd been ready for his time to be up for a while now. If nothing saved him or stopped him, that is. If the cosmos finally decided it was time for Dean Winchester to rest.

"You mean if it sticks?" he asked sarcastically in Cas's direction. The angel didn't seem to get the joke, or wasn't laughing about it. Dean sobered, trying not to be annoyed by his friend's increasingly depressing behavior, and gave a sharp nod. "Yeah. I'm ready."

Not that he thought it would actually happen, of course. Heaven and Hell couldn't afford for him to die right now without a deal stamped on his soul to send him straight to Hell. But sure, in theory, if God or Fate or any of that other destiny crap he utterly didn't believe in came down and decided it was his time, then yeah, sure. He could deal. He could let go.

Castiel didn't say anything, and his expression was closer to that stoic angel Dean met eight years ago. He wasn't sure if it was disappointment he saw in those eyes, but the hunter couldn't imagine anything else from his admission. Not his steadfast, loyal angel, anyway. Cas never gave up on anything, Dean worst of all.

He looked away. The guilt that had been conspicuously absent as he considered the decision, having been replaced with an exhausted sort of calm he so rarely felt and usually associated with failure, was suddenly present in full. Dean thought about what his death would mean in this timeline, in this moment. Leaving Sam alone to face the Apocalypse. Leaving his Dad to feel like he should have made that deal. Bobby to think he should have been there.

All those people he wouldn't be there to save or help or meet going forward. Charlie, Jo and Ellen, Claire and Alex and Jody. He briefly wondered what would happen to Castiel: the Cas that existed in this timeline and not the one standing in front of him now. Would the angel ever leave Heaven? He certainly wouldn't rebel without Dean pushing him to give up everything he knew for what was *right*.

Maybe that was better, he thought bitterly, for only a moment before sweeping the thought aside. He was dramatic and childish for thinking it; Cas had professed several times that he did not regret his decision, nor his friendship with the brothers. Only the choices that had come after.

"If I go down," he suddenly spoke to the room, staring at the wall and

not his best friend, "do I take you with me?"

Dean couldn't stop himself from glancing at Castiel, suddenly terrified of the answer. He shouldn't be, he thought. It was not like either of them were afraid of Death. They were all old friends at this point.

Still, facing death and being the cause of it in another were two very different things.

The angel's piercing gaze stared at him for some time, and then slid, slowly, just over his shoulder. Dean resisted the urge to glance behind him. There was nothing there (there never was with Cas). Blue eyes slid back.

"I'm not really here, Dean."

"Right. Shadow," he answered automatically, offering a bitter smile. He swallowed thickly and looked away again.

Silence reigned for another moment, Sam and the doctor still talking. Dean wanted to roll his eyes, but didn't bother. He'd stood in his brother's shoes a month ago in Wyoming and he'd hounded the doctors then too, trying to find an angle – any angle – to save his brother, no matter how slim the chances were.

"You may not be all here right now," Dean said out loud again, not quite looking at the only one in the room who could hear him, "but I'm glad you're *here*."

It was quiet, but serious. His cheeks may have flushed because, come on, teenage girl moment much? Of course, the last time he'd seen the angel, Cas had been confessing his need to be useful, so Dean didn't give himself too much crap for admitting it out loud. It was nice – desperately needed, actually – not to be alone in this, and Cas deserved to hear it.

The angel watched the hunter carefully, indecision beginning to show in the cracks of his stoic mask. Eventually, he turned to look at Sam, wrapping up his useless discussion with the doctor. Cas ducked his head for a moment, took a deep, resolute breath, and turned back to Dean.

"It's strange," he started, impassiveness back in place and at odds with the clearly forced flatness of his voice. Like he was trying to be pre-Apocalypse Cas and failing pretty terribly at it. Dean cast him an odd look, but the angel ignored it and, honestly, the hunter was starting to

settle more on annoyance than worry over this mish-mashed version of his friend. "Your father didn't have any appointments scheduled for this afternoon. At least, not on his chart."

The annoyance died like a candle flame in a friggin' hurricane, and Dean sat straight up on the floor with a breathless, "What?"

Cas just regarded him with that pointed look.

Panic struck the human, sending every nerve into a fit of *shit shit shit!* His dad had lied. His dad had lied, and they'd lefthim alone with a bag full of stuff to summon a demon. How stupid could they possibly be?

Son of a bitch!

Without thinking, Dean pulled his knee to his chest and struck his leg out as hard as he could against the bedframe. His bare foot connected with a solid hit. Only, the thing didn't just rattle like Dean expected, hoping to get his brother's attention *right fucking now*. It screeched and jutted six and a half feet across the room, careening at an angle and taking the mattress, his body, EKG machine, and IV stand with it.

Okay, overkill maybe, but it did the damn trick as the two living humans in the room went dead silent and stared incredulously at the bed and its solo occupant. The IV line was still swinging back and forth with an obnoxious squeak.

It also did the trick of sending a shearing pain through his chest, straight to his heart. Dean gasped out, falling back on one arm, the other grabbing across his tight, cramping torso. Cold flooded him and he suddenly couldn't breathe. He watched in terror as his legs, torso, hands, all flickered out of existence and back again. Then the multiple machines in the room started screaming.

-o-o-o-

"Look, I know it isn't easy to hear," the doctor was saying, "but your brother *is* fighting. You just have to have faith in whatever comes next."

Sam nodded, trying to accept what was supposed to be reassuring words, but mostly failing. Platitudes, and nothing more. He'd heard them before, from doctors on cases concerning injured civilians. From cops on hunts where they hadn't made it on time, or someone had been caught in the crossfire. Empty words meant to bring some sort of

closure, but were ultimately meaningless in the end.

The young Winchester wasn't ready for closure anyhow.

"Thanks, Doctor," he said with a nod, trying to get the man out of the room now that he'd once more exhausted every possible scenario where the medical world got his brother out of this. Sam had already known it wouldn't happen; he was going to have to turn to the supernatural remedy if he wanted to save Dean.

"I'm not just saying it, you now." The doctor was a middle-aged man of Indian descent with kind brown eyes and a smile that suggested a halfway decent sense of humor when he wasn't breaking terrible news to people. Sam had to remind himself not to take out his frustration – or impatience – on the man just doing his job, and a decent one at that. "A patient in a coma with his injuries and those stats? I would have called it the minute he came in."

He turned back to Sam, a sympathetic but not entirely unhopeful turn to his lips. "He's held on way longer than I – or any of us – thought he would. Something's keeping him here, so have faith and give it some time."

Sam stared at his brother, eyes tracing down to his gauze-wrapped chest and the burn marks from an inhuman blast he knew lay just underneath. The kid swallowed heavily but nodded to the doctor with a weak smile.

"I'll check back in before my shift ends. I'm not promising anything. His odds are still not good. But the fact that he's fighting…"

"I get it," Sammy mumbled with a nod. "Thanks. For everything."

The doctor hesitated for a moment more, then nodded and patted Sam on the shoulder. The hunter consciously slid the Ouija board deeper under his arm. Boy, had the man given him one hell of a pitying look when he'd seen it. The doc moved to pass him and exit the room when a stilted screech of metal on linoleum ruptured the air and fast, brutal movement drew both their attentions to the center of the room.

The hospital bed his brother was lying on flew towards the far wall, scraping across the floor a good half dozen feet. Machines tumbled to the side in its wake. Tubes pulled tight. Dean's body settled from the jerk with a light rock and Sam could only stand there, blinking.

"What in God's name-"

He turned to the doctor, who was staring at the scene with wide, disbelieving brown eyes. Sam tried for a light laugh, grabbing the man's arm and hauling him towards the door, excuses flying from his mouth about how he'd really just like some time alone with his brother, maybe say goodbye or try that faith thing. Grieving process, you know.

The doc was stuttering out half-formed responses, hand catching himself on the doorframe into the hallway, sort of arguing against the man – but also not really because what the hell had just happened – when his patient's heart monitor started beeping dangerously fast. All confusion and disbelief (and any shot Sam had at getting him out of that room) vanished, replaced by a terrifying level of professionalism. The man pushed past the hunter, coat flapping as he rounded the bed, pressing buttons across the multitude of machines now cramped in the corner by the angle of the bedframe.

"He's going to crash." The doctor turned towards Sam. Before the young man could ask him what the hell he meant, he yelled d at the top of his lungs, "CODE BLUE!"

The sounds of people scattering in the hall signaled that nurses at the station a dozen feet away heard the cry and were already on the move. The doctor began chest compressions on Dean's unmoving body just as alarms started blaring from his brother's bed. It was at least a dozen terribly long seconds before three nurses and another doctor rushed into the room, hauling a defibrillator machine behind them. They pushed Sam out of the way, and the young hunter huddled along the side of the doorway as the medical team surrounded his brother and prepped the AED.

One of the nurses silenced the heart monitor, killing the shrill alarm that had been crying out ever since Dean's EKG flatlined. A second nurse handed over the paddles to another doctor, and the attending physician pulled back, ending the chest compressions. One of the nurses yelled 'Clear!', and Sam bit back a sob and the water gathering in his eyes as his brother's body jolted with the electricity they sent straight to his heart.

"No," he barely whispered, fingers gripping the edges of the Ouija board hard enough to put nail marks in the cardboard.

The doctors hit his brother again. Sam released one hand from the box, transferring his death grip to the doorframe because his legs were not going to keep him upright much longer. They hit him a third time,

and beeps started up again, intermittently, from the machines. The room bled tension out like a system flush. Nurses quieted, Dean's lead doctor called adjustments in fluids and medication as they got him stable once more, and the room settled.

Sam turned and fled.

-o-o-o-

Dean lay gasping on the floor, staring up at the ceiling as his chest heaved up and down with the sudden flood of not being in pain. That *Sucked*. Capital 'S'. It was crippling, even. Cold gripped at his chest like an ice claw of absolute terror and nothingness. Worse yet was the fear that came with it, because he'd only felt that specific, freezing, gripping pain before in the times he had died.

The hellhounds, the doc who'd put him to sleep so he could chat with Death, Metatron, even that shotgun to the chest before he'd wound up in Heaven. They had each come with pain of their own, but the unifying quality between all of them had been that gripping cold that came just before the end.

Every time the docs hit his body with a jolt, he'd felt the electricity arc through him. Like a tuning fork bringing him back in sync with his body, he'd felt each zap spring across his chest as if he were once more corporeal. The connection allowed all the other aches and pains of a broken body to come through too, though at least those were blissfully numbed by a cocktail of morphine and god knows what else. He didn't know if he could have handled the full thing in addition to that death grip around his chest.

Movement at the door caught his attention, and Dean sat upright in time to see his brother tear out of the room like a bat out of hell.

"Sam!" He knew the man couldn't hear him, but he called after his distraught younger brother all the same. Damn it. The poor kid had just watched him flatline and the docs fight to bring him back. Dean struggled to his feet, but his ghost body, or whatever it was, felt as weak as a kitten.

Cas extended a hand in front of him. Dean glanced up at the angel, almost having forgotten he was in the room. Castiel regarded him with a pitying look where Dean expected to see concern and that wide-eyed fear the angel never was capable of hiding in the face of one of the Winchester brothers' pain.

Oh, right. This Cas was ready to throw in the towel and thought Dean wasn't far behind in options. Just another thing on the long list of shit to deal with.

Dean grabbed his friend's hand and hauled himself up. The angel followed after him as he tore out of the room in search for Sam. His brother hadn't gotten far; the kid was collapsed against the hallway wall a couple feet down from Dean's door. He'd ended up back against the supportive surface, long cricket legs drawn up to his chest, Ouija box across them and forehead pressed to the cardboard as he fought, valiantly, not to have a complete breakdown in public.

He was mostly losing.

Dean crouched in front of him, an ache settling deep in his chest at the sight of his brother this way. He curled his fingers around Sam's tightly fisted hand, even if they went right through. "It's okay, Sammy. I'm right here. I'm okay."

"Dean." Castiel's voice was soft, but held none of the comfort he desperately needed from his best friend right then. "It's time."

Anger flashed through every non-existent fiber of his incorporeal body. But he refused to leave his brother's side just to take it out on the angel who, frankly, could have picked a better time for this little mid-life crisis. He gritted his teeth and counted to ten, then counted to ten again, as he focused solely on his little brother who he couldn't help right now either.

"Dean."

"No," he finally snapped, channeling more anger in the angel's direction than Castiel probably deserved, for lack of a better target elsewise. "Damn it, Cas. Help me! We still have time; we can still stop dad. We just have to get Sam talking to us."

The angel's eyes dragged to the side, back to the hospital room he stood in front of, where doctors were still settling their patient. Dean's body lay unmoving, tubes repositioned and fluids checked, though every human in that room knew it was only postponing the inevitable. Cas turned back to the spirit that body belonged to.

"It's not your fight anymore."

Feet away, hand still wrapped around his brother's, Dean frowned sharply. He almost couldn't believe the words coming out of his best

friend's mouth. What the hell was going on with him? Dean had never seen him just give up like this before.

"How can you say that, Cas? *You?*"

The angel only held out his hand, ignoring his words. "Come with me, Dean."

Slowly, the hunter stood, releasing his brother's hand though he towered over him protectively, even if the kid couldn't see or sense him. As he stared at his angel, disbelief began to fight on an even playing field with the anger that had so easily overwhelmed his intelligence and his gut. The cogs in his brain started turning.

"You know," he began almost conversationally, belied only by the tight fists at his side, "I've seen a lot as a hunter. Lifetime's worth of things most people can't even imagine. But you know what I've never seen, in all that time? I've never seen you throw in the towel, Cas."

Castiel's expression didn't change. He regarded the hunter with the same pity and resolve, hand held out to him. Dean's green eyes hardened and darkened into something dangerous as his suspicion cemented into certainty.

"Not even in the face of *Lucifer*, man. You didn't give up. Not like this."

"We're both on borrowed time already," the angel supplied with a slight one-shouldered shrug. Like it didn't matter. Cas was many, many things, but uncaring was not one of them.

"Maybe." Dean shook his head, regarding the creature standing in front of with the same lethal expression he gave anything that threatened his family. "But you and me are real good at screwing with time. You'd know that, if you were the real Castiel."

Silence hung heavy in the hallway as the sharp words rang between them like a physical thing.

The image of his best friend frowned, staring at him with something between disappointment and resignation. Then Cas was shifting. The lights overhead flickered as his dark, wind-blown hair grew out around his face, framing the softening jawline with a cut that was straight and short and severe. The trench coat and suit melted away to reveal jeans and a black top fitting a slim, petite, and definitely female body. Those piercing blue eyes shifted color, lightening like sea-foam on a stormy day at the beach. That gaze was just as cold and

unmoving and sad as he remembered.

"Tessa."

Chapter 36: Season 2: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> **Chapter Warnings:** How can so much plot happen when people are so busy chatting? They run and talk, that's how. The boys are experts at it. But first, they gotta warm up by… not running. Actually, they're kinda sitting around a lot…. How was there plot in this again?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 3

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Tessa."

"That's one of my names," the reaper responded, crossing her arms lightly over her black top, staring at him with that ever-unimpressed gaze. He should have seen it earlier in Cas's blue eyes. "I'm curious how you know it, though."

"Oh, we've met," Dean responded with a near-predatory grin. "We go way back, you and me."

She laughed lightly – a sardonic chuckle more than anything else – and stared at him with no small amount of skepticism that looked far more right on her cold features than it had on Cas. "I think I'd remember someone like you."

"Trust me, you will." His grin grew in size and danger, and he could tell the reaper was already rethinking her approach. Which, yeah, she definitely should. He was *not* the man she'd come here to reap; he was something a hell of a lot older and smarter and more deadly than that kid. "For the record, digging in my brain to come up with that little Cas impersonation? Not cool, Tess."

"I wasn't trying to hurt you. And I didn't read your mind, Dean." She walked towards him and her voice was back to the calm, gentle demeanor she seemed to default to. The mother figure to a wounded animal voice. He remembered it with Cole, and it had worked a hell of a lot better on that kid then it would on him. "Just your soul, and it

told me his form would be the most comforting to you, to ease you in the transition."

He snorted and shook his head at the excuse. Strike two; she had one shot left. "Yeah, well, it told you wrong. And I'm not easing into anything."

"I've noticed." One thin, manicured eyebrow rose with that touch of sass he was more familiar with when it came to this particular reaper. At least when she wasn't on the job trying to convince him (or anyone else) to roll over and die. Her pale green eyes slid just over his shoulder for a moment, then focused back on him, demeanor softening. The hand she put on his arm was gentle and sympathetic and oh, yeah, she was definitely heading straight for strike three. "Death is nothing to fear, Dean."

"Maybe not *now*," he answered easily, one shoulder raising in a half a shrug, "maybe not for *me*. But it's sure as hell something to fear when you've sold your soul to hell, like my *dad* is about to!"

That tripped her up, and Tessa paused. Her hand slid off his arm and she stared up at him like she was trying to guess whether or not he was lying. He got it. Really, he did. Demon deals were rare in this timeline. They wouldn't be picking up for another year or two, not until the Hell Gate opened and the apocalypse really got going. So Tessa had every right to think he was crazy.

Especially since he'd been spouting shit about being from the future that he'd just assumed Cas' knew about.

"Look, I know how it sounds," he conceded after another moment, his green eyes searching her much lighter ones as they stood a scant half foot apart. "But he's going to make that deal, and I have to stop him."

Her eyes shuttered for a moment and she finally took that half step back, putting an appropriate amount of space between them once more. "It's not your fight anymore, Dean."

"Bullshit." Tessa's eyes snapped back to his with raised eyebrows, but he plowed on ahead. "I know that's not true, because I've done this all before, alright, Tess? You may not believe me, but my dad is going to die and I'm not. So no, my fight isn't even getting started yet, sweetheart."

She didn't respond, just stared at him with that icy calm that had always infuriated the action-trained hunter. Movement caught his eye

and Dean turned his head back to Sam, who was climbing to his feet. His eyes were red and puffy, but he had pulled composure across himself like a well-wrapped security blanket. It hurt Dean's heart to see him put that hard hunter's mask back on and pretend he hadn't just watched his brother die.

The kid gripped the Ouija box tight to his side and trudged past the reaper and brother he couldn't see, back to Dean's room. The ghost of a hunter turned back to Tessa, resolve firm and time up.

"You want to ease me into some Dr. Phil transition crap, then help me. You reapers care about the natural order, right? Well my dad's about to do something pretty damn *unnatural*. So help stop him, and I'm all yours."

Tessa, head turned to track the still living Winchester boy as he walked past, turned back to face her charge. She tilted her head to the side slightly, once more trying to parse his honesty. He was a hard one to read. "You'll come with me?"

Despite having already found resolve in the answer, Dean still found it hard to swallow. It had seemed easier when it was Cas he was talking to. The reality that they were talking about his actual death warred for control over the knowledge that he knew it wouldn't happen anyway. But if it did…. He tossed the thought away. If it did, then it did. He'd deal with that bridge when he got to it, like he always did.

"If I stay dead, then yeah, I'll go with you." He shrugged carelessly, but he could tell by the sharpness in her eyes and the fractional relaxing of her shoulders that she finally believed him. "Just don't get your hopes up. Death doesn't really stick around me."

The frown was almost cute on her round face, especially with the cynical look that said '*I've heard that before, bucko*.' He pushed past her, following his brother back into the room where his body lay.

-o-o-o-

Tessa let Dean pass without trying to stop him. Her sea-green eyes stared sightlessly at the floor a dozen feet away, mind racing with the request. Help? That was her job, after all. Perhaps not stopping demon deals, though she detested them as surely as any reaper should. They broke the rules of nature. They forced death before it's time and roped souls into a fate they couldn't possibly have contemplate in full, having no experience of it, when they agreed to it.

It was a cheat, and Tessa despised cheats.

But reaping Dean Winchester was her current job. His soul was in her care, and it was her duty to carry him to Heaven, to be at rest in a paradise he had earned after years of hardship.

Her eyes slid across the tiled floor to a pair of black loafers, then up translucent slacks to the shadowy figure in a trench coat who had remained behind after the hunter took off. A faded echo of an angel that had been one step behind the ghost of her charge ever since she'd first come to collect him.

Piercing blue eyes regarded her fiercely, challenging her right to interfere even though Castiel could do nothing to stop her and they both knew it.

"He should be at rest," she tried to reason with the shadow of the guardian angel. Her voice was soft, her eyes understanding. To be honest, she wasn't even sure why she was explaining herself to him; she had no obligation to do so. "You need to let him go. You're the only thing keeping him tethered to his body."

The angel did not yield.

"You know he has to move on."

If anything, that blue gaze glowed brighter and his hands clenched into fists. "He has work to do."

With that, the shadow strode forward with purpose, past Tessa to follow his human charge once more. He left behind the reaper, who turned to watch him disappear into the hospital room with a worried frown, no answers, and many, many questions.

-o-o-o

The doctors had cleared out of Dean's room, and the one nurse who stayed behind to answer any questions Sam might have was politely dismissed by the young hunter. Dean entered just as Sam was settling on the ground, pulling out the Ouija board.

"Don't make fun of me for this," Sam muttered miserably as he set the board down between them. His hands were shaking and he quickly clenched them across the top of his thighs. Dean settled cross-legged in front of him, no good in the face of his brother's obvious pain. Sam closed his eyes for a moment before placing steady hands on the

planchette. "God, just…just please still be here, Dean."

"I'm here, brother," the spirit answered steadily, injecting more confidence and comfort than he felt into the words, even if Sammy couldn't hear them. Dean settled his own hands atop the wooden indicator.

Sam took a deep breath, and Dean moved the planchette to the word *'Yes*.' His kid brother let out a breath as shaky as it was shocked, staring at the thing that he definitely hadn't moved himself.

"Dean?"

"Gotta start asking more than just 'yes' questions, Sammy," the hunter chided lightly, but he gave the indicator a little wiggle where it sat already atop the affirmative. Sam breathed out a happy little noise.

"Are you….Are you okay?"

Dean moved the indicator to 'No' even as Sam muttered what a stupid question that had been, but before his brother could do more than frown down at the resulting answer, Dean was moving the planchette again. His brother read each letter aloud as Dean dragged both their hands across the board.

"D-A-D."

When the small plank of wood with the hallowed out circle stopped on the final 'D' and didn't move again, Sam blinked. "Dad?"

The planchette slid quickly across the board to settle on 'Yes' once more.

"What about Dad?" Sam was clearly confused, but he also didn't know how much Dean was able to see and hear while having an out of body experience. Perhaps he didn't know where their father was, or if he was alright. "Dad's fine. He's two floors down: broke his arm and collar bone in the crash but he's okay."

Dean let out a frustrated noise his brother couldn't hear, and slid the little wooden indicator across the board again.

"D-E-A-" Sam cut off his reading of the letters with a frown, despite the fact that his brother's ghost continued to move the planchette across the letters. "A deal? What deal?"

"Can't answer you if you don't read, Sam," Dean muttered. "Work with me here!"

"Y-E-D." Sam waited for more, but the plank stopped moving and he sat there, blinking. He repeated the letters, but they didn't spell any word he knew. Dealyed. Delayed? Dean wasn't usually dyslexic. Deal, yed? Okay, maybe an acronym. Y.E.D. He ran the letters through his head over and over again. When realization hit, he wanted to kick himself for taking so long. "The Yellow Eyed Demon."

The little slip of wood slid so quickly to the 'Yes' that Sam was sure it would go right off the board and skid across the floor. He sat up straighter, back tightening at the jolt of fear shooting down his spine.

"Yellow Eyes is coming here?"

The planchette wiggled atop the 'Yes' but then rifted to "M" and "E" before going back to the 'D', then the 'E', 'A', and Sam suddenly got it. The air in his lungs left with a punch to his gut.

"Dad is going to make a deal with Yellow Eyes to save you."

The plank hesitated for only a second, if that, before it slid over to the 'Yes'. Sam was on his feet faster than Dean could even track. The tall hunter stared down at the board with frantic eyes, chest heaving as fear and realization spiked his heartrate and filled his body with a buzzing tension.

"We have to stop him. Dean, he has the stuff to summon a demon!"

The planchette spun around the 'Yes', but Sam didn't see it. He was already out the door and heading for the stairs at a breakneck speed that had nurses and doctors yelling after him. Dean scrambled to his feet as well, jumping needlessly over the Ouija board to follow after.

He skidded to a halt just outside the door when he saw Tessa leaning against the wall, staring up at him. Sam was disappearing rapidly down the hall, and Dean glanced over the reaper's shoulder at him, before refocusing, reluctantly, on her.

"You gonna help, or what?" he asked, tone quite telling of the answer he thought he'd receive.

She pushed off the wall, uncrossing her arms but still regarding him with the same iciness that she carried like a well-worn sweater. "I don't like demons working *my* turf. So, if what you say is true, then

yes, I'll help."

Surprise painted his face, but Dean didn't let it slow him down for long. "Great. Let's go."

He went to push past her once more, but she extended her arm in front of his chest. The spirit of the hunter turned to her, expression growing thin on patience, but it did not phase the reaper. "After we stop your father, your soul is the first one I'm reaping, Dean. Understand that."

Dean pressed past her arm and headed for the stairs after his brother.

-o-o-o-

Sam rounded the corner into his dad's room at a far more moderate pace than he would have preferred, but given how the hospital staff was yelling at his reckless speed, he had genuine concerns of them throwing him out and then who would stop his father from doing something so damn incredibly stupid.

The fear that had gripped him as he ran – more like barreled – down the two flights between floors had been all-encompassing. Because halfway down that first flight, taking the stairs three at a time, it had occurred to his overly-active brain, which never shut off no matter how much he wanted it to, that unless Dad has said something out loud with Dean's spirit in the room (*doubtful*), there was only one other way his brother could know about their father's intentions.

It didn't take a genius to put two and two together. This had happened last time, and they were about to lose their father if he couldn't change it. *This* is what Dean had been talking about only days ago. *This* was where John Winchester died, throwing himself in front of the Yellow Eyed Demon far more literally than Sam could ever have guessed. This is where they were going to lose their father.

Damn John Winchester, was all Sam could think. Their father who couldn't even give his sons time to come up with something on their own. Sam could save Dean. Sam *would* save Dean. And they didn't have to resort to selling anyone's soul to do it.

His grip on the doorframe was aching as he stared into his father's empty hospital room.

"No," Sam muttered, quickly crossing the threshold and looking around the space as if that might change its lack of occupant. He tried

not to panic; Dad had said he was scheduled for more X-rays, and it was possible that's where he was.

His mind balked. If that was true, then where was the duffel bag full of supplies to summon a *damn demon*? He ripped open the one cabinet of the hospital's bed side table, the only place to hide a bag that size. Sam's stomach plummeted when there was nothing inside but a balled up hospital gown. His father's clothes were gone too, leaving just his cell phone and a magazine on the bed's attached table.

"Shit," he muttered, then repeated the noise louder, kicking the side of the bed swiftly. A nurse passing by outside hesitated at the door, causing Sam to freeze in apprehension. He couldn't afford to have hospital staff lecturing him or, heaven forbid, kicking him out. She paused long enough to send him a warning look before carrying on her way.

Sam breathed out shakily, heart pounding. "Dean, if you're here, I'll take the lower floors. Can you…. Can you make noise or something if you find him?"

The attached table on the bed rattled, the edges of the magazine flapped beneath the weight of John's abandoned cell phone, and Sam took that as a yes. Then he was out the door and headed for the stairs to the first floor, too anxious to wait for an elevator when his dad could be making a deal with the yellow eyed demon.

-o-o-o-

Dean turned to Tessa as they both hustled into the hallway, following Sam's lead. "I'll take the roof, you grab the ones in between."

The reaper pushed herself in front of him before he could make a break for it, holding out her arm for good measure. Her sea-green eyes stared at him, unimpressed but perhaps a tad amused. "*I'll* take the roof. Between the two of us, I'm the one equipped to handle a demon."

The hunter pulled a face. "Hey. I was getting pretty good with the magazine!"

She spared him another amused-not-impressed glance, taking a step backwards. Her form shifted once more, shedding the persona of Tessa in favor of that creepy ass death-wraith-ghost thing she actually was, then shot up through the ceiling. Dean was still grumbling about his capability as a hunter – even a ghost hunter (*a badass ghost hunter, damnit*) – as he started his search for his father on the current floor,

though he was pretty damn sure the man had enough smarts not to summon a demon right under his sons' noses. He'd most likely go for the roof or the basement, if this place even had one.

Again, Dean wished he could remember how this went down the first time. He'd woken up, memory-less, with his dad coming into his room minutes later. And minutes after that, he'd been dead.

The hunter shook his head, forcing himself to focus as he started checking rooms, stairwells, even janitor closets. Meanwhile, he viciously bit back the desperate, screaming fear that his father wasn't going to be summoning a demon in some supply closet.

-o-o-o-

John stood, paused, hand outreached but mind heavy, in front of the poorly lit door. He'd stumbled on it more by accident then on purpose, just looking for a space far enough away from his sons that Sam wouldn't interfere, wouldn't get caught up in it.

He'd have gone to the other side of the city – hell, the other side of the state – if he could have. There was something primal within him that fought the very idea of summoning that yellow eyed bastard so close to his kids. But it wasn't an option.

They were the reason he was doing this, he had to remind himself. All it took was one thought of Dean, dying seven floors above him, and he hefted the duffle bag full of supplies over his good shoulder. With steeled resolve, he forced his way through the *"Employees Only"* marked door and into the secluded darkness within.

-o-o-o-

Sam was getting frantic. It had been more than fifteen minutes since he'd discovered his father's room empty. He'd cleared the parking garage first when a hurried search of the main floor of the hospital had yielded no underground levels. The connected parking structure made the next best sense for somewhere a hunter could quietly summon a demon out of the way of bystanders. But the three leveled building had yielded no results, and now the young man was back to square one, rushing across the covered bridge between buildings and the east stairwell back down to the main lobby of the hospital. He'd taken the west staircase going over, and he needed to cover every base.

Rounding the final landing that led back into the busy main floor of

the hospital, Sam drew up short at an unmarked, brown door just to the side of the lobby entrance. It had a handle and deadbolt lock and no windows, unlike the push-bar and crisscrossed glass window of the lobby door, through which Sam could see the occasional visitor or nurse pass by in the room beyond.

The west stairwell hadn't *had* an unmarked maintenance door. That, or in his rush to get to the parking garage, he'd run right past it and hadn't looked back.

Cursing, Sam gave the knob a quick twist and a push. The handle rattled, but the door didn't budge otherwise and Sam didn't have time to find something to pick the lock with. He glanced quickly through the little window into the lobby, waiting for a clear moment, before he delivered a fierce kick to the rusty thing, and it gave with a crack.

Not waiting to see if anyone had heard, he took the stairs that lay beyond two at a time, until he came to a long hallway. It was painted that same egg white as every hospital ever and, with the accent of a flickering florescent light set into the ceiling and dirty linoleum floor, looked like the beginning of every horror movie monster moment.

Sam ignored all of that, and took off for the far end and the door marked *"Employees Only"*.

-o-o-o-

"You still need to sweeten the pot, John."

Azazel grinned sinisterly at the hunter who stood across from him in the basement, eyeing the two demon orderlies he'd brought with him. John's good hand tightened into a fist at his side, and the demon knew he'd won.

"What do you want?"

The Prince of Hell tsk'ed, turning his body away in mock disappointment as he swung his arm to the side. "Now, it's not nearly as fun if you don't at least *guess*." He turned back to the human, a predatory gleam in his eyes as they flickered yellow. "A competent hunter like you? I'm sure you already know."

John's body was stiff as a board, marine training kicking in as he stared down no less than death itself. But the man was a father, and he wasn't here for himself. That's why humans were so easy to play, really. You just had to know what made them tick.

"Me."

"Bingo!" Azazel clasped his hands in front of his body and smiled at the hunter. "Your soul, to be specific. You know how these things work, John. You want a miracle? You gotta provide the juice."

The human clenched his teeth, but Azazel knew he'd already made up his mind. Things were finally playing out as they'd predicted. Leave it to John Winchester to get them back on track.

"You'll fix him up? All the way?"

The demon shrugged. "Not me personally, but I know a girl."

John's eyes narrowed, but the Prince of Hell stretched out his hand.

"Shake on it?"

A noise back the way they'd come – the sound of a door forcefully opening – stopped each of them. The two demons he'd brought with him for show glanced at one other, then him, but he shook his head and waved them away. They hesitated for only a moment before stepping back, melting into the shadows and out of sight.

John started forward with a worried look he couldn't school quickly enough. It told the demon exactly who he feared was on the other end of that noise. Not that Azazel had expected anyone other than the boys to interfere. He turned his outstretched palm to the side, halting the hunter before he could run into that hand, face reddening at the gall of the demon.

Azazel just gave him a warning look and disappeared into thin air.

-o-o-o-

Sam walked with quick steps past water heaters and old machinery, searching down each little corridor and niche formed by the large tanks and pipes. He rounded one of them and stopped, breath leaving his body at the sight he had been desperately hoping for, but really wasn't expecting.

John Winchester stood in the middle of a small room, space carved by the layout of the old metal cylinders and pipes and control panels. Sam swallowed heavily, taking a step forwards, only to pause at the look on his father's face.

It was worn. Tired and weary and downcast, in a way the youngest Winchester had never quite seen from his stony father.

"Dad?"

John met his eyes, but it was clearly a struggle to do so. There was shame and fear there, in all the righteous ways John Winchester conveyed those emotions. And Sam knew. He knew without his gaze dropping to the floor and the six candle flames flickering in the slight draft of the basement room. He knew without the symbol drawn in chalk on the cold cement or the bowl of still smoking ingredients sitting in the center of it.

He was too late. John Winchester had already made a deal with the devil – or damn near close enough.

"Dad…"

"It's going to be okay, son." His father offered a tight smile, and Sam knew it was a gesture of goodbye. He took a step forward, anger and desperation suddenly flaring in him like a supernova. But John stiffened, eyes shifting to something just behind him even as he called out in warning, "Sam!"

A hand landed on his shoulder, and the world darkened into oblivion before he could even fully turn around.

-o-o-o-

The youngest Winchester slumped to the floor underneath Azazel's hand, and John had the Colt drawn, cocked, and centered on the demon in the blink of even one of his impressive eyes. The Prince of Hell regarded the hunter with a moment of admiration (he could admit being impressed, even of a mere human), before his expression settled on something far more condescending.

"Come on, John, we both know you're not going to shoot me."

The gun didn't waiver, but John's gaze slid to his collapsed son. Azazel rolled his eyes even as he stepped over the boy.

"Don't get your tighty-whities in a twist there, Daddy. He's just taking a nap. Can't have him interfering in our little deal. Unless, of course," the demon paused for dramatic effect, purposefully dragging his eyes slowly over to the downed hunter, loving the way John Winchester shook with anger at him so much as looking at the kid, "you wanted to

offer him as payment instead?"

It didn't matter if John knew he was being played, and honestly Azazel wasn't sure he did. The hunter was almost shaking in rage now, and it was quite likely he didn't have the bandwidth to disregard Azazel's words for the manipulative taunt they were. Another problem with humans. So emotional.

"Why don't I just shoot you, and summon another demon to do the job." John answered between clenched teeth, but they both knew it was posturing and not much more.

"Sure, you could do that." Azazel disappeared in the blink of an eye, reappearing just behind John's right shoulder. The hunter, for his credit, spun and retrained the gun on him quickly. Not quick enough to save his life, had Azazel wanted to kill him the old fashion way. But still quite quick. The demon reasoned he had a good chance at actually clipping him with that peashooter.

Not that that was going to happen.

The two demons he'd brought with him re-emerged from the shadows at a single hand gesture, coming back up to flank not him, but John Winchester, who eyed them wearily.

"You could probably get me with that little nuisance," Azazel gestured his chin at the Colt, "but I doubt even you would be able to get all three of us. And my boys have very specific orders to tear you limb from limb if anything happens to me."

The borrowed flesh of his minions split disgustingly into malicious grins, wide and dangerous, showing their pearly white teeth and all the things they'd do to him.

"Then you're dead, Dean's dead, and Sammy's all alone and… so *vulnerable*." Azazel smiled so sickly sweet it hurt even his teeth. He couldn't begin to imagine – gleefully – how it must hurt John. "Ripe for the taking, if you will."

"You son of a bitch." John's words were rock steady, rightfully pissed. The gun never wavered. Azazel still knew he'd won. He knew this hunter, and that was defeat in his voice, not bravado.

The demon held out his hand once more. "So, where were we?"

-o-o-o-

Tessa was concluding a thorough search of the roof when it happened. The few lights that peppered the upright structures – the stairwell building, and several along the edges of the roof – began flickering. She frowned as they did so at the same time, but out of sync with one another. Not a single short or momentary power shortage then.

The change had her tense before she felt it – the approaching presence of something sick and dark. The reaper spun on the roof, looking for the source of it, but nothing was there. Tessa glanced over her shoulder at the stairwell, but the door remained shut. A ventilation shaft rattled to her left and she spun to face it, just as black smoke began pouring out of it.

The reaper recognized it for what it truly was immediately, and she stumbled back in shock at the raw power of a Prince of Hell.

"No, stop." She shook her head, trying to abandon her human form for her incorporeal one before it could catch her, but the slimy black essence was already enveloping her. "You can't do this!"

The demon wrapped around her – smothering her, *choking* her – and filled her essence with his own.

-o-o-o-

He was three floors from the roof when the lights started flickering. Dean stopped in his search, pulling his head out from yet another room empty of anyone but an ailing patient, to stare up at the hallway ceiling as the florescent bulbs sputtered and struggled. It lasted less than thirty seconds, but it was enough to have dread pooling in the hunter's incorporeal stomach.

Only three things made lights flicker like that. Ghosts, Demons, and Reapers. And all three of them were in the hospital at that very second, Dean was sure of it.

"Tessa," he whispered, still staring at the burning bulb above him, and possibly the roof beyond. He took off at a run. She had gone for the roof and hadn't returned yet; she must have found Azazel. Reaper or not, she was going to need all the backup she could get.

Dean pushed straight through the stairwell door, having figured out about eighteen room searches ago that he could just stick his head straight through a wall so long as he didn't think about it (you do not want to know what happened the one time he did think about it). The little trick tripled his search rate, even if it sent shivers through his

body every time.

The hunter was rounding the second landing up when soft, steady footsteps above halted his movement. He gripped the railing, staring up the stairwell as Tessa rounded the corner, sauntering down step by step like she had nowhere better to be than a vaguely downward direction.

"Tess?" Dean let out a breath of relief. She looked unharmed, though he didn't exactly appreciate the snail's pace as she proceeded down the steps towards him, head lowered and eyes fixed on the stairs. Her untouched appearance meant the roof was clear and the flickering lights were more likely his dad summoning a fucking demon than the reaper finding one. Dean's hand fisted around the railing and specks of ice started forming on the metal around his fist as his frustration and panic surged. "Did you find anything?"

"No, I didn't find anything," the reaper answered calmly as she came to stand on the step directly in front of him, that cold, somber expression ever in place.

Dean hung his head for a moment, breathing through the panic that instantly tried to solidify into defeat. They still had time. They'd find him. They had to. Dad was going to be fine.

"It found me."

The hunter lifted his head, brow already furled in confusion and a question on his lips, when he met Tessa's eyes. They were a sickly pale yellow.

Dean scrambled back with a cry, but Not-Tessa shot her arm out with deadly precision, wrapping freezing, painful fingers around his throat. The grip was enough to bruise flesh that didn't even exist, and certainly enough to keep him from the two-step fall he probably would have taken on his ass, even as a ghost.

He'd have preferred the fall.

"Today's your lucky day, kiddo," Not-Tessa said with a wicked grin Dean recognized only too well.

He didn't have time to yell – to question – to fight – before a hand slammed onto his forehead, fingers curling around his skull like talons. Everything went white and he woke up, shooting upright, in a hospital bed with no recollection of how he got there.

-o-o-o-

Sam came to confused. It was dark where he was, with little lights flickering just past the clarity of his vision, which was struggling back into focus slowly and with a lot of effort. The young hunter hauled himself up onto his hands and knees with a groan. Nothing hurt, but his head weighed twice as much as it should and he didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten there.

The clarity of both the room and his memory returned with time. Little candles lit the cold cement painted with white symbols – a summoning spell – next to an open gym bag, clearly rummaged through – Bobby's, once full of herbs.

Sam blinked at the setup once. That was Bobby's bag. He'd given it to Sam, along with the info that the stuff he'd requested sure as hell wasn't for protection.

The hunter straightened, head clearing out of necessity as he stared at the summoning ritual in pure terror. His father had been here, he'd been here and then… The hunter scrambled to his feet, brushing at his shoulder where he could still feel the weight of the hand that had somehow knocked him out.

Azazel.

He took off running, back the way he'd came. If his dad wasn't here anymore, but the demon had been… Oh god, they were too late.

Please. Please don't let it be too late.

Sam knew the second the elevator doors pinged open on the seventh floor. He pushed through the widening gap before there was even enough space for his large body. He knew the second he saw the crowd of people outside of his brother's room. The commotion was loud and frantic and the many faces were filled with stoic professionalism and confusion. He knew before all that, really, because it wasn't John's room his feet had automatically taken him to, but Dean's.

It still punched him straight through the gut to hear his brother's cries: anguished screams that meant he was awake and alive, as surely as their father no longer was. Sam pushed through nurses and bystanders and into the room to see his dad, unmoving on the floor, surrounded by men and women desperately trying to revive him. There was a mask over his face, hands drawing away from his chest, fingers

pressed to his neck and more to his wrist. Two nurses and a doctor were holding Dean back on the bed as he fought to get to their father's side.

"Alright. Let's call it," one of the doctors muttered, wiping the back of his sleeve across his sweat-slicked face as he pulled away from the body on the ground. John wasn't moving, head lolled to the side as they pulled the oxygen mask away, half-lidded eyes staring, unseeing, past his youngest son.

"No," Sam whispered, staggering against the doorframe. There were arms around him, holding him upright, maybe keeping him from falling, maybe fighting him from getting to his dad's side like his brother was trying to do. He didn't know.

"Time of death: 10:41 am."

Dean's unearthly howl was what finally sent Sam to his knees.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I'm a terrible no good dirty rotten author. But you all are beautiful.

John's Death: I probably should have warned about character death, but I also reeeeally didn't want to spoil it. While keeping John alive would have been very interesting story-wise (seeing how he would interact with Dean knowing he was from the future, how the timeline might have changed with his presence, meeting Cas and some of the other supernaturals, etc), I couldn't do it. Writing him is so damn hard for me, and I was truly worried it would be my – and the story's – undoing. So, off he goes. Some things just have to stay the same ;)

Chapter 37: Season 2: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Strong language, cuz Dean is piiiiiiissed.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 4

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean shot up in the bed with momentum he had certainly not possessed a second ago. Energy flooded his body and he fought, momentarily, with the tube down his throat and the wires sticking out of every part of him. He gagged and chocked around the intubation, coughing deep as he hauled the thing up and out of his throat with mucus and disgust.

Shit that hurt.

His body shook from the exertion, discomfort, and shock as he tossed the thing to the side with a frown. He went for the IV in his arm next, pulling the needle out with a hiss. God, he hated hospitals. Dean left the heart monitor on, not wanting to deal with the rush of a false Code Blue just because his finger wanted freedom from the clip. Instead, he looked around the room.

He was tense. Terrified, even, though he didn't know why. The last thing he remembered was that cabin, albeit in bits and pieces. And if he was in the hospital, alive, then there wasn't much to fear.

Except an empty room and no clue what condition Sam was in.

And Dad.

Dean's breath stilled, drawing in slowly as realization came back to him and the terror returned. The heart monitor started beeping faster as he quickly catalogued his injuries, which totaled a grand tally of absolutely friggin' zero.

Intubated with zero injuries?

Not a chance in hell he came by that naturally.

He paled as the words – nothing more than an idiom – brought on

realization a lot more real than some turn of phrase.

Hell.

"No," he whispered to the empty room, panic running through him like a freight train. "No, no no. I have more time. I have more time!"

It was May. It had to still be May. Azazel had held them in that god awful cabin, but John had come for them. He'd been in there at the end, Dean was sure of it. His dad had come for him and Sammy, and the three of them had all gotten in the Impala and driven ***away*** *.*

"No. No, no, no."

They'd driven away in the Impala. Just like last time.

"Dean."

The hunter looked up from his bed, eyes already watery and full of denial and anger and fear, as John Winchester walked into his room with the look of a dead man painted in every line of his body.

"Dad," Dean breathed out, barely a whisper. "Tell me you didn't."

John smiled a small little smile at him, and Dean's heart broke for a second time in his life. "You know, when you were a kid, I'd come home from a hunt and after what I'd seen, I'd be….I'd be wrecked."

"Don't. Please, dad, don't." Dean was shaking his head, trying to climb out of the bed but his legs wouldn't listen and John was walking up to the side. He knew this speech. He'd heard it again and again for ***months*** *after his dad had sold his soul to save him.*

"You'd come up to me and you, you'd put your hand on my shoulder, and you'd look me in the eye and you'd…" John's eyes were watery and he blinked through them, giving a small, nostalgic laugh. "You'd say, 'It's okay, Dad.'"

"Dad."

John reached out and cupped the back of his son's neck, staring into those eyes that somehow knew exactly what he'd done. He didn't know what was going on with his son, but Sam had been right. It was still Dean in there, even if he knew things he shouldn't.

"You shouldn't have had to say that to me. I should have been the one saying it to you."

"I was happy to say it," Dean whispered and the tears started running down his cheeks, despite his urge to look away, to pretend it wasn't happening. But he knew this was the last time he was going to see his father, and he wasn't going waste it staring at the bedsheets. "You did the best you could, Dad."

"No, I didn't." John bent forward, pressing his forehead to his son's. His second hand joined the first, wrapped around Dean's neck in a comforting way he had so rarely done in the past. He should have done it more. He should have hugged his sons more. "I'm sorry, Dean."

"Don't," his son whispered, half hiccupping past the word as he reached up and wrapped his hands around his father's forearms, hanging off of him like a child.

"I need to tell you something, son."

Dean swallowed heavily, his father's head pressed to his, that voice whispering so much like it had happened last time that he almost couldn't breathe. "I know. Dad, I ***know*** *."*

John pulled away slightly, releasing his son's neck enough to stare into his clear, green eyes. Dean blinked, but refused to look away.

"I won't do it. I won't," he reiterated, water swimming in his eyes as his father's last words echoed in his mind. They would not be his last words this time, Dean would make sure of it. "I'm going to save him, Dad. I promise you that."

His father looked uncertain what to say, but he found himself nodding slowly at the conviction in his son's voice and, more than anything, in those eyes. Somehow, Dean did know, of that John was sure. So he released his son's neck slowly, pulling away and letting the touch linger, if only to feel his son, alive and breathing, beneath his hand one final time.

"And you…you hold on down there." Dean swallowed heavily, and John could only mirror the movement. He didn't know how his son knew all of this, but the fierceness in those eyes silenced any questions he might have had. "In a year- In a year, they'll be a hell gate. You get yourself out, alright? Promise me you'll be there."

"I'll be there," John whispered almost numbly. He didn't know how his son knew but it didn't really matter anymore. His part in this fight was over, and he had his own battles upcoming. A year in Hell. He had no idea if he could hold out that long, but for his son, he would try. "Tell your brother…"

"I will," Dean whispered, and John grabbed his shoulder, offering his oldest a smile through tears.

"I'm proud of you, son."

Then he looked over his shoulder at something Dean couldn't see, and it was the last thing John Winchester ever did.

-o-o-o-

Dean stared, eyes unfocused and gaze all but dead, at the funeral pyre burning hot and steady. It was early afternoon and he and Sam had driven out into the less populated woodlands of east Michigan in order to find a final resting spot for their dad. It had taken them almost an hour to build the pyre, using palates they'd snagged from the back of a grocery store and plenty of branches and limbs from the surrounding trees.

They'd done so in absolute silence, each in their own heads and their own mourning.

10:41 am.

John Winchester died at 10:41 am. Didn't matter that it was two months early and a whole bucket load of changes later. Ten forty one in the fucking morning. Again.

Dean was so tired. So. Damn. Tired. Tired of fighting this fight, tired of losing it.

He stared, numb, at the flicker of orange and yellow and reds that blurred in front of him. He was so done, so over this, over Time and always being one step behind the bitch when he should, by the very friggin definition of coming from the future, be at least a step ahead. He was done trying to change things and losing.

What was the point? What had been the point of any of this? Of sending him back in the first place. This wasn't a second chance; it was torture, was what it was. Worse than Hell. Worse than being a demon or bearing the mark.

This, of all the things he'd ever faced, *this fucking thing* was going to be what broke him. If only Zachariah and Michael had known. If only Crowley or Abbadon, Eve or Raphael had known. All you had to do to break the mighty Dean Winchester was make him relive it all again, unable to change anything.

He'd known, that morning he'd woken up in the Impala in 2005 and not 2016, the morning he'd realized his father was still alive, that he'd never be able to save him. He'd *known* that. He'd tried like hell to keep him and Sammy away from that suicide mission wrapped in their father's clothes. Still, *still*, as soon as he'd seen the man, as soon as he'd opened Bobby's basement door and seen his dad, free from the Baku's dream power, leaning on Sam, weak as a kitten but very much alive, Dean *knew* he was screwed. There was no way he couldn't try – couldn't hope – that maybe, just maybe, if he was fast enough, strong enough, clever enough, he could stop it.

He was an idiot.

"Tell me we kill him."

Dean turned his head to take in his little brother, standing with slumped shoulders, hands shoved in his pockets, and head hung down damn near his chest. The older Winchester and man from the future took a deep breath to still the sudden ache in his heart on top of his own despair and downright darkness. Sam was fighting with everything he had against the tears gathered in his eyes, the trembling of his bottom lip and the reddening of his nose. The kid looked a damn near wreck, and rightly so.

This was Sam's first time losing their father. He hadn't lived it before, been prepared or forewarned it was coming, because Dean hadn't told him. Dean hadn't told him anything because he hadn't been able to man up and be the bearer of bad news and a crap ton of crap. Hadn't been ready for the way Sam would look at him. Well, that sure as shit at cost them.

Dean's anger fell to the wayside. It didn't dissipate – Dean Winchester rage didn't just fade away or stop existing – but it was pushed violently aside to be dealt with later because his little brother needed him.

"Tell me we kill him," Sam repeated. It was obvious from the murderous look in his watery eyes, tipping over as he blinked and trailing down red cheeks rubbed raw, that he was honestly starting to wonder if they even could.

"We kill him." There was a very obvious, if silent, '*but*' that echoed through the woodland clearing.

"…But it cost us Dad," his younger brother filled in the silence, staring at the slowing burning pyre and the only source of warmth in what

was feeling more and more like a damn cold world.

Dean didn't answer for a moment – thought about not answering at all – but he knew he needed to knock that shit off, and soon. He couldn't keep lying or omitting truths (splitting hairs), if he expected to change anything. Sure, there were going to be things he didn't need to tell Sammy – didn't want to – but here on out, as they watched their father burn, he was going to have to start being honest. More than that, he was going to have to be friggin' forthcoming, something he hadn't mastered in damn near forty years of trying, and which might have cost John Winchester his life this time around.

Not that he had much faith (or strength or whatever you wanted to call it) left that it would make much difference. That he – they – could change anything at all.

"Costs us a lot more than that," he finally muttered, tone carefully blank of the bitterness that infested his soul. Their dad was gone, despite Dean knowing it was coming. What reason did he have to believe that in a year, Sammy wouldn't be as well? Then he'd be on his way to hell, and this would all have been *pointless*.

"Dean-"

He shook his head, refusing to look anywhere but those climbing flames. "Not now, Sammy."

"When?" Because Sam understood, he got it, really, that right now might not exactly be the best moment to be asking. Not standing in front of John's body, a hunter's funeral for their own father. But if not now, then when? Because they'd had plenty of time leading up to this, and still Dean had said nothing. "I need to know, Dean. If I'd known about the deal-"

"You'd what?" Dean cut in harshly. Sam turned to him, eyes hurt, but Dean was barely looking at him. "Not left Dad's side? He'd have found a way, Sammy, and you know it."

His kid brother flinched under the harsh assault as Dean finally turned to him, arms flung wide, eyes fierce with an anger Sam knew wasn't directed at him, and all but foaming at the mouth with hatred for something that didn't exist and, if it did, wasn't corporeal enough to punch in the face.

Dean was done. He was done, and he was *angry*. Angry at himself for failing. Angry at himself for hoping. Angry at John Fucking

Winchester for pulling the same damn martyr play twice. Angriest at Time and Fate and fucking Destiny, written in stone, for letting it happen. For demanding that it must.

"So let's go back further. I told you about the crash, would you have taken a different road? Not gotten in the car in the first place?" Dean shook his head with a hollow, broken laugh and his arms fell, lifeless, to his side. Sam swallowed, knowing that even if he'd known – even if he'd known there was a demon out there in the dark, waiting to crash the Impala off course – he couldn't have stayed in that cabin with his brother bleeding out in his arms. "It wasn't supposed to happen for *months*. Telling you about it would have done jack shit. Don't you get it, Sammy? There's no point. We *tried* and we *failed*. We can't change anything! Coming back, changing the future? It's *useless!*"

Dean was screaming, red faced and so close to breaking. Sam's heart hurt for his brother so suddenly it stole his breath away. Dean so rarely lost it, especially not in front of Sam, who he saw as needing some sort of macho, invincible, super-hero brother to look up to. Not that he'd been wrong when Sam was young, but he was a man now – an adult – and old enough to know that super-heroes didn't exist. There were only ordinary men and sometimes that was enough.

"No, it's not," he whispered quietly and Dean blinked in the sudden volume change. Wood crackled, trees rustled. Sam stood, hunched with his hands shoved in his pockets, feeling small and fragile, and yet so much stronger than his brother. He could be the pillar of support that Dean usually tried to provide him. "Jess is alive, Dean."

The older hunter went still, an odd and heavy silence wrapped around him. He probably could have used a good screaming match. Hell, he definitely could have used a screaming match, but Sam, always the smart one of the two, wasn't going to give it to him.

Sam been worried – so worried – Dean wasn't going to handle John's death at all. The brother he knew shoved everything down, refused to feel or be weakened by emotions. But this, this Dean from the future seemed already broken, and Sam knew he was reliving this death a second time, probably with twice the guilt now that he'd failed the old man twice.

"I get that in the bigger picture that may not be much," the young hunter continued, staring at his brother imploringly as he pushed his own guilt and grief aside and focused on what they had left, "but it means everything to me."

Even if he never saw her again. Never talked to her again. Jess was alive, and it meant *everything*.

Dean swallowed and suddenly turned back to the pyre, running a hand down his face as he visibly pulled himself together. "I know it does, Sammy."

A section of the pyre collapsed, sending sparks and embers into the air. It should have been beautiful. In a morbid, depressing way that rotted away at their hearts, it still was.

"We have changed other things." Sam gestured to the flames. Perhaps not the best or most appropriate example, but it was the most relevant. Sam tried not to let it tie his tongue or fill his throat as he pushed the words through. "It may be the same result, but it didn't happen the same way, right? It happened sooner."

"How is that in any way a good thing?" His brother's voice was bitter – *angry* – but Sam had plenty of experience with that.

"It isn't always going to be good, Dean. Change, at any level, is unpredictable! That's why people are so damn scared of it." Logic had always been his best weapon against an overly-emotional, panicking Dean Winchester. Leave it to Sam to be the Spock to his brother's Kirk; a reference Dean would love, if only he was in the mindset to appreciate it. "Look, if time wants to stay the same, then there's probably a balance. For everything we do manage to change, some things have to stay the same."

"Win some, lose some, huh?" Dean smiled bitterly, refusing to look at him as he rubbed harshly at his chest. "Story of our god damn lives."

"We just have to pick our battles," Sam offered with a light headshake, resuming his funeral watch.

His brother didn't answer, but eventually he bent down to the small cooler they'd brought. It had three beers in it: two for the ones still kicking, one they'd pour out for the member they'd lost. The final component to a hunter's funeral, John Winchester style, and the last goodbye from a couple of sons to their father.

-o-o-o-

They worked their way back to the car slowly once the fire had burned down to safe enough levels to leave. They'd parked on the edge of a river, which might have been beautiful and calm any other

day, and they'd hiked a ways into the woods that bordered the water and road until they'd found a large field perfect for a hunter's farewell.

Now they were leaning against the old, rotted out fence that lined the edge of the waterway, probably leftover from the days that this was someone's property. They'd broken out another round of beers; one hadn't seemed justice enough for the legend that was their father. Though these they sipped slowly as the mood slipped slowly, but steadily, back to grief and loss.

"Did he say anything to you?"

Sam had been quiet for a while, and Dean was not surprised by the question when his brother finally asked it. They had had this conversation once before, after all.

"No," Dean returned softly as he watched his brother, beer all but untouched in the sasquatch's hand. The man from the future struggled in the silence between them for a moment, knowing what he had to say but dreading every word of it. "Not this time, at least."

Sam's head whipped over to meet his eyes. Dean didn't volunteer the information, but he could see his baby brother's gears churning behind those intelligent hazel eyes. "But…last time?"

The older Winchester didn't need to answer or even nod. Sam already had it figured out.

"Dad knew."

"Not the end game, Sammy." Dean finally turned away, back to the river. "Not about the apocalypse."

"But he knew about the blood." John had told him as much, back in Bobby's yard that day. The last happy memory of his dad, really, and it ate at him now as much as all the bad ones. "He knew Azazel had plans for me, even if he didn't know what they were. Dean, what did he tell you?"

"It doesn't matter-"

"Yes, it *does*!" Sam grabbed his brother's shoulder, forcing the older man to look back at him. Those green eyes were hurting so damn much that Sam found it difficult to keep the gaze, despite it being what he had been aiming for. Still, it didn't change the bare facts. "I need to know all of it. I can't make different choices, can't stop your

future from happening, if I don't know what it is I'm trying not to do!"

Dean tried to look away again, guilt and pain weighting those eyes and body down, but Sam shook his shoulder insistently.

"You told me no more lies."

"And I meant it. Not trying to lie to you, Sammy. I just…" Green eyes hesitantly met his and his brother let out a broken, aggravated sigh. "He didn't know what Azazel was doing to you. But he- he wasn't going to let him… let him have you."

The younger hunter stood, gripping his brother's shoulder, as he parsed through the less than straight answer. It didn't take long, and Dean could tell each degree of understanding gained by the way those fingers dug harder and harder into his collarbone.

"Dad…" Sam blinked hard and swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing as stiffly as the rest of him. "He told you to kill me."

"He told me to *save you*," Dean countered harshly – insistently.

"And if you couldn't?"

The return was more immediate than Dean had been expecting and he went silent. He couldn't hold his baby brother's gaze anymore.

'*That's what I thought.'* Sam's hand fell from his brother's arm and a dangerous emptiness filled his gut. It was almost like numbness, accept it had a distinct taste of *dark* to it. Sam didn't know how else to explain it, but whatever it was, it was ugly and it rooted quickly and festered even faster.

The implication of the words that weren't said, said too much. His dad – his *dad,* the man that had *raised* him, that should have loved him and cared for him and helped him move to Stanford and been there at his wedding and the birth of their first kid, his first grandkid, *that* man, who Sam knew was nothing like John Winchester – had told Dean to kill him.

'If he can't save you,' a gentle voice called from the depths of that deep, dark pit, fighting against it, though the struggle did not seem to be in its favor. Still, the voice sounded like Jess, and Sam clung to it more desperately than he was proud to admit. *'And you know he'll do everything he can to save you first.'*

'What if he can't?' He whispered back, but Jess didn't have a response for him.

The quiet between them, broken only by the rustle of the wind and the soft gurgle of moving water over river rock, was heavy and stretched.

"Dad's wrong, Sammy," Dean whispered softly, his gaze directed off to the side, back towards those woods where there father's ashes still sat in a pile of smoldering wood. "Plain and simple. I don't care what he told me or when. He was wrong."

"Maybe he wasn't."

Dean's gaze snapped to Sam's, and suddenly the silence was so much more preferable. "What? *What?"*

The younger hunter winced at the harsh, demanding tone, but he fisted his hands by his sides and stuck his chin out stubbornly. "Dean, if killing me stops the apocalypse-"

"It doesn't. It won't."

Despite Dean's adamant tone, Sam was relentless. "You said-"

"They'll just bring you back, Sam!"

"Not if you shoot me with the Colt."

Silence fell on them once more, this time so thick that it slowed time and blocked all other sounds. No more water, no more bird song or breeze through the trees. Just Dean, staring at his little brother with incredulous, wrecked eyes.

"*Jesus*!" Dean swore, turning away. The move was immediately aborted for, instead, spinning back around to jab a finger in the taller man's direction. "Is this what you call picking battles? Funny, it sounds a lot like *quitting*."

"It's not quitting, Dean, it's tactical."

"Well guess what, Sam; we don't *have* the Colt. There goes your tactic!" And why hadn't *that* been something he'd remembered before he'd decided to go comatose in a hospital bed, useless to every damn person on the planet. Not that *that* had any fucking ground on what had just come out of his brother's mouth. He gritted his teeth and

steered the conversation back on god-damn-point. "Even if we did have it, *I'm not killing you!*"

"We'll get it back." Sam's jaw was just as tight as his brother, hands just as shaky, heart just as heavy and pounding. "We'll get it back from Azazel, and I'll do it myself."

Dean threw his arms up in the air and turned away; it was about all he could do not to punch the stubborn, stupid, selfish kid standing in front of him. That wasn't entirely fair and he knew it, but he also didn't care just then. His brother had just asked him to kill him or, at a minimum, hand over the gun to do it. They weren't a hundred yards or an hour away from where they'd just buried there father. There wasn't much more Dean could care about other than those four fucking words.

Sam, smart enough to know when he was on the verge of his brother's limits, didn't speak. Dean bet he wanted to. He probably had sixteen thousand reasons and no less than four exhibit A, B, C, and Ds to demonstrate his reasoning and point.

It just made him all the more pissed.

They were such fucking martyrs, the both of them. Self-sacrificing sons of bitches. Over and over and over again, they could always save each other, always pull one another out of that kind of talk, but never gave a damn about themselves. Could never see the friggin' light of hope when it was their turn to hold the smoking gun to their head. Well, Dean was sick of it. Color the universe surprised that, of the two of them, *he* was the one to finally call quits on that line of thinking, but that's just what he was going to do.

He spun around, finger out and jabbing into his brother's chest. "You listen to me, Sammy, because I'm only saying this once. I did *not* come ten years into the past to relieve all of this shit-" he threw his arm out wildly to the side, encompassing not just the world as a whole, but their father's final resting spot as well- "just to watch you blow your brains out!"

Sam stumbled back a half step, before he righted himself and seemed to remember his earlier resolve. Dean still didn't care.

"So you-" this time he gave his brother a good shove in the shoulder with the flat of his palm, hard enough that Sam bumped into the fence and it leaned dangerous beneath his large size- "are going to suck it up and put a little *faith* in me. If you can stand there and tell me to pick

and choose my battles and not lose friggin' hope that we can change all this, than you can listen to your own damn words for once. And maybe, just maybe, we'll make it out of this with no one else dying!"

Sam held that gaze for as long as he could, but he wasn't a match for the fierceness – the anger and the sadness and the downright pain – before he lowered his head against his brother's onslaught. His own anger and stubbornness was far from fading, but it had always been hard to see his rock of an older brother – and despite the macho front and emotional constipation, he was still a *rock* – in pain. Pain he was causing by asking something he *knew* he shouldn't be asking.

It still didn't change his mind, however.

"Dean-"

"*Sammy*."

"I can feel it in me." The quiet admission finally shut his brother up long enough to listen. Sam lifted suspiciously glistening eyes, but if Dean noticed, he didn't react other than to snap his jaw shut. "I know you want to save me, stop the end of the world, but…"

He unclenched and clenched his fingers. That vibration was still there, just beneath the skin. It was faint, and its weakness left an empty feeling flowing through his veins that begged to be filled, to be renewed. And he knew what renewed it, knew what that hollow feeling throughout his body wanted. It terrified him beyond anything he'd ever faced before.

"This…This *thing* doesn't feel like something you can save me from."

He'd held the Colt to his head twice now and, while each time terrified him, it had terrified him more how ready he had been to do it. How simple the solution seemed. He knew it wasn't sane thought guiding him now, but nothing in the last two weeks of their lives had been sane. And not much on the horizon looked to be either.

Dean was quiet for several moments, staring off away from the river and the world and his brother. "Then we'll find the Colt."

Sam raised his brow at his brother. Caving had been about the last thing he expected, at least not with so little pushing. The younger Winchester fiercely ignored the odd coil of disappointment that filled him at his brother giving up on him so easily. He'd wanted this; he had no place to be annoyed at Dean for agreeing.

But the man from the future wasn't done. He looked at the younger hunter with the same coldness that had first clued Sam into the change in his time-traveling brother. "You said there are two bullets left. You can put one in my head before you deal with yourself."

His body may as well have been the Sahara for how quickly the moisture left Sam's mouth, throat, everything. He might have shriveled away in that second, turned to dust and blown away on the wind for all he knew. Hazel eyes looked away, then back, then couldn't leave. He shifted, tense bravado and anger gone the way of all the saliva in his mouth. He started to shake his head his head, denial on the tip of his suddenly fat tongue, but Dean didn't let him get far.

"You're as bad as Dad if you think I'm not eating one as soon as you're gone." The man from the future turned away, towards Dad's old truck that they had driven here for the funeral. Sam watched him go, watched him climb into the cab and sit behind the wheel, staring at nothing and waiting for his brother to eventually join him.

He knew it was a harsh thing – a cruel thing – to ask of his dangerously codependent, family-loving brother who'd come back from the future to save him. He hadn't yet thought beyond the first step of eliminating himself as a potential cause to the apocalypse. Hadn't thought past the great, infallible John Winchester, knowing it might come to this, and the world riding on his ability to make the right choices this time around. Hadn't thought what Dean would do once he was gone. But even knowing now, even with the painful, deep weight settled in his chest at the thought of it, Sam's opinion on the matter didn't change.

Was it really even debatable? His life for the planet? The math seemed easy to him, even if the steps it took to get there were ugly.

Eventually, he did join his brother in the car, parting with a final goodbye towards the woods and the man there who had both raised him and failed him, in so many ways. Dean tore away from the river with far more aggression than was probably healthy, and they left behind an idyllic view and the burned ashes of a hunter's grave.

-o-o-o-

Dean was done. He had been done at 10:42 am three days ago. Now he was *fucking* done. Nothing had changed – not *enough* had changed – and he was at the end of his rope of tolerance, patience, and god

damn sanity.

In total, he was done. Done listening to an angel that might be nothing but a memory in his messed up head. Done working his ass off for no reason, with no result. Done being Time's bitch. Just. Fucking. Done.

The car pulled smoothly off the road at the first populated parking lot they came across on their way into and through town. Originally, the plan had been to drive Dad's truck back to Bobby's. The older hunter had already left with the Impala, shortly before the two boys went off to give their father a proper funeral. He'd made himself available for damn near anything either of them could have needed over the past day and a half, but he also knew when he wasn't much needed.

Now, however, Dean was done and that meant Plan F (which he was conveniently calling Plan Fuck It).

Sam furled his brow as they pulled into a mostly empty lot with a spattering of old cars parked here and there in a semi-vacant strip mall. Dean parked a couple spots over from an old Ford Pinto that had seen better days, put the truck in park and pulled the keys from the ignition before tossing them to Sam and pushing open the old, creaky door. Sam, still confused, scrambled out of the car as well, expecting to switch places with Dean.

Only his older brother wasn't headed around the car. He was headed for the Pinto.

"Dean?"

"There's someone I gotta see."

Sam's brow went from furled to brushing his hairline in half a second flat, and the dark pit in his stomach – now mixed in with a dose of guilt – flared to life with a new hefty dash of worry thrown in the mix.

"What? Who?"

Dean just shook his head, rounding the pinto and trying the door. The old thing was actually locked, not that Dean looked surprised.

"Dude, what the hell?" Sam asked, following him to the car. "You're just going to take off? Dad's dead, we just *buried* him, and you're gonna leave?"

"Told you," his brother gruffed as he glanced around the parking lot before ramming his elbow into the window and shattering it inward. Glass tinkered to the ground and across the seat before Dean finally met his brother's eyes over the roof of the now-stolen car. "There's someone I need to have a chat with. Just head to Bobby's, I'll meet you there in a couple days."

Sam tilted his head dangerously, chin jutting up: a warning move that usually came before he punched whoever he was looking at in the face. Luckily, Dean was spared by the barrier that was his new wheels. "Dean, we need to stick together."

"I'm not leaving, Sam," the older man countered, though he shook his head in annoyance at his own statement and corrected, "Not permanently. I'll be back in three days."

"Then I'll go with you." His voice booked no room for argument, but he knew that would hardly matter where his older brother was concerned.

"No. You *won't*." Dean reached through the broken window, grabbed the old silver pin of the door lock and popped it up, opening the door. They probably shouldn't just stand around the car they were breaking into, waiting for the owner to return, even if it did look like no one had touched the poor vehicle in weeks. "You can't come on this one, Sam."

Sam clenched his jaw, hand fisted by his side. "If this is about what I said back at Dad's-"

"It's not," Dean interrupted swiftly, voice as hard as his brother had ever heard it. Sam didn't believe him for a second.

"Don't do this." His voice was low and foreboding, and Dean knew what he was saying. *Don't cut me out. Don't be dad*.

"I'm not. But I don't want you anywhere near the guy I'm going to see."

Sam had a feeling who it was, but didn't bother asking. That wasn't the point here. "If he's that dangerous, you're not going alone."

The man from the future made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat, cursing his apparent inability to ever explain anything to his brother without somehow making the kid feel like he was being left behind due to lack of skill. "He's not dangerous. I mean, yeah, okay, he is – he can be – but not to me. Probably."

Yeah, he was really explaining this one real well.

Dean blew out a breath. "Look, I need you to trust me on this."

"Why?" His brother's abrupt, harsh response drew the hunter up short just as he'd been about to climb into the stolen vehicle. Sam was staring at him fiercely across the hood. "You keep asking me to trust you Dean – and I do – but you never trust me back."

The older man frowned, pulling his head back as he righted himself once more. "This isn't about not trusting you, Sam."

"Yes, it is. It always is with you!"

Dean rolled his eyes, irritation at the reoccurring argument that wasn't even relevant flaring up among all the other anger. He went to climb back into the car, not even bothering to answer.

"He was my dad too, Dean."

The man from the future froze, blood turning to ice. That…that wasn't below the belt, not really, not considering they'd *just* lost their dad and here he was, taking off as well. But it still hurt. Dean swallowed, not quite able to look at his kid brother but also entirely unable to look away.

The world was empty between the two of them, silent and heavy and hollow.

Finally, Dean closed his eyes briefly. "Last time."

Sam's eyebrow climbed slowly, challenging.

"I swear."

"You sure you want to cash in that chip?" his brother asked coldly, and Dean winced. Yeah, Sam wasn't going to let him get away with this again.

He swallowed but nodded. "Last time. I'll be back in three days."

Sam knew a lost cause when he saw it, or maybe he was just deciding which battle to pick after all, because he eventually bit out, angrily, "Two. And you'd better be there."

Dean let the demand hang heavy in the air for a moment before he cleared his throat and nodded, throwing on a smile that almost didn't

look as fake as it felt. "And what, leave fixing my Baby to you? Not in this timeline, or any other, bitch."

The pause before his brother's reply was duly noted and spoke volumes, but, then again, so did his eventual response. "Jerk."

Dean made to climb into the Pinto but stopped once more. He straightened back up, meeting Sammy's gaze across the car.

"You'll help me fix her up, this time. We'll do it together." It took Dean a lot more than he was willing to admit to keep his brother's gaze. "And while we do… I'll tell you everything."

The younger Winchester's jaw was clenched tight and was all but stone. "All of it?"

The man from the future hesitated for only a moment. Procrastination was Dean Winchester's go-to, but he knew this time his dues would come and he'd actually have to pay them. He wasn't even sure if he would be able to. But it didn't matter, not really. They'd reached the end of this road, and he had no doubt that Sam would leave – for good this time – if Dean didn't figure out how to start telling his brother the truth.

"All of it."

-o-o-o-

He was on his second drink of the morning, and it wasn't even ten o'clock yet. But the screen in front of him was disturbingly blank, his head disturbingly clear despite both the alcohol and the penchant for migraines that seemed to strike him on a weekly basis now, and his cell was blinking that little green light that meant he had voicemails from his publisher because no one else ever called him.

Chuck Shurley set down his glass of amber liquid, ice cubes clinking along the sides, and stared at the computer screen. He was… stuck wasn't the right word for it. He couldn't be stuck, he had deadlines. Not to mention, he'd never been stuck before. Sure, the story didn't ever seem to go where he thought it would – wanted it to, really – but anytime he hit that patch of writer's block, bam! On came a new idea and a fresh headache.

Only, no ideas, no headache.

The writer sat, blinking, in front of his blank laptop, at an absolute

loss for what to do next. Were there other ways to cure writer's block than alcohol, insomnia, and quite possibly the slow but imminent liquefaction of his brain under immense pressure, pain, and light sensitivity?

Probably. Maybe he should google.

A heavy-handed knock on his front door interrupted him before he could, not that he was really all that likely too, not before drink number four if he was being real honest with himself, which he was frighteningly good at. The only thing he might actually be good at, he muttered as he climbed off the small desk chair and gave himself a cursory look-over.

He considered changing out of the striped bathrobe and boxers, but ultimately decided, whatever. His visitors totaled about as much as his callers. It was either his neighbor Phil – a practical joker who had an awful sense of humor – or his mean mail-lady who he had a bit of an ongoing feud with currently.

Either or, they'd both seen him in worse.

What Chuck Shurley was not expecting when he pulled open his front door that morning, was a young, good-looking guy wearing an angry expression and holding a glowing ball of light dangling from a black chord.

"Hey, *Chuck*."

Dean Winchester did not look happy, standing there lit by the blinding amulet, a sightless head adorned with cow horns currently glowing like a supernova, which his brother had given him fourteen years ago. Chuck remembered writing that scene.

"We need to talk."

Chapter 38: Season 2: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

God as Chuck: My head-cannon for Chuck is that God is Chuck. He's not possessing a human, merely letting himself, as a cosmic being, sit on the backburner while he plays out life as a human. Sort of like acting out a role, but so method that most of the time he lets his character forget he's even acting to begin with.

Chapter Warnings: Lots of chatter in this one, but hopefully interesting chatter, at the very least! Writing is still a bit rough, as I forced it through in my 'off' phase. It may also be rough typo-wise because I struggled a lot with editing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 5

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The smile slid right of Chuck's face the second the door opened. Expectancy gave way to shock and then immediately confusion, but Dean wasn't buying it for a second. He shoved the glowing amulet into his jean pocket (a second before he remembered the thing burned *hot* in God's presence, but dammit, too late now) and regarded the disheveled deadbeat-God-turned-prophet-turned-writer with nothing less than vehemence.

Chuck tried to laugh it off – awkwardly at that – but any ploy he had at not owning up to Dean Winchester standing on his front porch with his right front pants pocket lit up like a friggin' Christmas tree was somewhat de-railed by the fact that the house started shaking.

The hunter had only a moment of *what the hell?* before the rising pitch of a pissed off angel's true voice and the sudden brightening of the world around them clued him in. Oh. Right. Prophet meant archangel chained to his ass. Dean had sort of forgotten about that.

Chuck looked wary for all but a moment before his façade collapsed into something stern but resigned. "You're not supposed to be here yet."

With a wave of his hand, the world went quiet. The walls and floor stopped shaking. Dean's pocket stopped burning. The glass around them – windows and car windshields, cups inside the house, and what the neighbor probably called 'yard decorations' but freaked Dean the fuck out more than any monster (civilians, man. Nothing more terrifying) – stopped vibrating, soon to shatter from the high pitch ring of an angelic temper tantrum. The world sort of went grey around the edges in a way that made Dean blink heavily, then shake his head when that didn't clear his vision. It didn't clear up, and now that he noticed it, the sound around them seemed oddly muted. Like listening to the world through a tub of water.

Chuck sighed and pulled the door open all the way, stepping to the side with a beckoning gesture. Dean, with a finger stuck in his ear trying to make them pop or something, took a step forward and immediately spun at the movement just out of peripheral range.

The hunter stared, wide eyed, at a double of himself, having an animated talk with a second Chuck. He glanced between the two bickering, a grey film over the entire image just like the rest of the world, and back to the much clearer, unmuted version of God standing next to him.

"Just a little distraction," Chuck supplied with an offhanded shrug. He watches his double – what Dean was starting to realize was like one of Gabriel's constructs (like Father like son?) – for a moment before he turned away. "Raphael won't interfere now."

Dean glanced skyward for a moment, but it looked like the archangel had gone silent. There was no doubt in the hunter's mind that Chuck had conveniently ended that tantrum with his 'son' none-the-wiser.

"You mean he won't know his deadbeat dad's been right under his nose all this time, ignoring every damn, desperate prayer sent his way?"

Well, he had come to have words, and never let it be said that Dean Winchester beat around the bush.

…Okay, at least let it be said he didn't do that around anyone other than Sam.

Chuck sighed again, running a hand through his hair and scratched at his beard. He seemed world-weary in a way the prophet had only ever seemed depressed and unhygienic. "You shouldn't be here, Dean. Not yet."

He didn't sound angry, just defeated. Like he'd full-well expected one, Dean Winchester, would show up to mess up his afternoon plans of alcohol, wallowing, and crappy writing one of these days, he had just hoped it wouldn't be *this* day.

Dean had never really understood that line between 'Chuck' and God.

The hunter, rebuke on his tongue, found the words stuck in his throat as God's eyes dropped to his chest and his face, stripped of reservation, turned so damn mournful it was breathtaking. Dean blinked, anger momentarily distracted, as God stepped towards him, hand outstretched towards his chest. Dean fought the immediate urge to take a step back, suddenly uncomfortable for so many reasons. Chuck didn't stop, nor did he ask, but he did glance at the Righteous Man and pause long enough to give him plenty of time to protest.

While Dean was still trying to figure out what he'd even say if he were to protest – which, yes, of course he was going to fucking protest – Chuck pressed his splayed out palm to Dean's chest and the next thing the hunter knew, he was struggling to remember how to expand his chest to suck air into his lungs against the onslaught, both physical and mental. It was like watching the last ten years of his life as a movie, only on rapid six-friggin-arrow, fast-forward mode. You know the one, where you've seen the movie before so even though you're just catching a single frame every tenth minute of the film, you still know absolutely everything that's happening in between.

Chuck was, apparently, 'catching up'.

Meanwhile, his chest flared at the sudden contact of primordial being of limitless power and, *oh yeah*, Castiel's fucking father. He couldn't tell if the pounding beneath his ribcage was his suddenly frenzied heart having a friggin' panic attack, Castiel's undeniable rage and upset that flooded every bit of his already angry-buzzed body, or the equally tragic longing that made Dean feel like his lungs apparently wanted to burst out of his chest Alien-style to give God a hug-and-or-possibly-strangle-him-to-death.

Had he mentioned he had no idea what was going on in his sternum but he was fairly sure he wasn't alone in there and it was all kinda weird and less than comfortable for the very human-is-safe-everything-else-is-questionable hunter?

"Oh, Castiel," Chuck breathed out, a heartbroken look unabashedly spread across his ancient eyes.

Dean sucked in a breath, not realizing he apparently hadn't tried breathing in a while because he almost choked on it and ended up coughing and staggering away from God's hand, finally severing the connection. His chest immediately flagged, heart calming and warmth and anger fading back to normal-Dean levels.

"Holy shit," he wheezed out, pressing his hand to his suddenly cold, bereft sternum. "What the hell?"

Chuck had the grace (ha!) to look at least remorseful of the state Dean found himself in, but honestly the hunter didn't care about that. Sure, he was pissed and the whole habit Heaven had of getting all-up-and-personal with humans without some fucking warning was ridiculous. But that wasn't what his brain was catching on as he stared at the weird mix of sorrow and pride – and slight apology – on God's face.

"He's…" Dean swallowed, realizing he was about to get one of the many answers he'd come here for. Honestly, he'd been prepared to get none, piss off God, and find himself back in 2016, dying alongside his brother and the rest of the world. To realize that might not actually happen – or at least it might not happen *yet* – shut his mouth as much as it did his brain and he definitely struggled to get both going again. The warmth in his chest friggin *wiggled*, like it was elbowing him in the ribs, and he realized how stupid he suddenly was. He already knew the damn answer to this question. He'd only come here looking for someone else to say it that wasn't a demon. "He's in there?"

God slid his hands smoothly into the pockets of his bathrobe in a move that would have been nothing but awkward on Chuck. The difference and yet similarity between the two was distracting. He looked up at Dean, a good couple of inches of difference in their heights. "Just a sliver. Probably meant to burn up on re-entry. Honestly, I'm surprised it didn't."

"What?" Dean blinked, only picking up half the words coming out of the primordial being's mouth. "What the hell does that mean?"

Chuck shrugged, demeanor relaxing back into almost-human-Chuck as he drifted into the house in search of a drink. "Human souls weren't really built for integration."

He headed into the kitchen, answering Dean's question without answering anything at all. God grabbed a couple of beers out of the fridge, pulling one free of the plastic ring and tossing it to Dean, who caught it with the kind of force that suggested he was considering

hurling it back at the guy's face.

Chuck didn't seem to notice. "Actually, nothing about the human body is great at integration. It was the best defense I could give against disease. Sucks for organ transplants. Though, to be fair, I wasn't really thinking that far in advance when I was going through the first draft."

Dean still didn't know what God was shuffling on about, but he supposed it didn't even matter. He had is answer. "Is that why I keep seeing him in dreams? And the…"

The hunter trailed off, unsure how to phrase it and even less willing to remember it. He mimicked an explosion one hand and a beer, a grimace on his face, and a muttered something about Azazel.

"Oh, yeah, definitely," God confirmed, way too calmly as he popped the beer with a light spray. "Probably did that in self-defense, I imagine. No way he'd have put you in that much danger on purpose." He shrugged again, raising the beer to his lips and taking a swig. "He took quite a beating from it, so you may not see him for a while."

It took a moment for God to notice, but when he did, Dean didn't actually have to say anything. The very blatant look on his face that said '*I'm going to start punching if you don't make sense here soon'* was obvious enough. Chuck cleared his throat, a move so reminiscent of Chuck that Dean struggled for yet another moment to separate the two. It ended as quickly as that face adopting a vaguely amused expression at the utterly empty threat, though he did start talking straight at least.

"That sliver is just a shadow, Dean." The hunter frowned at the wording, something familiar sparking in his mind but he didn't remember what that was. "Not much at all, really. If I had to guess, I'd say Castiel – your Castiel, of 2016 – used up what grace he had to get you back here, and whatever was left after he saw you through the trip got a bit…clingy?"

There was something he clearly found utterly entertaining about that, if the sly, slightly smug, and infuriating amusement in his eyes was anything to go by. Dean had no clue what about this could possibly be funny, but he knew he was damn close to slapping that look of God's face, even if it broke every bone in his hand.

Chuck cleared his throat again and chugged the last of his beer distractedly. "That explosion wiped out any energy he'd manage to store up. But he'll be back."

Something deep inside the hunter shook loose at that, and he felt like he could finally breathe, something he hadn't been able to do properly since that damn cabin and the thought of charcoal wings spread across dilapidated wood walls. The rest of him stayed tense, though, because he hadn't come here just to ask about his homemade angelic chest bomb.

Cas was going to be alright. More to the point, he was fucking *here* and Dean knew it now. Now on to those who fucking weren't and never would be again.

"And my dad?"

Chuck suddenly gave the very distinct impression of tilting his head to the side despite the fact that his neck didn't move an inch. "John?"

Dean grit his teeth hard enough to hear them squeak against one another, returning to his previous pissed-beyond-words state of natural being as he stared down a friggin' all-knowing cosmic being who apparently needed shit spelled out for him. "He's dead."

Confusion flickered through ancient eyes for an infinitesimal fraction of a second before understanding dawned and then something so dangerously close to pity took over that Dean almost punched him right then and there.

"Dean-"

"Don't you fucking 'Dean' me! You know why I'm here. Why Cas sent me back."

"To change things," Chuck answered with as close to a verbal shrug as anyone on the planet had ever achieved. Dean's hands curled into fists and he had to remind himself, several times, that punching *God* was not a good idea.

He threw his arms out to the side, taking it out on the innocent air around him instead. "I'm not changing a goddamn thing!"

The cosmic deity gave him a single, admonishing look for the choice of words. "You are."

"I'm really not." The words were low and dangerous, growled through clenched teeth and zero remaining patience.

Chuck signed. "John's death is unfortunate, but inevit-"

"I swear if you say inevitable I will find a way to kill you."

God looked almost fondly exasperated again, and Dean's inability to anger the guy was only raising his own levels of frustration. "If you don't like that word choice, let's try another: necessary."

"So what, it's destiny? My father dying just *had* to happen, some things just *have* to stay the same?"

"Yes and no," Chuck replied and Dean just stared him down until he continue. It was all he could do, because any alternative was certainly going to involve violence. "Think of it like a game of Chess. For every move you make, your opponent gets a chance to counter. You throw a ball into a pool, the water has to go somewhere. For every push you make, time will push back, or push somewhere else."

"A balance?" Dean asked, though the tone suggested he wasn't exactly being sincere.

"Yes and no."

"You better cut that shit out before I find a way to hurt you."

God's eyes were back to that fond exasperation thing and Dean tightened his fist. "Yes, to some extent, Time is a balance. Every up has a down, Ying has a Yang, so on and so on. It's going to try and stay the same. But also no. If you push too hard…"

"It'll break."

God nodded readily. "Snap like a toothpick. There goes your balance. You don't want that to happen, Dean. We're talking unpredictability like you can't even imagine. Take everything you know about what you think is coming and throw it out the window. You really don't want to see what that looks like. You're dad living past this point?" He held out his hand as he settled against the counter once more, palm flat and parallel to the ground before he tipped his hand. "There goes your balance."

"That's bullshit," Dean ground out. "He's one man! You telling me 'destiny' is balanced on one friggin' guy?"

"One guy who fathered the true vessels." His counter claim was calm, and Dean's jaw clacking shut was audible. "You and Sam are important, and leaning on each other, depending on each other alone, because you're all you've got left… Hard as that is, it's what's going to

get you through what comes next."

The hunter stood in God's kitchen, trembling, from rage and grief and pain and all of it, because damn it, that didn't sound wrong. It didn't sound fucking fair, either, but it didn't sound wrong. He and Sam had always managed better when they were together, and John just didn't factor into the picture well. Never had.

"You're going to have to play the game, Dean, whether you like it or not. A very careful game of push and pull; toe the edge but don't go over; decide what pieces you can't afford to lose, and know you're going to sacrifice some others."

"Pick our battles, huh?" the hunter asked bitterly, shaking his head.

"Sam always was a smart one," Chuck responded with a wry smile, eyes sliding into the other room where his computer sat, open, the Winchester Gospels still crisp and fresh across the screen. "Time is fluid, Dean, but it doesn't flow like either of you think it does. And what you're trying to do, you can't do without some give."

"I'm not here for a philosophical lecture." The fact that he refused to accept that lecture, from God or Sam or Cas, was another matter entirely.

"Well, you're here for something," Chuck offered unhelpfully, the first hints of annoyance creeping into his words. "So I'll keep talking and maybe eventually I'll say something you will listen to."

His body language never lost an inch of the relaxed, Jeff-Bridges-as-the-Dude-ness, but there was a bit of a warning in his voice now that told the meager human he was getting close to a line. Dean managed to bite his tongue, though every fiber of his being was telling him not to give a damn. It was only Sam's quiet, pleading voice in his head that kept him from pushing Chuck harder than he already was.

'*I can't do this alone, Dean.*'

God could send him back. He'd come here knowing the potential his frustration and hotheadedness was risking. So, he supposed, until Chuck said something he really couldn't take, that he could reign that rage in enough to at least let him say what he had to say.

Dean had only ninety percent come to yell at him. The other ten percent was for answers, which he'd only get if he actually listened. He wasn't happy about it.

"Time isn't a linear thing," Chuck continued, popping a second beer. "It exists, simultaneously, in every corner of the universe, all the – 'scuse the pun – time. You change something, and it updates, all at once, across the board."

Dean breathed through his nose, already walking back his commitment to not throwing a punch. It took several ten-counts, something Sam had once made him start doing to manage his anger that really didn't fucking work and he'd remember to tell the boy scout whenever this Sam got around to the subject, before he was able to grind out, "What do you mean?"

Chuck considered for a moment before spreading his hands out, gesturing with them and the open bear, as he explained, "Take Palo Alto. The first time you lived through this, there were demonic omens a week before Jess's death, weren't there? Your dad told you about them."

The man from the future stumbled over the question for a moment. It seemed so non-sequitur to their conversation, and so much had happened in the last six months that honestly, he'd sort of forgotten how this had all started. Not to mention he pretty much had two sets of memories he had to reconcile now anytime he compared first-time-then to second-time-then.

He cracked the yet-untouched beer in his hand open and took a chug. God, his life sucked.

"This time, no omens." Chuck apparently didn't need him to answer, as he continued right on, not even casting the sudden beer chug anything more than an understanding, cursory glance. He set his own can on the counter beside him, crossing his arms over his chest. "But you only showed up a day or two before Jess was supposed to die."

Despite having just drank half a beer, Dean was pretty sure his mouth had never been drier. He wasn't sure if it was the casual way God said Jess's death was *supposed* to happen, or maybe just the nonchalant acceptance that it hadn't happened, but Dean was back to having breathing difficulties.

The hunter had expected God to have a problem with the fact that they were trying for a reset. That Dean was basically *cheating* by coming back to the past to change it all. He'd been ready to argue, tooth and nail, for his right to be here. But, like with all things – and Dean couldn't even believe he'd spent energy worrying about it – God

just didn't care.

"You see what I'm saying?" Chuck asked, and no, Dean really, really didn't. "If time was linear, there would have been demonic signs the last week in October. You would have shown up November first, and Jess wouldn't have died by November second due to your presence."

The way he talked about it almost reminded Dean of Sam when he was geeking out about something nerdy. It was the most interested in anything he'd ever seen God get. It only pissed him off more.

"But Time isn't linear. It knew you were coming, knew your presence meant Jess wouldn't die that night, and so no demonic omens occurred. Time updated all at once, across the board." Chuck finished with a wry grin, swiping his beer back off the counter as he stood up. "Don't you get it, Dean? You think you can't change anything, but you already *did*."

Dean's brain stuttered a full ten seconds after Chuck wrapped up his little lecture, all but smiling up at the hunter who sat there, stunned. Wait, *what*?

"Are you saying…" The man from the future shook his head. "Then what the hell comes next? Is the Apocalypse…?"

God looked slightly apologetic and harried at the question, but his relaxed posture remained the same as he admitted, half sheepish, half nonchalant, "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" There was that anger again. He might as well grow a vagina for all of this emotional roller-coastering he was doing. God, no wonder women were so pissed off during their periods. "You're an all-knowing *god*, how can you *not know*?"

Chuck just shrugged. "I don't want to know, Dean. I'm all-knowing if I want to be, and I don't *want* to be. Plus, time is constantly updating. It's dizzying to try and keep track." At the intimidating level of angry red, sort-of-turning-purple that was blossoming across Dean's face, he tossed his hands up a bit, a little more human-Chuck showing through. "Why do you think I'm down here, living out life as a human?"

"I don't know," the hunter ground out, "maybe because you're a damn coward and a piece of work too fucking scared to face his own kids and deal with the mess *he* created."

Chuck sobered momentarily, a look of something dark and dangerous and old filtering across his face with such severity that Dean very quickly remembered just who it was he was talking to. Bits and pieces of that wrathful Father from the Old Testament filtered through his brain.

Too little too late on that one, buddy, he mumbled internally.

Luckily for him, 'God' had gone the way of the hipsters in the last century. All peace and Zen, apparently, and he quickly resumed his expression of fond, if not thinning, exasperation.

"I'm not hiding, Dean. If I was, I certainly wouldn't have picked a prophet as my hiding spot, smack dab in the middle of this mess and tied to one of my own children." Blue eyes darted up to the ceiling pointedly. "This isn't going to be an easy for you to hear – believe me, I know – but I am helping as much as I can."

"Helping?" the hunter roared, taking a step forward that brought him dangerously within Chuck's personal space. "My dad is *dead!* More people are going to die, and you're just sitting here, writing our crappy lives for entertainment!"

Chuck rubbed at his forehead, his elbow almost brushing against the imposing hunter with how close he was. But God didn't seem to take notice. "Look… I'm not the writer of all things, and I don't decide what happens. Could I? Sure, but I tried that for a while and it didn't work out so well."

Dean didn't speak. His lip twitched angrily and his hands remained fisted at his sides. Chuck tilted his head back, staring up at the ceiling and, hell, maybe at the kid hanging out above the house watching some illusion of a prophet go about his day.

"When I first started all of this… Yes, I wanted you – humanity – to know who I was. It was ego, plain and simple. I wanted my creations to love me, so I made myself a fixture in your lives. Laid down some rules, answered prayers, smiled down from on high and fixed it when it needed fixing. The whole lot. But look where that got me?" He lowered his head to take in the Righteous Man with a small, self-deprecating smile. "I gave you guys free will, something I missed on the angels, and there you all were, barely using it. It was all 'God, grant me this' and 'please, fix that'. I couldn't hold your hands forever. Eventually you had to leave the nest, start making your own decisions.

"What's that saying the Western world is so fond of? I'm just a kid with

an ant farm?" Chuck tossed his hands out to the side, a sort of *'well… yeah'* gesture. "They're not wrong, you know. The sentiment and connotation aren't great, sure, but the analogy's pretty on point."

Dean ground his teeth together. "You're really going to stand there, again, and tell me you don't care?"

Chuck let out an aggravated sound and pinched the bridge of his nose. Such a human thing to do. "No, that's not… Why do you get an ant farm, Dean?" When the hunter didn't answer, he threw out his arms emphatically. "To watch the ants! You don't get an ant farm so you can tell those little guys what tunnels to dig, where to put the dirt, how many rocks to move. You get an ant farm so you can watch them do incredible things!

"You guys, the human race, has *such* potential. Who am I, as a parent, to stand in the way of that? To curtail it by hovering, protecting, or solving all your problems for you? So, yeah, I stepped back. Sure, it took a few centuries for you to find yourself, and it got ugly a couple times there. But you came through. And you've grown so much more than I could have ever dreamed. Done amazing things."

Dean was shaking his head, hand raised and he just needed God – Chuck – to stop talking. "What does all this have to do with what's happening *now*? Heaven and Hell are going to start the friggin' end of the world, and you're going to let them!"

Chuck's face turned back to that slightly apologetic, little bit sheepish, but mostly nonchalant expression that Dean had been working so hard not to slap. "It's the angels' turn to be kicked out of the nest."

"What?"

"I started with you guys first. You have free will, a rebellious nature; kicking you out of the house was always going to go better than my older kids." Chuck shrugged guiltily. "Now it's their turn."

"This…" Dean almost couldn't speak, the anger and frustration and downright disbelief boiled in his blood and flooded his throat, stalling his tongue. "You're telling me this is all some sort of…lesson? For the angels? Half the humans on this friggin' planet are going to die, and it's a god damn *lesson?*"

"They're…not taking it very well."

"Are you *kidding me*?!"

"Dean-"

"No. No fucking way. You are going to go back to your messed up family and you are going to end this." Dean jabbed his finger into God's chest, and the celestial being allowed his body to be pushed back against the counter. "This is not my damn mess to clean up. Me and my family have done enough. We've bled enough. You. Fix. This. Now."

"Enough." The reverberating command rang through the house hard enough to vibrate the walls and shake the furniture. Dean stumbled back, blown away from the god as he straightened, finally having enough. The power flowing off of him ebbed almost immediately, leaving Chuck once more. "I know you don't understand, Dean. You don't have to believe me and you don't have to have faith in me, but I am doing everything I can for my family."

"Bullshit." Fear thrummed through Dean's veins, survival instinct screaming through every synapses to shut the hell up, but it just wasn't in his nature. Screw the consequences.

Chuck huffed a frustrated little sound, but he remained just Chuck. "I can't step in now. Imagine if 'God' suddenly came back to humanity, solved all your problems, created world peace, and then left again. You have *nukes* now. You'd never survive."

"Then here's an idea, *don't leave*." Dean's own daddy issues aside, was it so much to ask of a fucking father to take care of his damn children?

"But I'm going to." Chucks voice softened. "One day, I won't be here anymore, Dean. Death – or something else – will reap me, and then what? I'm a father; it's my job to prepare my kids for a world that I'm not in, and I'm trying to do that while I'm still around to help them through it."

He sighed, and the sound was rough, even for a god. "I walked away from the angels, and they're just starting to figure out I'm not coming back. If I step in and solve it now… when the time comes that I'm gone for good, they *will* end the world, and I won't be there to save it. At least this way, I can stick around and keep it from being a total disaster while they… figure it out."

"A total disaster? Thousands of people are going to die!"

"In a hunt, can you save everyone, Dean?"

The man from the future reeled back at that question like a punch to the face. That- that was not fucking fair.

"That's one, maybe two people, and I feel like crap when it happens!" he shot back. "You're talking half the planet!"

"That's something you and I can never see on the same level," God answered calmly. "You're one man, I'm God. I'm not saying it with arrogance, or that you're too small to understand. I'm *not*, Dean. But our worlds are never going to make sense to one another.

"I get that not being able to save everyone hurts you." Chuck smiled up at him briefly, despite the rage and anger and distrust facing him back. "You're good and righteous, and I'm proud of you. Everyone you can't save tears at you, and you'll never stop being that man. It tears at me too. We just see it from different perspectives."

Dean was already shaking his head, but God just kept on going, not letting the hunter argue. "This is the best that it can be. I know you don't understand or trust me, but this is everything I can do to save the world *I* created."

"And what? We're supposed to be thankful?"

Chuck closed his eyes briefly, patience thinning. "No. It's not that kind of help."

The god, in his boxers and bathrobe, beer in hand, pushed off the counter, setting the can down as he did so. "And you won't be very thankful about this either, but trust me. It's for the best."

"What is-" Dean took a step back as the words left his mouth, Chuck already in his personal space with a single step, a mistake on his part by crowding the God in his anger and frustration. Fingers were pressed to his forehead before he could so much as swat them away.

"Go back to your brother; he needs you. And you need him." Those blue eyes bore into his, ancient and old and yet still somehow Chuck beneath all of that. Wrinkles formed at the corners as God offered him nothing short of a fatherly smile. "For what it's worth, Dean, I believe in you."

Then the world went white.

-o-o-o-

Dean sat in his stolen Ford Pinto, staring out the windshield at Bobby's dusty house, parked in the salvage yard, and wondered how he got there. He had just been doing something, but he couldn't remember what. His talk with God had been a bust – bastard still wasn't going to lift a finger – but there'd been something else he had been doing.

He'd been going home? Home to Sam. Green eyes darted back through the windshield to the dusty house beyond, and Dean couldn't help the smile that pulled at his lips. *Home.*

But there had definitely been something else…

The hunter turned his head to the right, taking in the brown grocery bag sitting passenger side, filled pretty much to the top with stuff and emitting the happy, wonderful, world-redeeming scent of pie. Right, he'd stopped and picked up some groceries and supplies for Plan… well, he supposed it was Plan G now, since Plan F(uck it) had gone belly up. Although, if he really thought about it, this was Plan C, and he was just running the plans out of order.

Fuck Plan F, Plan C was where it was at.

With a slight grin, brought on by equal parts pie, being *home,* and the new determination swelling up within him (centralized as a deep warmth just behind his sternum that he couldn't help but rub at), Dean grabbed the bag with one arm and pushed open the door of his stolen vehicle with the other. As he climbed out, groceries shoved against his side, he didn't notice the small wooden box tumble out from the top of the slightly squished, dangerously tilting bag. It bounced off the seat, hit the ground, and rolled up under the footwell where it lay just out of sight. The hand-carved, Aquarian star across its top was masked entirely by the shadows cast by the dashboard of the stolen vehicle.

He slammed the car door shut, hefted the bag, and started for the house. He pushed thoughts of his failed meeting with God to the back of his mind – God damn Gods – and didn't think much of the fact that he couldn't quite recall the face of the not-man he'd just come back from meeting, or most of the meeting itself. Nor would he ever notice that the next time he thought of Chuck Shurley, he thought of the nerdy, slightly pathetic, alcoholic prophet stuck writing his crappy Winchester Gospels with an archangel tied to his ass, and nothing more.

Dean was whistling happily by the time he pulled open the screen

door to Bobby's house, Plan C in hand, surrogate father and brother waiting for him inside, and the smell of pie wafting up from the bag to fill his nostrils and, let's be honest, his soul.

The apocalypse didn't stand a chance against a Dean Winchester armed with family, hope, and *pie.*

-o-o-o-

Chuck sat back in his old, squeaky writing chair, staring at the computer as his fingers stilled on the keys. He was Chuck Shurley for only a moment longer before something far older took over his body and God groaned, bodily leaning forward and hitting his forehead to the sturdy surface of the desk. The resounding thunk was cathartic, but not nearly enough so.

You try to do something nice for the Winchesters.

Seriously!

It was like moving molasses. In the winter.

God picked his head off of the desk, staring at the words blinking back at him from the open document on Chuck's laptop. The blurb that described a little wooden box that shouldn't even exist in this timeline, sitting – useless – in the footwell of some stolen vehicle he just knew Dean wasn't going to revisit anytime soon.

Molasses. In the winter. In *Antartica,* for crying out loud!

He let out another groan and slammed the lid of the laptop shut. He needed a drink.

God damn Winchesters.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: If you're not sure what the box is, google it because you'll be very excited. At least until you get as frustrated as Chuck when you realize Dean's already lost it. I'm such an evil (read: no good, dirty, rotten) author

Chapter 39: Season 2: Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Time to catch back up on Sammy's progress the last two days! Uh, Actual Warnings: this chapter ain't pretty, folks. There be angst ahead. Heads up for trigger warnings; descriptions of withdrawal and fever dreams. Dark descriptions of blood drinking, death, and misery all wrapped up in a package of suicidal thoughts. It's not as bad as it sounds, Sam'll be fiiiiiine.

Actual Actual Chapter Warnings: okay, but no, seriously, this chapter goes very dark places, so please proceed with caution

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 6

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam made it back to Souix Falls in a little under twelve hours. He'd hit some nasty traffic through Chicago, which canceled out all the backroad, side route knowledge that usually made hunters so much faster than the average map user. It had given him plenty of time to oscillate between anger and the far lesser form of annoyance his brother was currently incurring within him.

Dean had never been the sharing kind, particularly when he was grieving or guilt-laden, but Sam hadn't expected him to *leave*.

Like father like son.

He immediately winced at the thought and resolved not to think such a cruel thing again. Especially now. The reasonable part of his brain, the part untouched by overwhelming emotion, the part that would have made such a good lawyer, knew Dean was probably trying. Or at least, his version of trying. Granted he sucked at it and Sam was fast approaching his limit of how much he could take of his brother's overprotectiveness, emotional constipation, and trust issues. Even with the conciliatory agreement to finally, finally come completely clean, Sam was still angry and irritable and definitely getting the short end of the stick, hand over hand. There wasn't going to be much left of the damn thing when all was said and done, and Dean would be a lucky son of a bitch if Sam didn't beat him with it in the end.

But he'd almost died. Dean had almost died in that hospital. Every time Sam got too angry, too worked up, a little voice in his head reminded him that he'd almost lost him altogether. The last family he had in this world. Then his mind would revert back to being just annoyed, coupled with the grief of loss and fear of the future. At least until he inevitably talked himself back into a fury.

He put the truck into park along the salvage yard's drive, grabbing his gear from the otherwise empty passenger seat, and tried not to feel the newest whirlwind of emotions at the fact that his brother wasn't sitting next to him. Anger, hurt, annoyance, loss, sorrow, worry, dread, more anger, and over all of it a thick, heavy film of bone-deep exhaustion.

Bobby was waiting for him at the screen door, a raised brow at the lack of a second brother, to which Sam grumpily muttered something in return that at least put the old hunter off his questioning for now. The younger Winchester really didn't feel like talking about it anyhow. He trekked his way upstairs with his go-bag and his dad's too. He'd have to sort through it, keep any of the useful stuff and…. He didn't know what he'd do with the rest. A decision that should have been made together, if Dean hadn't gone off who-knows-where.

Selfish, self-centered, ignoramus, unthinking, martyring, asshole. That's what his brother was. And stubborn.

And also not dead.

Sam collapsed onto the bed after he'd dropped both duffels without much care. Without much anything, really. He was tired. Emotionally drained, tired of feeling so damn much all the time. Physically drained too. His bones felt heavy, his muscles ached, and his veins were hollow in a way that was fiercely uncomfortable, but he had no idea how to address.

No. That wasn't true.

Sam rolled onto his side, tucking a hand beneath his head as he stared at the second twin bed where Dean usually slept. He knew exactly what would make his body stop hurting. Knew what he could fill his veins with to make them sing instead of scream.

The hunter closed his eyes tightly against the gnawing hole in the pit of his stomach that had been growing since they'd left that cabin. When he'd first been cleared by the hospital staff, he wrote it off as hunger and ignored it in favor of finding his father and making sure

his brother would make it through the night. When he'd finally sought out food, it had done nothing for that growing pit, and he'd decided it was because of Dean's condition.

It hadn't gone away once Dean woke up, perfectly fine.

He could say it was because of his father; he'd gotten his brother back only to lose his dad. But Sam knew that wasn't it. The other symptoms were too obvious to assign to his grief. The slight tremor in his hands. The insomnia and exhaustion that weighed him down with every step and every blink. The dry itchiness in his eyes and the tingle at the tips of every finger, the ends of every limb.

Withdrawal. He'd walked Brady through it enough times to recognize the signs. It also meant he knew exactly what stage he was at and the bad news was it was going to get much, much worse.

Sam rolled onto his back and opened his eyes to the ceiling above him. There was a water-stain just over his head. He and Dean had patched that for Bobby when they were teens, staying here on one of John's numerous hunts deemed too dangerous for them. There'd been a storm, and Sam woke up in the middle of the night to the drip drip drip of a quickly dampening bed.

Dean made at least three wet-the-bed jokes even as he scooted over on the small mattress and begrudgingly beckoned the even-then giant of a human into his bed. It hadn't been the comfiest of nights, but at least it was dry. Looking back on it, Sam wondered why one of them hadn't just taken the couch downstairs. Probably because they'd been sharing beds since they were toddlers and neither had grown up with a whole lot of personal space between them.

The next morning, seeing clear skies and a beautiful sunny day, they'd rummaged Bobby's library for a book on roof repair and got to work that afternoon. When they'd climbed down that evening, Bobby gifted them with beers and a solid waggle of his finger that he best not be hearing from John about it. Sam had tried a sip, gagged at the rough taste, and promptly given the can to Dean, enjoying a soda for the rest of the evening instead.

The young hunter turned away from that water stain and the happy childhood memory – one of the few he had. Dean wasn't here right now and he had bigger worries on the horizon than a night spent under a leaky roof.

-o-o-o-

He woke up shaking. It was the middle of the night, the room around him dark and empty. His muscles ached in a way they hadn't when he'd gone to sleep. Sam groaned, curling into a miserable ball beneath the blankets that weren't nearly enough warmth or weight.

Hours passed in shivering misery. Halfway through what was left of the early morning, Sam gave up fighting the cold that racked his body yet left him sweating, and stumbled from his bed long enough to grab the blankets from Dean's empty mattress. Muscles protested the sudden use, aching in such a way that suggested they were near cramping and his joints felt creaky and old beneath the weight of his large figure. He snagged the comforter with one hand and curled back up in a cocoon of fabric and wretchedness.

This was going far worse than he'd foolishly hoped.

-o-o-o-

Bobby came into the room in the early afternoon hours of the next day, probably to investigate why he hadn't come down for breakfast or lunch. The hunter didn't seem very surprised to find a sick Winchester curled in a mount of blankets, shaking and blinking at him from sunken eyes ringed by blue-black circles more befitting of a skull than a living thing. If the gruff old hunter thought it was a cold or something more (Sam was fairly certain Dean had told him about the demon blood), he was as unreadable as stone.

"You've both been going hard for weeks now," he reasoned as he dug another blanket – a thicker one, meant for the winter months. Karen had quilted shortly after their marriage, and Bobby hadn't touched it since her death, though the boys dug it out now and then through the years. She would have liked that, knowing he had kids who curled up beneath it during storms, spilled popcorn and soda on it through movie nights, and built forts and tents during long, hot days. "Not surprised your body finally called it."

He didn't need to mention that they'd also just lost their daddy. Falling victim to a cold was the least of the funny things grief could do to people.

Sam took the heavier blanket with greedy, shaking fingers and a weak thank you passed through chapped lips and a raspy throat. Bobby gave him a sympathetic look. Whatever this was had hit hard and fast. He left the kid to sleep it off as much as possible. An hour later he came back up with a cup of soup, a handful of crackers, and some

juice he'd picked up on a run to the store.

When he came up the following morning with something equally light for breakfast, the food was untouched. The glass of cranberry juice, at least, was empty.

-o-o-o-

Sam desperately wished for his brother. He needed his brother.

There were only two times in his life he could remember being sick without Dean there to take care of him. To mother hen him way past the point of being ridiculous, actually. His older brother didn't do things in halves, that was for sure.

The first time was his freshman year at Stanford, barely a month into classes. He'd never spent so long on his own before. He was still finding his footing and hesitant to make friends, despite his eagerness too. Sam was good at making friends, but his unique childhood meant years of conditioning not to get close to people. He would always lose them to the next hunt, the next move. It was a lesson that had taken him far too long to learn, and one he'd made damn sure he wouldn't forget easily.

It meant that a month into college, he'd barely spoken to anyone for any meaningful amount of time. People there were great – amazing actually. For the first time in his life, Sam fit in somewhere. And not just because most everyone around was intelligent, eager, and striving for success in ways his family never would have defined the word. No, for the first time in his life, he was away from his family, away from the life and not going back. It was bittersweet, but it was the thing that made his new life feel so right.

Sam spent a week and a half curled in a ball in a shared dorm, miserable and weepy with fluids leaking from more places than he knew possible, wishing for his brother with everything that he was. He even thought how stupid he'd been to leave. To have gone out on his own, to face the world when he'd never managed it before and had almost no experience doing so. Eventually, his roommate – a fresh-faced, wide-eyed jackass with perfect teeth who had barely exchanged more than three full sentences with Sam – dragged him down to the parking lot, shoved him in his fancy car, and drove him to Urgent Care. Sam had managed to contract strep slapped atop a chest cold that was well on its way to bronchitis, all in his third week of school. The doctors pumped him full of drugs and tissues, handed him back to

Brady, and the two had been best friends that day forward.

The second time had only been a couple of months before Dean came to fetch him in his search for Dad. That time Jess had been there to take care of him. Despite her choice of Halloween costume later that year, she actually had a terrible bedside manner. It had been a good running joke for those months after and, quite possibly, the motivation behind her sexy nurse outfit that October. Sure, she had taken care of him, but it had been so much more of a nurse Ratchet than a nurse Betty. Strong-arming him back to bed, telling him to stop being a baby and drink the damn soup, to get over it already, it was just pneumonia for Pete's sake.

She would have made a terrifying mother.

Will, Sam corrected. *She will make a terrifying mother, one day.*

Just not to his kids.

The young hunter shook his head, groaning at the splitting headache behind his eyes, threatening to burst through every orifice of his face with every movement. He pushed everything, including the pain, to the side, and forced himself to think happy thoughts.

Her bedside manner had actually reminded him of his brother, really. He'd never told Jess that – he didn't talk about his family before Dean tripped into their life in the middle of the night in the middle of their apartment – but he was fairly convinced it had actually helped get him better faster.

Nothing like a little Winchester tough love, after all.

All that had been missing was the hovering, over-protective, and more than slightly co-dependent helicopter parenting. Which was essentially what he spent weeks teasing her about afterward.

What Sam wouldn't give for a little of that here. It would suck to have Dean in this room with him, no doubt about it. The non-stop fussing and all the worry. The desperation and disappointment in his eyes. The pity as he looked on and watched Sam suffer a sickness of his own making. The slight anger just under the surface that he would refuse to address until it boiled over entirely and ended up with Mt. Vesuvius level fallout, usually losing the high ground and probably Sam's only saving grace.

He'd give anything in the world not to see Dean look at him like that,

to see him like this. But he'd give more just to have him there.

-o-o-o-

Bobby knew it wasn't the damn flu.

He may not be some intellectual or academic, he may not have a degree or fancy letters after his name, but he knew those boys and he was no idiot. Dean hadn't warned him in so many words that this might happen, but he'd been worried enough about it that Bobby had picked up on the general concern.

But gee, it sure would be nice to have someone around right about now who knew about the fallout of blood addiction. Someone who was (and this was just spit-balling, here) conveniently from the future, perfectly suited to deal with withdrawal, knew the symptoms and risks, and also happened to be (oh, let's say…) related to the poor kid suffering alone upstairs.

Too bad Bobby didn't have anyone like *that* around to help.

Damn Dean Winchester for leaving when he was needed most. For being just like his daddy when the exact opposite of John Winchester was what they needed most now. What Sam needed most. Have no doubt, Bobby would be having words with his oldest kid just as soon as Dean showed back up from whatever fool errand had run him away from his family and his brother's bedside.

-o-o-o-

The fever got worse. It became hard to discern reality from the dark and terrifying thoughts his brain supplied on a never-ending loop in his unfocused, chaotic mind.

He should never have asked Dean to kill him. That's why his older brother had abandoned him, that's why he was alone to face this pain and hurt and misery. He'd pushed Dean away, asked him to do the one thing he could just never do. Sam wasn't an idiot. He remembered, vividly, every time John had taken Dean to the side to reprimand him. To remind him what his job – his only job – was. Sometimes he would scream it right to Dean's face, the youngest Winchester standing on the wayside, wide-eyed and scared and unable to look away.

Take care of Sammy.

That was always what John Winchester told his son. They were

lectured on cleaning their guns, on running faster, on shooting straighter, on knowing more and acting quicker. They were grilled and berated and it had never stopped, even when their Dad was in a rare, good mood. But Dean only ever had one real job.

Take care of Sammy.

Sam could remember each time Dean had been yelled at, screamed at, reprimanded and brought down, all on his behalf. He knew how John had raised his older sibling. The disappointment in his eyes, and the anger and heartbreak in Dean's.

And now. Now, the last words Dad would ever say to him, the last thing Dean had heard, was an order to save or kill the one thing he'd formed his entire life around. The one thing John Winchester had raised him to never let happen. And Sam had looked him right in the eye and asked the same. He'd had no right to ask that. Less than no right, since he *knew* what it would do to his brother. He was worse than his dad, and he'd sworn to himself his entire life that he would *not* be John Winchester, even if it killed him.

In the morose and dark headspace, clouded with fever as withdrawal shook his frame and blood addiction screamed through his veins, Sam couldn't help but think this just might.

But Hell wouldn't let him go this way, would they? That was the whole point of asking Dean in the first place. The Colt was the only way either he or Dean would see an end to this. Even if he died here, they'd just bring him back.

Or Azazel would see to it that he got more blood in him first.

The sudden thought was so terrifying in its possibility that it damn near shocked him out of his fever-crazed, shivering state. The wards. He had to check the wards. The salt lines too. He had to make sure the demon could not get in this house. Could not bring more of that damn red hell with him.

God, he wanted it. He wanted it *so badly*.

He needed to warn Bobby. But he couldn't warn Bobby without admitting what was happening. And if he admitted what was happening, he was pretty sure the next thing out of his mouth would be to beg Bobby for what he so desperately needed. What his stomach was eating through itself for, what every bone in his body squeezed and ached for, what his muscles convulsed and clenched for until he

was sure they would break his own bones with their force.

No, he couldn't tell Bobby. He couldn't own this, not now, when he knew he couldn't control what would come after.

So instead he sat, fevered and paranoid, watching the shadows and seeing yellow eyes in every corner, blood seeping from under the beds and down the windowsills until he had to shut his eyes, cover himself in blankets like a frightened child, and whisper over and over again that they couldn't get in.

-o-o-o-

Bobby kept bringing glasses of juice for the kid, though it seemed fairly random when he'd drink them or not. Soup and OJ went back downstairs, hours after going cold and warm respectively. The kid sometimes managed to keep down the cranberry juice, so Bobby eventually stopped with the soup and just delivered a glass every couple hours. He left the crackers, hoping when Sam came out on the other side of this, he'd be able to stomach the bland substance.

Over the passing day and a half, Bobby gathered damn near every blanket in his house and piled 'em on top of the kid. He knew next to nothing about taking care of a sick kid – outside of the handful of times one of the boys had fallen ill while staying with him. Even then, though, Dean or Sam usually took over for the other like a well-oiled machine. Those boys hardly ever *needed* him around.

Still, that was no reason not to be there for them all the same. That's what family did. So he piled blankets onto the miserable, shaking, beanstalk of a man who looked more pathetic than a drenched, homeless kitten caught in the rain. Bobby had learned the hard way he had claws like a damn cat too. The kid got a couple real good hits in the first time he'd gotten too close trying to wake him from a fever dream.

It sucked balls having to listen to the kid toss and turn and cry out in his fever-fueled mind, but trying to wake him had been arguably worse, leaving the kid awake but in fear-soaked delirium. So Bobby left him be as much as possible. He checked on him every couple of hours, cycled through glasses of water and juices, and spent his off-duty hours reading everything he could find about demon blood and other, mundane addictions.

-o-o-o-

Sam wanted to die. Anything to end the pain racking his body. It was everywhere and it was inescapable. No position eased the fierce aching of his bones, the tense spasms and twitches of overused, undernourished muscles, the burning in his eyes and just behind them as well. His head pounded away a constant headache, his fingers cramped and throbbed from fisting the sheets, now soiled with sweat and sick.

He hadn't wanted to die before, that much was very, *very* crystal clear to him now. He had never realized how very much he did not want to die, until he was lying there in Bobby's spare room and all but begging for it. He'd never been in so much pain in his life.

It was right around his first thoughts of death that the hallucinations started.

-o-o-o-

The unrelenting puddle of blood crawled across the cabin floor, seeking him out. He couldn't move away – couldn't leave Dean. His muscles didn't work anyway. He had no bones in his body. All he could do was slump over his brother's unbreathing body and watch the blood encircle him. Creeping, growing, climbing, until he was swimming in it. Drowning in it.

There was Dean, in his arms, eyes a foggy blue, unseeing as a halo of red spread from the back of his head. Sam wanted to pull away. Blood leaked from his brother's forehead, gurgling out of a bullet hole straight through his head, right between those unseeing eyes. A bullet Sam had put there himself, Colt still hot and smoking in his hand, covered in the blood. He barely registered what he'd done, though. Once he smelled it, once he saw the red, he couldn't see anything else. Sam *wanted* that blood. He licked it right off the weapon that had murdered his brother.

That was the first time he threw up. It was hardly the last.

Dean, Dad, Jess. He saw them all, dead in his arms, crimson spilling from their bodies, soaking him. He swam in their blood and all the while his throat seared with dryness and he begged for an end to the thirst. An end that was soaking through his clothes, coating his skin, choking his resolve with terror and need. All he had to do was drink it.

John Winchester stood over him, eyes so full of disappointment that Sam broke down and sobbed at his feet. Begged him to understand,

that this wasn't his fault, that he didn't want any of it. But his dad had never been one to listen to him. Sam took to keeping his eyes squeezed shut whenever John showed up. That resulted in his father's deep voice filling Sam's head, relentless, never-ending, hounding. His voice was quiet. Calm. Even-tempered, as he rarely was, but so filled with disappointment that the boy cringed at every syllable. Each word condemned him for his father's death, hammered him into the floorboards for John's fate, for the pain he was suffering in Hell, surely, even now.

Sam sat, rocking against the wall that substituted a headboard, hands clamped over his ears and eyes shut against the ghost of his dead dad's accusations.

The torment was never-ending. He may as well have made the deal to save Dean himself, because this was a hell of his own making. Sam saw flashes and images too garbled together, too filled with panic and pain and fear, to tell apart. His mom, pinned to the ceiling, dreamily smiling down at him, so damn proud. Jess, suddenly beside her, the same grin stretched across her face even as blood dripped from her stomach. His brother, standing in front of him, terror in his eyes as Sam, wearing Lucifer like a sweet prom tux, held the Colt to his own head tauntingly. The sound of a gunshot, then he was falling. Falling, falling, falling, all the while wearing the devil, or was the devil wearing him? He hit rock bottom and arched his back away from the cold and the emptiness of the world. Azazel grinned down at him as he lay in the grave, stone walls stretching up, up, up. Too high to ever climb out of. He would never leave this place.

The demon extended his hand to fetch him, to bring him to his side, free him from the prison of his human body. His hand was coated red, dripping. The blood was hot and warm on Sam's face. Too close to his lips.

He screamed and screamed, fighting to get away, because even buried in Hell, in the cage, with no other way out, he refused to take that hand.

Through hours and hours of fevered hell, ever changing, ever terrible, Sam found himself in places he knew and others he didn't. Those he found comfort in were perverted by pain and fear. There was the panic room, the iron in the walls glowing red hot around him as he tossed in his sweat-soaked cocoon, trapped in the heat as he burned alive and boiled from the inside out. Dean and Bobby were trying to burn the demon out of him, but it wasn't going to work. He couldn't

take it, couldn't survive it. They were killing him.

He was in Jenny's house – their house – lit aflame and he, with no way out, calling to no one who could hear – no one who would answer – as the water evaporated from the very air around him, his throat parched and burning. His body burning. There was an old tomb, dark and cavernous and empty and cold. He remembered the cold, because it was so jarring from the fire and flames that it possibly hurt more. He begged for the heat back, the warmth of the sun, the touch of his family. Of anyone at all. He had never felt so alone. Alone but for the eyes in the darkness, green and bitter and mad and staring straight through him.

It was Max's apartment, with the kid flat on the ground, neck twisted around, vertebrae jutting up against purpling skin at unnatural, broken angles. He stared accusingly at Sam with clouded blue eyes that followed him despite the fact they never moved. Couldn't move. Max was very much dead.

His shack, his castle in Flagstaff, all his and only his, for two glorious weeks. Only Bones, his dog, was nowhere to be found. He wasn't coming back. Azazel had snapped his neck and left his body, forever alone, in the woods. Or had it been John?

Then he was awake, and that was maybe worse.

Sam saw the demon everywhere. The foot of his bed, where he'd stand for hours, never moving, just staring. Sometimes he was right beside him, looming over the edge of the mattress, knowing Sam was too weak to even roll away. The corner of the room with the worst of shadows that had always sent him scurrying beneath his covers as a child. The closet he and Dean stored their guns and duffels in every time they stayed at Bobby's for any length of time. His favorite seemed to be spread out across Dean's bed as a taunting reminder of his brother's absence and abandonment. Always, he boasted a smile that split his face in two, blood dripping from his yellowing teeth as he held aloft an offering of glass and crimson that had Sam reaching for the demon as often as it had him screaming at him to leave him be.

He'd smashed the first jar clear across the room, but that had left a wall painted in blood, dripping, crawling, *climbing*, and the smell of iron and need filled the room until Sam was gagging from it. After that, he let Azazel taunt him all he wanted with that jar, just so long as the blood stayed inside those glass walls.

It was when the fever dreams and delusions finally ended and Sam sat, shivering and sweating, stomach cramping from a hunger he knew he couldn't feed, legs shaking from the aches and pains of joints and bones, mind foolishly wishing for death just to end the sheer misery leaching into every inch of him, that he knew he would never touch a drop of demon blood again. He couldn't. Wouldn't be able to, for the sheer terrifying knowledge of what came afterward.

If he had to go through this again, Sam wouldn't survive. He knew that, as sure as he knew his own name. He would give in, beg for blood, do horrible things to get it, of that he had no doubt. Now, more than ever, he believed the future his brother had told him about.

When the fever finally broke and the young hunter managed to keep down more than just a glass of juice that he was fairly certain he'd only drank because it was *red*, he came through the other side with a terrifying mix of trepidation and resolve. They'd never have to worry about him drinking demon blood again. Not in this timeline.

Unfortunately, something told him Hell wasn't going to accept his stance on the subject.

-o-o-o-

As the second day passed and the crippling symptoms began to lessen, Sam found a certain level of clarity about his current situation. The ability to think clearly for the first time in forty-eight hours also graced him with a calm he hadn't felt in weeks, or possibly months now. He owed his brother an apology, that much he knew. (Dean owed him one, too, but that was no revelation and certainly not something he'd hold his breath for.)

He also didn't want to die, something Dean deserved to know and which he needed to affirm aloud. His brother had asked him for faith, something that could not have been easy for his hardened sibling, and Sam wouldn't let him down. Dad's death hurt; his last words hurt even more. But Dean wasn't Dad, and Sam knew that. Loved that.

The problem with the blood was a far more serious one. Flirting with death had been, for all intents and purposes, a last resort. It was something he shouldn't have brought up at all, mostly fueled by grief and fear. The blood, however…

The blood terrified him. He'd take dying over being turned into whatever he had been for the last forty-eight hours. He knew, had Azazel somehow showed up in that room with a supply, Sam wouldn't

be here now, back to rational thought and a growing determination to face this the right way. He'd have been at the beck and call of his mother's murderer, if only to stop the pain and feed his hollow veins. The thought was almost enough to empty his meager stomach contents all over again.

That was withdrawal after only a single dose, and he knew from guiding Brady through such withdrawals that this one had been thankfully *short*. His body's reliance on the drug had not been built up over time, and was more like an overdose than true withdrawal from a dependent substance. The troubling question he couldn't let go, though, was what would have happened to him if he had taken more.

Azazel had already gotten him to drink it once. He'd almost gotten him to do so again back in that cabin. Sam seriously doubted he'd be able to say no forever; the demon wasn't going to let him. Eventually, the yellow eyed bastard would find the right button to push, the right leverage that Sam wouldn't be able to fight.

But he could not allow himself to be turned into that craving, pathetic, bloodthirsty thing again. He wouldn't. And yet, it was very easy to see just how it was going to happen.

Either way, Dean had a point, and one Sam needed to get on board with. If he had the gall to tell Dean to hold on, by fingertips need be, then he could swallow his own words and do the same. He'd told Dean back in that cabin – compressing his chest every other second, blocking out the statics and facts condemning his brother to death in his head, desperately pleading to be wrong about each and every one so his brother would just *breath* – he'd told him that he couldn't do this alone. It was unfair to expect – to ask – Dean to do any different.

-o-o-o-

He made it downstairs towards the end of the second day. The sun was starting to sink in the sky, painting Bobby's den and kitchen with dusty, deep yellow light. There was something warming about it after spending forty-eight hours as a popsicle. Sam was still shaky and his joints felt creaky and fragile as he descended the stairs, but at least he was upright.

"Hell of a cold," Bobby commented with a lightness that immediately put Sam on edge as he settled into the kitchen chair across the table from the old hunter. "You feeling better?"

The young Winchester nodded wearily, head in his hand.

He *was* feeling better, but that didn't mean he could still hold his head up on his own just yet.

"You want I should forget to mention that little bought of flu when your brother gets here, or you think he ought to know he might come down with it too?"

Sam grimaced at the dry words. They were caring, in the kind of reprimanding way only Bobby ever managed to pull off with sincerity, but they stung all the same. While the hunter hadn't said anything at all, he'd also said more than was needed to for the intelligent kid to read between his lines.

"Doesn't matter," he mumbled in reply, not quite making eye contact. Some of that newfound calm started to flag under the daunting task of admitting his sins aloud. "I don't think Dean has to worry about catching *this*."

Bobby nodded and the silence that filled the room wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as Sam had expected. After a moment, the gruff man scratched at his beard, fed a hand beneath his cap and repositioned it on his head, then cleared his throat. "You're a good kid, Sam."

Sam snorted, and Bobby gave him a look.

"Dean thinks so, too. Down to that boy's core." It was Bobby's turn to snort. "Might not say it in the best words, but it's there."

The young Winchester sat, staring at his hands on the worn surface of the kitchen table, and contemplated his friend and father-figure's words. He could still remember that itch under his skin, even without thinking about the need hours ago that had left him mindless and pathetic.

Quietly, he admitted, "I don't feel *good*, Bobby."

"Well you are," Bobby insisted firmly, a solemn nod adding to the weight of his declaration. "Don't you let anyone, not even yourself, tell you any different, boy."

The sound of a foreign car turning into the dirt drive halted the rest of the conversation, but Sam figured there probably hadn't been much left to say anyway.

Chapter 40: Season 2: Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

-Chapter Warnings: The brothers are back together, but not all is well in the Singer House. Conversation, confrontation, and secrets are coming to a head. Sam's utterly done with it while Dean's still trying to figure out how to be done with it. An Bobby is Bobby. Awesome and supportive, with the occasional tough love smack to the back of a deserving head (better duck, Dean)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 7

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean entered the house with his bag of groceries and Plan C. His mood was greatly improved by pie and the overall feel-good-ness, which he couldn't exactly explain the existence of, but every time he started worrying about it, he somehow got distracted until the uncharacteristic hope pooling in his chest didn't seem all that important to dig into.

Despite the misdirection worthy of Copperfield himself, Dean was very much starting to suspect God had mucked around in his brain.

If that wasn't enough to dampen his determined mood (and dammit, it friggin *wasn't*, by the nature of the very misdirection he ought to be annoyed as hell about), than seeing his brother certainly was. At the first glimpse of Sam, standing in front of one of Bobby's many bookshelves, a selection of books already resting in the crook of his elbow, their last conversation came flooding back. What Sam had asked him to do. And along with it came the desperation and the cold and the damn despair.

Dean felt that bubble of warmth in his chest warble and flag under the weight of the memory. Damn it, he really needed answers about that, because it was getting *weird* now that he knew it was there. Worse, he was pretty sure he'd *gotten* answers, only he really couldn't be sure because as soon as he tried thinking about it, he *couldn't remember anymore*.

Friggin' God.

Ruthlessly, he took the dark little raincloud hovering over his head, formed by his brother and his fuzzy memory and the stupid warbling chest angel, and shoved it viciously to the side. They weren't out of this game yet. They had Plan C, for starters, and Dean wasn't gonna stop there. Even if God was the reason he had the stupid, fluttery, feel-good hope of hope-y-ness in his chest, it was something that finally felt good. And damn it, they hadn't had *good* in weeks.

He'd kick God's ass for it later. As soon as he found him again. Because… he had no idea where the guy was.

…*Jesus Christ*, where had Dean even *been* the last two days?

"Son of a bitch," the hunter audibly growled, finally tearing away from the frozen spot in the entrance to Bobby's study and heading straight through to the kitchen. He set the paper bag full of glass jars and pie down on the counter harder than he intended, though not harder than his current mood suggested. Sam, who'd already looked up from his research at his brother's entrance, moved into the kitchen at the loud noise and obvious tension filling the room. He brought with him a guilty look, which Dean spotted first, but quickly moved beyond to the dark circles, pale and sallow skin, and damp bangs.

His brother looked sick.

"You okay, Sammy?" Dean asked immediately, raincloud all but forgotten and chest-warmth sidelined in the face of his brother's slumped posture and finite trembling. Dread rapidly pooled in his gut as his mind easily supplied the most likely cause. "You're shaking."

Sam glanced down at his hand, fingers barely quivering now in comparison to twelve hours ago when he couldn't have even held his hand up, let alone kept it steady. "I'm, uh… I'm…"

He hesitated, stumbling over the words. Was he good? He clearly wasn't, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be. Couldn't be. He met his brother's concerned eyes. The trepidation he'd feared seeing was indeed there, blatantly on display, but in equal portions to the worry and fear born of love and, if he knew his brother as well as he thought, the guilt of leaving.

"I'm on the other side," he admitted quietly, giving Dean the confirmation that it was exactly what he was fearing. No point hiding it, and no desire to anyway, only shame. "I'm alright, Dean."

His older brother glanced down at his trembling fingertips, then back

to his face, and the regret there was so strong that Sam almost forgave him on the spot. He didn't, of course, not entirely. Dean had left and that still *hurt*. Not to mention his timing had sucked (understatement of the century), but Sam knew Dean hadn't realized what he was leaving his younger brother behind to face alone. Not entirely, at least.

How could he? Sam hadn't said anything out of shame, or anger, or grief, he didn't know. All of the above, probably, but it wasn't the point.

"I'm sorry," the young hunter blurted out, locking gazes with his older brother who looked about a second away from saying the same. Sam needed to say his piece first, before he waivered or let Dean apologize his way out of everything, including the portion of guilt that was Sam's to bear. "What I asked you to do. I never should have- You didn't deserve-"

Dean nodded heavily, saving Sammy from having to put it into words, despite his need to. "Sam, you don't have to-"

"I don't want to die." The confession was just as sudden as his apology, and the younger Winchester gulped slightly as the way his brother's jaw clacked shut and he stared, wide-eyed and slightly horrified, at him. "But I don't want to start the end of the world, either, Dean."

"You won't." Dean's voice was soft, haunted even. "I swear to you, Sam. We'll figure this out. We always do. Trust me."

Sam nodded, almost by rote, but his throat hurt and his eyes stung and he couldn't form the words to say he had his doubts, had his share of old wounds not yet scabbed over, probably had so many more coming and he had no idea how he would ever endure them all.

"And I'll trust you." Dean's gaze was honest and *so damn sorry* when Sam's eyes snapped up to his. "I told you it's not about that and- and maybe that wasn't fair. I do trust you, Sammy. More than anyone. It doesn't stop me wanting to protect you. Sometimes from everything."

In the silence between them, Sam struggled to form anything in return. He din't know what to say. What he wanted to say. What he should say. He didn't want to have the same argument they always had. He wanted to tell his brother he didn't need protecting (was that even true anymore?) and have Dean actually believe it. He wanted it to be true, to stop feeling the weight of the futility of it all.

"If you never let anything happen to me…" Without his brain's consent, he found his mouth forming the words of a distant memory that came faintly, but seemed right. Because his brain was busy thinking of a little fish with a gimp fin; a film he would never have wasted an evening on if Jess hadn't insisted, plopping down on the couch with a bag of popcorn and a scandalized expression when Sam told her he wasn't into to kid movies.

'*It's not a kids movie!*' she'd rebuked, mock offense painting her beautiful face. *'It's **Disney**. There's a **difference**, and I will no long associate with you if you do the lawyer thing on this.'*

'It's called a rebuttal.'

'You're a rebuttal. Now shut up, sit down, and watch the fishes.'

Sam cleared his throat and fought the water mounting in his eyes at the memory. God, he missed her. But he remembered that stupid little fish, whose father had tried to protect him from everything. That damn, adorable little clownfish who Sam had related to on a level he was not comfortable admitting. "Then *nothing* can ever happen to me."

Dean's brow was cinched together tightly, staring at his brother with heavy, dark eyes. "Did you…Did you just quote *Finding Nemo* at me?"

Sam rolled his eyes, ignoring his brother's indignation with as much sass as an ailing Bitchface could manage. Of course Dean would recognize the movie. There apparently wasn't a movie on the planet his brother *hadn't* seen and knew by heart. So instead, he translated; "Two Winchesters are better than one, but you've got to let me grow up."

Dean huffed, eyes darting over Sam's shoulder as Bobby approached from the study with his usual mix of both caution and fuck-it-this-is-my-house-you-idjits. The man from the future didn't fight the grin that spread across his face as their surrogate father joined them. "Throw in a Singer, and we're damn near unstoppable."

The old hunter glanced between the two boys, one raised eyebrow almost meeting the line of his cap. Sam sent a weak smile his way, but Bobby was confident it would strengthen with time. "Apocalypse don't stand a chance."

"Damn straight." Dean gave a resounding nod, then turned back to his bag of groceries and started pulling out a cardboard box that smelled suspiciously like pie – what else – and jars of ground herbs, dried

leaves, and other assortments. "I got pie!"

And just like that, they were all almost okay again.

"And not much else edible," Sam chimed in, picking up jar after jar as Dean dug them out of the paper bag and set them aside.

His brother sent him a truly scandalized look. "Why would you need anything else when you have pie?"

Sam rolled his eyes again, setting one of the mystery jars down and looking at the growing collection coming out of the pretty full paper bag. "What's all this for?"

"Uh…" Dean balked for just a second, the hesitation and damn near panic perfectly clear on his face. His brain stuttered a minute.

This was Plan C. Plan C was awesome. Sam would love Plan C. Only problem was, he didn't actually know where the idea for Plan C had come from, other than to literally appear in the passenger seat beside him. Oh, sure, he remembered shopping for every one of those items in that bag – he'd apparently gone to three different stores to find it all. Only problem was, *he was also very much sure he hadn't done any of that at all.* And despite the little warble of joy bouncing around in his chest right now, Dean was also pretty damn sure this *wasn't his plan*.

He cleared his throat. "That's for summoning an angel."

Sam almost dropped the jar of white, soft petals he had just picked up. They looked kind of like jasmine. He stared at his brother, wide-eyed. "What?"

Dean shrugged self-consciously, all that confidence and warm, chest-gooyeness suddenly nowhere to be found. *Thanks, Sternum-Cas.* He set the pie to the side for later, and faced Sam and Bobby with as squared shoulders as he could manage and absolute uncertainty in everything else.

"We're gonna summon Cas."

His younger brother floundered only for a moment. It was long enough for Dean to wonder if maybe he should have snuck off to some abandoned barn to do this by himself like he originally wanted to (*did he?).* Maybe drag Bobby along just to keep Time and her 'some things should stay the same' crap happy (*Crap, was that a thing he needed to worry about?) (God damnit, God!*).But when Sam finally stuttered out a

response, it had absolutely nothing to do with summoning an angel at all.

"I- I thought that's who you went to see."

Bobby was ping-ponging between the two like a referee at a tennis match.

"Oh." Dean cleared his throat, blatantly ignored the wide-eyed, expectant, and dangerously-close-to-a-lecture look coming from his surrogate father, and awkwardly addressed his brother instead. "Uh, no, that was…someone else. Total bust too. This is Plan C!"

He gestured to the ingredients spread out around them on the kitchen table. Very Vanna White. Even had the smile and everything. That made Bobby Trebek, and Sam the nerdy college contestant who was gonna blow all that money on the final question.

Dean needed to start watching less television. He'd learned a long time ago that nothing good ever happened when his sense of humor started paralleling Gabriel's.

"Dean, who did you go see?" Sam was staring at him hard now, expectation and no small amount of concern seeping from every inch of his body. Bobby looked to be about the same. "Where were you for the last two days?"

"Funny you should ask that…" Dean trailed off as he rubbed the back of his head. He'd told Sam no more lies, and they'd just now had some sort of awkward, brotherly, I'll-trust-you-if-you-trust-me truce. But Dean wasn't about to tell him he didn't *actually* know where he'd gone. Or come back from. Or what he'd spent two days doing.

Friggin' God, man!

"Dean." Sam's posture was rigid, his brow straight and heavy, forehead dangerously smooth. "Who. Did you. Go see."

"Look, before you two get on my case about this..." The hunter cleared his throat. So much for being almost all okay again. This was gonna be the shortest turnaround ever in the history of the Winchester brothers, and that was saying something. "I didn't want you to meet the guy because I was protecting-"

"Do not tell me you were protecting me!" Sam barked, cutting him off with a stormy expression. "Damn it, Dean! When are you going to stop

pulling this crap? I'm not some innocent kid!"

"It's not about that," Dean argued back, running a hand roughly across his scalp as he struggled, once more, to put his reasoning (perfectly valid reasoning, thank you very much) into words that didn't make him sound like a total ass. "You're right, you don't need protection. I wasn't protecting you *that way*. I was trying to protect…*you*."

He gestured emphatically at his little brother, whose face was screwed up in the Ultimate Bitchface (unworthy of numbering, for it was *Ultimate*). Dean sighed, aggravated. "I know you're not some damsel in distress, Sam. That's not- this wasn't-"

It was clear from the look Sam and Bobby exchanged that he was failing spectacularly at this, and they had no clue what he was trying to get at.

"You're good."

Sam blinked at his brother's words, echoes of Bobby's own less than half an hour before; his adamant assurance that Dean thought the same, though neither believed they'd hear it from him. Not directly, at least. Dean didn't do direct.

"You're not like me, alright? You're *good.* You believe in God and angels and people actually being halfway decent. You have faith; I know you pray, and believe in the whole 'Plan' thing, despite our crap lives and every shitty thing that's happened to us. You'll always think God's up there, listening. That he gives a damn. The apocalypse doesn't really change that, Sammy." Dean's shoulders sagged, words winding down as he admitted, awkwardly, "I didn't want to ruin that."

Bobby and Sam both stared at him as they slowly realized that, somewhere in there, he'd admitted to who he'd gone to see. The wheels were obviously turning as they worked through the older Winchester's jumble of words for the underlying meaning. As they each got through it, Dean watched with building anxiety as their eyes widened and they checked in with each other, a clear 'he's not saying what I think he said, right?' on both their faces. Of course, it happened in slow-motion for Dean, but for everyone else it was scant seconds. Sam and Bobby were both veritable geniuses, and this wasn't exactly a Mensa puzzle they were solving.

"Dean, are you saying…"

Bobby picked up where Sam trailed off, "You went and had a chat

with *God*?"

All Dean could do was shrug one shoulder awkwardly. Again. Sam practically choked. Bobby, at least, covered his equally negative reaction with a snort.

"You know… You know *God?*" Sam asked somewhat weakly once he'd recovered. At the same time, Bobby crossed the two feet of distance between them to smack Dean on the back of the head.

The hunter, halfway to opening his mouth to say '*well, before yesterday I did,'* yelped like a chastised child. "Jeez, what was that for, Bobby?"

"I don't s'pose you have any clue what a dumbass move that was?" Bobby's tone was certainly reprimanding, and Dean had the decency to not quite meet his gaze. "Sam said you weren't doing anything dangerous. Kinda got the feeling *yelling* at God qualifies as dangerous, ya idjit! It's damn stupid, at the very least."

"It doesn't matter," he dismissed offhandedly, rubbing the back of his stinging head with a glare. "He wasn't going to do anything. He's not interesting in 'interfering.' He's not interested in anything."

No need to mention the fact that he was pretty sure God had altered at least some of his memories, which was *something*. Something entirely unhelpful, that was. But it definitely wasn't information at all necessary for this discussion. Not at all. It would probably get him another smack to the head. All the more reason not to bring it up.

"You already knew that, though," Sam realized softly, staring at his brother with something eternally sad etched across his face. Dean mistook it for the loss of faith he'd been so weary of causing and his shoulders slumped further in the face of all but shattering the last of his brother's innocence.

"I'm sorry, Sammy," he mumbled.

But Dean had misunderstood his brother's reaction, and Sam was already shaking his head, expression smoothing out into discontent blankness.

"That's your faith. Not mine."

Dean blinked at the suddenly dark tone. It was nothing compared to some of the fights they'd had or some of the times he'd truly ticked his brother off, but it was still pretty up there on the scale of Pissed Off

Younger Brother.

The older Winchester's confusion must have been evident, because Sam continued, "You're talking about your lack of faith like it's mine. Like God not living up to *your* expectations cancels out what I believe. Your faith doesn't define mine, Dean."

"It's not about faith," his brother immediately argued back, brow furled like he didn't have a clue in the world what Sam was so upset about. "I've met him. He's a douchebag. A deadbeat who doesn't give a crap about any of his so-called 'kids.'"

The taller man shook his head, ignoring his brother's finger quotes and growing annoyance with him. "Even if that's true, that's not how *faith* works. God, this is your problem! This is why you don't trust me, Dean, even when you think you actually do!"

Now Dean was getting riled up as well, anger beginning to buzz in the back of his skull at the attack coming out of nowhere, at least from his perspective. "What the hell, Sam. How is this about me?"

"Because you already told me God was a deadbeat and angels were dicks. And you *just* said it doesn't change me, that the apocalypse doesn't change what I believe. And yet you kept me away under some pretense of protecting my, what, my faith? Faith you don't even believe in. And I don't mean faith in God; I mean *me*, Dean. You don't believe in my faith in myself, let alone have any faith in me yourself."

Sam tossed his head side to side, a disbelieving huff passing through pursed lips. "That's such bullshit, man! You can't keep making calls for me like that."

Truly baffled, Dean threw his arms forcefully out to the sides. How the hell had they circled back to *this* again!

"It doesn't matter if God's a deadbeat," Sam responded to the non-verbal (and pissy) question. "It doesn't matter if seeing Him would have destroyed my faith or anything else. You didn't give me the chance to find that out on my own. You decided it would, and that's that. Choice made! That's not protection, it's control, Dean. And you have to stop it, right now. I'm not kidding."

Something clicked that never had before, and Dean's arms fell like cement weights to his sides. He stared at his brother, bits and pieces of so many arguments they'd had through the years coming back now, some in a much clearer light. It wasn't a lightbulb above his head or a

lighting strike of epiphany, but for Dean Winchester it was damn close.

"You say you trust me, that you know I can take care of myself, but you don't *let* me." Sam's shoulders sagged slightly, the wind in his sails beginning to falter as his anger lost steam, leaving just the overwhelming sadness that he'd felt at the start of it all. He'd yet to see the way Dean was staring at him as anything other than the continued disconnect the brothers had had for years on this subject. The disconnect Sam was fairly certain they'd always have, so long as they could survive it, and he didn't know how long they could. "I need to call my own shots, make my own decisions. I can't do this any other way, Dean. Not with what's coming."

Dean could only keep staring. Sam's expression was so damn disappointed and resigned, like he'd had this argument a hundred times and already knew it would change nothing, even if his anger remained and his feelings were justified. Dean struggled to keep that gaze; it hurt something deep inside him and yeah, okay, maybe they'd had this argument a dozen times, but for some reason, either Dean was actually listening or he'd finally heard the words enough to learn their meaning.

The room was heavy as silence settled between the three of them. This wasn't Bobby's fight, of course, and he'd managed a step or two back from the boys to have it out. He was family, though, and it was testament to that that neither Sam nor Dean felt his presence as awkward or intruding on this very personal, charged conversation.

Sam heaved a final, exhausted breath. "We have an impossible task ahead of us, and I can't do it alone. I don't *want* to. But your way or the- no, just your way, no highway option, isn't going to work. We do this, it has to be together, Dean. As equals."

Dean huffed, crossing his arms loosely over his chest, far less defensively than the others were probably expecting. "Robin and Batman, not Batman and Robin, huh?"

Sam didn't laugh right away, like Dean had kind of hoped but ultimately knew wasn't likely. He just stared, eyes bordering on further frustration. Finally, he hung his head. With an exasperated headshake and matching sigh, looked back up and tried not to smile that exhausted smile of a younger brother who constantly had to be the more grown up one.

"Partners. Brothers. Not older and younger, not hero and sidekick."

Scrunching up his face, Dean gave almost a comical impression of thinking before nodding in acquiescence. "Dynamic duo. Team Free Will."

It was Dean's (only) way of breaking the harsh tension of a serious conversation without dismissing it. This was Sam's older brother saying 'I hear you' in the only language he knew.

Still, the man cleared his throat. His expression tried for serious and landed shy of it, somewhere around sheepish. "You know, I'm damn near forty, and that's one thing I'm still total crap at."

He chanced a glance at his brother, rubbing the back of his neck. Something in Sam's eye must have triggered a change, though. His green gaze turned somber and he dropped his hand. "I'll try. I swear, Sammy. I'll give it my best."

It took a moment of Sam's challenging stare, before the younger relented an nodded solemnly in the end, accepting the concession. The look in his Dean's eye was enough to convince him he was taking this seriously, and he may finally understand what his brother had spent years trying to communicate.

Off to their side, Bobby let out an audible breath of air and it made the younger Winchester chuckle. Before he knew it, it was a full laugh. Dean cast him a suspicious look, but Sam just shook his head with the first real smile he'd felt in weeks. "Dude. You're *old*."

So maybe he was letting the tension in the room slide away in no more mature a manner than Dean had tried. And maybe he was accepting the easy-out. But it was worth it to see the way his older brother's face screwed up into something appalled and offended, and he twisted his body like he was going to leave, only he had nowhere to go.

"Shaddup," he settled on, making a beeline for the fridge instead, all the while grumbling, "I'm not old. You're old. Your *face* is old. Shut up."

-o-o-o-

"So," Bobby began conversationally a handful of minutes later as the three men sat around the kitchen, beers in hand. The gruff man shot a look towards the various supplies spread across his kitchen table, a

couple still on the counter by the sink. His tone may have been conversational, but the scant glance was anything but. "We gonna summon an angel, or what?"

Dean swallowed his beer a little more forcefully then he would have preferred, trying to cover up the choking cough with an ill-disguised throat clearing. "We probably shouldn't tonight. It's getting late."

The look he sent the scattered jars of herbs, flowers, and powders was nothing short of longing, Sam thought. Or, it would have been, if Sam knew he wouldn't get his ass kicked just for thinking something like that. More worrying, however, was the hesitation there. His brother was a gung-ho, go-getter. Fly by the seat of your pants, plans are for sissies. He didn't do hesitation, not when it came to action, especially not when he already had a plan (labeled and everything)

But the way his eyes met theirs, a little too quickly before dropping back to his beer, told both Sam and Bobby that he was about to give some crap reason to put it off.

"We should wait till the Impala's fixed up."

Bobby harrumphed and Sam stared on, brow pinched in concern. He shifted in his chair. "Why? Why wait?"

His older brother looked really uncomfortable for a moment, wiggling in his chair and completely oblivious to the blatant tell. Truth was, Dean needed time to think. Hell, he didn't even know if summoning Cas was his idea or God's. If it was God's, why the hell did he wipe his memory of it? Why not just friggin' tell him like a normal person!

Because he was friggin God: the kid with an ant farm.

"Cuz it's not as simple as just waving a magic wand and poof, Cas!" he grumbled into his beer before taking a long swig to put off the topic for another moment more. "We can't do it here, for starters. We'll have to find a safer place."

"Safer?" Sam blinked, surprise warring with immediate worry at the implication of those words. Why, exactly, did they need to be safe from a potential ally and friend?

"Than this house?" Bobby balked, almost at the same time. The hesitation that had been painted across the man's features tripled. Maybe even quadrupled. "Why in hell's name do we need something safer than my home?"

The forceful gesture he aimed at the walls around them was, in no way, exaggerated. Bobby Singer's house was one of the safest places from supernatural forces on the planet. If they needed something more, what on Earth were they talking about summoning?

"Uh…." Dean neglected to answer, instead he started digging into his jeans' pocket for his phone. "That reminds me, we'll need to grab one more thing."

It hadn't been in with the rest of the supplies. Another oddity, since Dean very clearly stopping at all those different stores for the various ingredients. Well, maybe not *very* clearly. Okay. Maybe not clearly at all. Kinda foggy around the edges actually… Whatever. Point was, he was pretty sure this wasn't one he would have forgotten.

Just another sign that God had mucked around in his brain, something he really wanted to be more furious about than he currently was. Hell, he'd settle for angry. But he couldn't seem to stay on topic long enough to really care.

Mother. Friggin. Gods.

Scrolling through his contacts, he ignored the curious looks his father figure and brother were sending his – and each other's – way. The phone started dialing and Dean raised it to his ear.

"Hey, Pastor Jim!" he greeted with a fond smile when the line picked up. There was something awesome about talking to the guy he'd spent his fair share of weekends with growing up and who hadn't been gutted by a demon bitch this time around. It wormed its way into his chest, not so different from that warm confidence and, dare he say, hope that he'd felt earlier. "You wouldn't happen to know where I could get my hands on some holy oil, would you?"

Chapter 41: Season 2: Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Quality Warning: I wrote this chapter four weeks ago and two friggin' days ago I found a crap ton of notes for it. And I just haaaaad to go back and work it all in because darn it, it was decent stuff. Which just kept making it *longer* Gaaaaaaaaah. So, uh, anyway, the editing on this is kinda shoddy, little hobbled together, and entirely last minute.

Chapter Warnings: No actual chapter warnings (whoo-hoo, break from the total angst fest!)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 8

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Jim Murphy had not only known where they could find some holy oil, he happened to have a supply of his own, as it turned out. Not *his*, per say. It belonged to the church, but he was sure they would not miss it, given he believed whatever task the boys needed it for would be for the betterment of the world.

Sort of, Dean supposed. It would be if Plan C went according to, well, plan.

They spent the first day after Dean returned by climbing into Bobby's old junker truck and driving to Blue Earth, Minnesota. At first, Dean had insisted on fixing up the Impala for the drive. Sam balked – there was no reason not to take the Pinto or delay their tip to the good father by days. Only after hour two of Dean's grumbling and bitching about the miserable excuse of a stolen car, not to mention the fact they'd have to hotwire it every time they got it started (*'that'll be real subtle, Sammy. Won't scream 'I stole this!' at all.')*, did Sam cave and send pleading puppy-dog eyes Bobby's way. The gruff hunter tossed the kid his keys and told them, in no uncertain terms, to get out and best be gone for *at least* eight hours. He was too old for this crap.

Jim's church was only a couple hours away from the salvage yard, so the boys spent most of the day catching up with the older pastor, who had been a friend and mentor of theirs since Sammy was still in

diapers. Dean just kept letting that niggling warmth in his chest glow all happy behind his sternum, ignoring the oddity of it and, what he suspected, was some serious brainwashing on God's behalf.

He'd be so mad about that if it wasn't so damn good to feel hopeful. And if he could, you know, focus on the problem for more than the three seconds it took his brainwashed-mind to jump ship. He was worse than a dog with a squirrel. He was a friggin' goldfish.

Bobby happily stayed back at the house for their little errand. Not only did he not want to be the third body crammed in the truck's relatively small cab, but he needed a break from his boys. Parenting sucked some days. Not that he didn't secretly love it.

Originally he'd offered to go out in search of this 'safer location' Dean was insisting on. But the older Winchester shot him down, adamantly insisting he needed to be there for the search. A search which, according to him, wouldn't be right without the Impala. Figuring it was just another one of those weird, I'm-From-The-Future quirks, Bobby backed off and agreed to dig around for a summoning spell that would fit both the deed. The time traveler didn't argue, despite knowing the spell by heart already.

After most of a day spent catching up with the pastor, the boys turned the old junker back towards Sioux Falls. The ride back to Bobby's was amiable, both men's spirits lifted by their friend and old babysitter. Sam had a feeling from the way Dean greeted the pastor that maybe things hadn't gone so well for him the first time around. He'd nudged his brother for more information as soon as Jim left the nave to fetch a container of holy oil he'd left in his office, but Dean just shut down and muttered, darkly, a single word: Meg.

Sam hadn't asked any further. He could picture how that worked out for Jim, and it wasn't a picture he liked. If he hugged the pastor a little harder on their departure, neither his brother nor Jim said a thing. Now back in their borrowed vehicle, the mood optimistic in a way only the good father could ever foster, Sam asked the question that had bothering him since the previous night.

"Why are you stalling on summoning Cas?"

Dean usually charged head first into things, especially things that were hasty and dangerous. The fact he was hesitating, that he wanted time to *think* it through, was disconcerting to the younger Winchester. Sam wasn't sure whether to be concerned or amused. Certainly

confused.

His brother's answer of "I'm not" were followed so quickly by a cleared throat and the confession of "Okay, I am," that it might as well have all been one word. Sam raised his eyebrows and waited for his fidgeting brother to continue.

"We *just* lost dad, alright?" Dean bit out, and while Sam winced, he forced aside any other reaction. He'd been expecting this, actually. Angry, bitter, blaming Dean was familiar. Truthful Dean was someone he actually trusted less. He was harder to read, ironically. "Can't we have a *week* to recover from the latest shit show that is our lives, before jumping head first into the next thing?"

Sam chewed on his lip to keep from speaking too soon, rising to the bait like his brother wanted him to. He did his best to keep the pitying look off his face, knowing Dean would only grow more furious if he saw it, especially when he realized he wasn't pulling any wool over Sammy's eyes, not this time. Instead, the younger man counted to ten several times over – a trick he'd been trying to get Dean to pick up with little success before taking off for Stanford – then countered softly, "Of course we can. I think it's a great idea. But that's not what this is about, is it?"

Silence reigned, and Sam let it. He knew his brother. Silence would ultimately be his undoing.

Sure enough, Dean cleared his throat again less than a minute later. "Look…Cas is kind of a big deal, alright? We can't do this without him, so we can't fuck it up. Right now, we're off our footing. *I'm* off my footing."

While Sam was suspicious about his brother's promise to come clean – alright, perhaps not suspicious. Apprehensive? – he was also fairly certain this was exactly that. Dean actually coming clean, in the most Dean way possible.

"Are you…." Sam blinked at his brother, then shifted in his seat to stare more head on at his brother, who refused to take his eyes off the road. "Are you *nervous*?"

"Yes, I am!" His older brother's quick exclamation actually startled the young Winchester, who had fully expected the version of Dean who was full of bluster and puffed his chest out in the face of fear. "You should be too! No- wait, damn it, don't be nervous."

Dean gave an aggravated noise deep in the back of his throat and hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. The man from the future was trying to give himself a seizure between the glances towards his brother, than the road, than his brother, then shaking his head and finally looking like he wanted to facepalm into a friggin' wall.

Sam stared at him for a moment, something between worry and deep, loving endearment filling his gut and chest. This wasn't the type of nervous born of fear. He knew what that looked like, rare as it was in his brother. There might be a little of that in his brother right now, but it wasn't what had Dean so damn out of sorts. This was more like the jitters - like asking a girl out. Only, well, no, not *Dean* asking a girl out. There wasn't anything Dean was more confident about, other than hunting of course. More like his brother preparing to meet an idol. Steven Tyler or Brian Johnson, maybe. His brother would be this freaked out right before meeting one of those guys.

Except for that flicker of uncertainly that kept flashing across his face before he clamped down on it *hard*. Like he'd clamped down on his future-self back in dreamland. Sam could almost see the mask slamming down in place.

"Dean, what's going on?"

His brother closed troubled green eyes for a moment – only a moment, he was driving after all – before he forcibly swallowed whatever had him so tongue-tied. His fingers wrung the length of the steering wheel, missing Baby's smooth leather and comforting grip. Finally, he licked his lips and opened his mouth, "Cas didn't start out on our side, okay? It took a *lot* of convincing and some damn bad stuff happening in between for him to realize *we* were the right side."

"And…without all that happening?" Sam asked cautiously because that was *exactly* what they were about to do.

"I don't know," Dean breathed out. He was rubbing at his chest distractedly. Sam didn't think he was aware of it. "I think I can talk him into it."

The younger hunter didn't want to point out that this didn't really seem like a good situation to only *think* and not *know*. "If you can't, what happens?"

His brother winced, rapping his knuckles against the steering wheel in a nervous gesture. "Best case? He sends me back to my time."

"That's- *Best*-" Sam practically choked, but he swallowed back the immediate fear and looked away. He wasn't going to confess how much that possibility scared him. How much that had been scaring him since he realized the implications of his brother going off to scream at *God*. It hadn't taken much for his never-silent brain to supply that little tidbit, and Sam was ashamed of the all-gripping panic that had encased him at the thought of doing this alone.

Sam's throat closed up on him again and he cleared it harshly, refusing to let that terror show. Dean wouldn't let it show.

Without his brother though…. He couldn't do this. Bobby knew the truth and what was coming, so he wouldn't entirely be alone. But he knew they didn't stand a chance without Dean. Neither of them knew enough, and despite growing attempts, Dean had not prepared either of them to face the full extent of what was coming without him.

Turned out, Dean wasn't the only co-dependent Winchester brother in this story.

"Uh…wh-what exactly is the *worst* case here?"

His brother was silent for long enough that Sam was now officially on Team-Stall-Summoning-Cas. He was, in fact, thinking maybe they should rethink this entire plan, after all.

"He reports it to Heaven," Dean finally supplied, "and we're all screwed. They'll break the timeline, we'll lose our one advantage in this, and most likely? Zachariah will hand deliver you to Azazel and probably keep me under house arrest until it's time for the big showdown."

And without Cas on their side, they wouldn't stand a chance against any of that.

Sam breathed out…something. He wasn't even sure what it was – it certainly wasn't something *nice* – but his brother nodded along with it in agreeance.

"Yeah, so, you know," Dean swallowed a little thickly, eyes still on the road and Sam could hear the avoidance in his voice. It was ridiculous that *this* was somehow more dangerous than hunting God down for a personal scream fest. "Maybe don't give me crap for thinking this through a bit more than usual."

"No, yeah, uh…" Sam stuttered out, nodding his head way too damn

much, way too damn fast. He was still processing – shell shocked – and incapable of much more as he sat, numb, and watched the world pass them by. "Take your time."

Silence filled the car for several miles as Sam worked through the last thing he'd been expecting. What had he expected? Sam's thoughts flashed back to Missouri Moseley, her deep voice and soothing words trying to hush down his brother's fear of a man with black hair and blue eyes. That day back in Kansas, Sam assumed the man was Cas and his brother's fear came from the demonic presence holding something dangerous and costly over his brother's head. Later, he assumed it was the price Dean paid for the Colt.

Then came Dean's confession that Castiel was an angel, and Sam thought, maybe he wasn't the man with blue eyes. He'd all but written the idea off once Dean confirmed Cas as their best friend and ally. He couldn't have been the blue eyed man, then. Dean wouldn't be afraid of his best friend. Even with Sam's doubts that Castiel was some magic guardian angel conveniently arrived on his brother's behalf, he still trusted Dean enough to know when to be suspicious and when not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Now? Sam found himself rethinking everything, with little conclusion or comfort in any of those thoughts. Was Dean afraid of the angel? He'd stressed, heavily, just how dickish the species could be ('*no better than demons*,' had been his words, *'cept for Cas, of course*.') If this angel hadn't started out on their side…

Honestly, Sam was struggling with the concept of Dean befriending something so wholly inhuman. He understood the brother that sat beside him was not the same that he'd known his whole life. Things changed – would change. Still, it was difficult to accept the augmented reality without proof. Now? Dean was telling him they were best friends with an angel that had started out as an enemy, and one worth being afraid of?

Sam didn't know what to think.

"Dean, what does Cas look like?"

His brother shot him a questioning look, eyebrows raised. It was clearly not the question or response he had been expecting. "A wave of celestial intent the size of the Chrysler building?"

Sam choked again, eyes the size of saucers. He had no clue if Dean was joking.

"Don't ask me, I never saw it," he supplied with a shrug. "Here on Earth he looks like an IRS agent. Tan trench coat, suit, tie: the whole deal."

Sam waited for more, but Dean didn't seem to be catching on to what he really wanted. "Hair color, eye color?"

His brother shot him another weird look. "Black. Blue. He's a little shorter than me. Maybe six foot. You want his weight and zodiac sign next, Sam?"

Sam didn't bother returning the snark. That was exactly what Missouri had described, but it didn't make any sense. Why, *why* would Dean be afraid of the person he claimed was their best friend? The one he hadn't planned on summoning way back then, so he had no reason to fear his interference…right?

The younger Winchester bit back the thought that saying something might be a bad idea, and instead asked Dean straight up, explaining what Missouri Mosely had seen and said. Dean's grip on the steering wheel tightened again, wringing at the leather, but he didn't shut down like Sam expected him to.

"I figured," he muttered, recalling how Bobby had mysteriously known Cas's features. "Damn meddling psychics."

"Why were you afraid of him?" Sam asked again, desperately needing the last piece of this puzzle, but also weary of the answer. They could really use a win right now, that's what Dean would say, and Sam couldn't deny it. His brother had started out so excited to summon Castiel, and now Sam was starting to wonder just where that excitement was coming from, since everything about this venture sounded dangerous and borderline suicidal.

"At the end-" Dean cut himself off sharply, emotion thick in his throat even as he cleared it. "Before he sent me back, Cas wasn't himself. Not fully."

Sam's brow cinched together. "What do you mean?"

"He was possessed," Dean replied, and Sam could only blink, a thousand questions springing to mind but his mouth unable to form any of them fast enough. How could an *angel* get possessed? "The details don't matter. That's what Missouri must have picked up on."

The man from the future shut his eyes against that wicked smile

spread across his friend's face as Cas turned on Dean, head dipping, blue eyes staring up at the hunter from beneath long eyelashes. Dean knew in that moment that his best friend was about to kill him, with his bare hands, *slowly*. The look had been demented; the whole thing terrified Dean in a way very few things ever had. It was a moment his brain refused to forget, despite his best attempts.

So, yeah, little surprise Missouri picked up on that. Seeing his mom's ghost burn up on the ceiling the same day probably hadn't helped that whole mental control thing, either.

"We got nothing to fear from Cas," Dean supplied, clearing his throat again and shoving away those memories, old and new. "Unless he decides not to listen to us."

He shot his brother a sheepish smile that went absolutely nowhere in comforting Sam.

"Are you sure we should summon him?" Despite his own growing concerns, Sam tried not to sound as worried as he was, aiming to be a support pillar and not a sledge hammer taking down whatever flimsy structure was still standing in his brother's head after almost seven months of time travel. "Maybe we should wait."

"No, we're gonna need him," Dean answered evenly enough that Sam could tell he'd already this argument several times with himself. He started rubbing at his chest again. "And I need answers. We've barely got a clue what we're doing, Sammy. We need someone who knows more."

The younger Winchester was quiet, back to staring at the passing scenery before he answered, softly, "…Okay."

-o-o-o-

"This is it?"

Sam winced at his brother's exclamation. The two stood in front of the wreck that was the Impala, or at least what was left of her. The entire side and rear of the car was totaled, crunched in like a candy wrapper. The right passenger door and trunk had taken the brunt of it. Honestly, Sam was kind of impressed Dean had survived, unbuckled and injured in the backseat as he was.

Thank God they'd put him in with his head on the other side of the car.

"Man, you had me worried," Dean continued, voice sounding way more optimistic than it had any right to be when staring down the annihilation of literally his favorite object on the planet. Sam stared at him with disbelieving eyes. "This isn't so bad. Way better than last time."

"Wait, really?" The younger of the two scrunched up his face, glancing back and forth between his recently demonically-healed brother and the car that had put him in a coma. How could the damage have been *worse*?

"Oh yeah," the man from the future nodded, eyes alight with some twisted sense of excitement. "This'll take way less time. Look, the truck hit the back passenger side." He pointed to the damage like Sam was supposed to see something specific, and not an almost entirely wrecked car overall (which is exactly what he saw because, overall, the poor thing was *wrecked*.) "Last time it T-boned the front seat dead on, completely totaled the engine. Had to build her from scratch. But look at her!"

Dean threw his arms wide, an enormous grin stretched across his face.

"The frames busted, yeah, but I bet her engine's just fine." He let his arms fall back to his hips, expression sobering ever so slightly. "We'll disassemble it, of course; check each piece. A blow like that probably rattled her. Besides, it'll be good practice for you; learn how she runs. Then maybe you'll finally pick up chicks like your awesome big brother."

Sam choked on the laugh that came, unbidden. He'd expected Dean to be pissed. At best, morose for his poor baby. But apparently, this was an improvement over the previous time. Not that Sam could see anything particularly optimistic in the twisted metal, other than the fact that they'd walked away.

Well. Most of them.

Despite the sobering thought, he couldn't help the scoff that tugged at the back of his throat and he rolled his eyes just because he could. Leave it Dean to be the man from the future he barely recognized one minute, only to jump back to being seventeen years old again. That Dean Sam knew only too well.

He held his hand out for the crowbar. "Whatever. Just tell me what you want me to do, jerk."

Dean grinned, slapping the tool into his brother's outstretched palm with a satisfying weight, over-enunciating the first letter as he replied with, "Bitch."

-o-o-o-

Sam was on bolts duty while Dean properly assessed where his Baby stood: what was salvageable and what was fodder for the scrapyard. They were only an hour or two in before Sam started flagging. The sun wasn't high in the sky yet, given the mid-morning hour, but the temperature was rising, particularly in the yard, where there was no shade and nothing but reflective, heating metal and bright dirt to shine the sun back on them from every angle. It took a while for Dean to notice, no doubt because Sam hid it as long as he could. Soon enough, though, the sweat dripping down his face, skin a couple shades too white, and the tremble in his limbs were no longer concealable.

"Let's take a break," Dean announced after a moment of watching his brother struggle with his relatively easy task of loosening anything he could get a tool around: nuts, bolts, screws, the like.

Sam huffed in response, clearly annoyed with his body not being able to handle even the simplest of physical labor, and even more so with Dean for bringing it up. "I'm fine. We have work to do."

Dean took a couple steps back from the car. He hadn't really dug into his poor, sweet baby yet, though he'd just about been ready to start doling out the more complicated tasks that came with deconstructing a totaled vehicle. Still, this wasn't just about fixing up the Impala, so he made his way over to the cooler, popping the lid and digging inside the ice. He tossed a water bottle to his brother, who nearly fumbled the catch and frowned at his shaking hand.

"Car's not going anywhere," the older of the two joked, uncapping his own bottle and taking a long swig. "There's no rush, either. We got plenty to do, but plenty of time to do it."

Sam glared down at the water, but his throat was aching with thirst and the sickness he was still shaking off. So he cracked the lid and took a seat on the cooler. After he'd drank no less than two thirds of the bottle, he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, closed his eyes against the bright, warming sunshine, and had to admit that sitting down felt immensely better on his still aching joints and muscles.

When he opened his eyes several peaceful minutes later, Dean was staring at him with so much guilt that Sam found himself grunting, "I'm fine, Dean."

"I know you are," came the immediate response. The words were steady and serious, and Sam squinted over at him, wondering immediately what conversation they were about to launch themselves into. Then he wondered how he could put it off for another several hundred years. Sam would accept the title of hypocrite, he really would. "I should have been here."

The younger Winchester closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of warm, dusty air in through his nose and letting it out through his mouth. Jess had dragged him to yoga once, and it was just about the only thing he'd taken away from that class, other than the knowledge that he had way worse balance than he'd ever thought.

"Yeah, you should have," he answered calmly and matter-of-factly. Dean winced at the response, but it was nothing more or less than he deserved, in his opinion. Besides, Sam had said it without heat or accusation: just stating fact. "But you won't always be. You can't always be. And I handled it."

His voice sure sounded more confident than he felt, but Sam reminded himself that he *had* beat it. Was he sure he could do it again? Not at all, but that didn't negate that he'd won this first battle, and he'd done it on his own.

"It's not fair," Dean growled out from his side, glaring off past his wrecked Baby, hands on his hips and expression dangerous. "You shouldn't have to go through this. You didn't choose it, Sammy; he practically shoved it down your throat."

Sam clenched his eyes shut against the memories, the illusionary ones and the real, of blood creeping towards him in an ever growing puddle. His stomach clenched. He no longer wanted it, no longer thirsted for it so much that it hurt, but the memory of that need was fresh enough to hurt all on its own.

"Dean."

"I won't let him do it again," his brother bit out, despite the warning. Sam opened his eyes once more to find Dean staring down at him, fiercely protective. It was oddly comforting, despite still not wanting to discuss this.

"I won't. This-" he gestured to Sam's still trembling frame and the sweat pouring off him, despite the break- "this won't happen again."

The younger of the two was far less sure, but he nodded anyway, taking another sip of the icy water that curbed his thirst. A thirst still left over from two damn days of hell.

Silence passed between the brothers once more as Sam nursed his water and Dean brooded in silence against the Impala, arms crossed over his chest.

"Look, I gotta say it, and you're not gonna like it," Dean started up after another minute. He pointed his bottle in Sam's direction. "I think you should hang back when we summon Cas."

Sam opened his mouth to argue immediately, *pissed,* but Dean talked over him.

"It may not play out the same way this time, but Cas was a dick to you at first." Sam closed his jaw, slowly, still staring with an angry expression, though it held traces of confusion and curiosity there as well. "It wasn't all his fault. Heaven dragged your name through the mud, man. The 'boy with the demon blood.'"

Whatever relief from the dust and sun the water had provided was gone now, dried up in an instant, leaving Sam struggling to find a place in his mouth for his tongue. He couldn't stop himself from wincing, or push down the flare of pain and shame that ignited in his chest.

"That's not you, Sam," Dean bit out fiercely, either in reaction to the pain on his baby brother's face or in a rage all his own. Sam forced the shame aside and met that angry, protective gaze. "It wasn't you then, either. It was bullshit, is what it was – *is*."

"But Castiel may not know any better," Sam picked up, easily seeing where this was going. "Not now. Especially when I'm like…this."

Recovering from addiction and withdrawal from a substance that, yeah, Heaven would absolutely find appalling. *Abomination*. He didn't know where the thought came from, but his heart squeezed at it, and he fought away the disparaging voice clawing at his heart like acid.

"Cas becomes your best friend, too, Sammy. Like a brother to you, I swear. It just…" Dean shook his head, obviously recalling a memory and dismissing it. "You got every right to be there this time, to make it

different. But…maybe it's not a great idea."

Sam didn't answer at first, thinking over the newest bombshell in what was sure to be several days of pure firestorm. Finally, he stood back up, setting his water on one of the tool tables they'd scrounged up for the job. "I appreciate the choice, Dean, I really do. But I'm going."

It was testament to how seriously his brother was taking their previous conversation, that Dean only nodded in acceptance and didn't argue. Sam moved to get back to work, only to be all but shoved back onto the cooler with a single, motherly look that would have put actual mothers to shame across the globe. He opened his mouth to protest again, but Dean cut him off.

"Sit down before you fall down," he growled out, grabbing the crowbar from the table. "You're shaking like a leaf, Sammy. Just watch and learn."

Sam let out an annoyed sound at his brother's purposeful bluster, but he relaxed back on the cooler with a light glare instead. "Addicts are supposed to keep busy, Dean."

His older brother fumbled with the first placement of the crowbar against ruined metal, and coughed awkwardly to cover up how blatantly uncomfortable he suddenly was. The man from the future stared down at the iron in his hands, knuckles growing white around it before he forced his grip to relax. "You're not an addict."

Sam hadn't meant to bring the conversation back around. Or maybe he had.

He'd been reading up on those books Bobby had gotten, both from his own collection and several he'd picked up in town since Sam had shown up on his doorstep and given him the scare of his life for the following forty-eight hours. One of them, on recovering from addiction, just happened to show up on the kitchen table shortly after he'd come downstairs that first time, and Sam didn't bother wondering if Bobby had left it out on accident or purpose. He'd fought to keep the shame off his face, embraced the truth of exactly what he was now, by choice or not, and picked it up. That afternoon, he tucked into Bobby's comfortable, worn couch and buried himself in one of the strengths he still very much had.

"Maybe not by choice," he said, because he could hear what his brother wasn't saying. '*This time*.' Which might as well have been a '*yet*' as far as Sam was concerned. "Will and intention have nothing to

do with addiction."

"The truth is that I wanted it." Sam had to force the words out, and put every inch of the strength he had left into keeping his voice even. It may have only been a couple of days, but Sam was never one to waste time when it came to employing his new understanding of something, particularly if that something affected himself or the ones he loved. And all his reading so far had led him to believe if he could own his shame, then he could own his recovery too. "I wanted it since the cabin. It may have happened different here, this time. I may not have chosen it, but I have to acknowledge it either way if I'm going to fight it."

Dean remained uncomfortable, his rigid posture showing every failed effort to relax, but he nodded all the same. This didn't feel like the last time, but Sam had a point. They'd be stupid to ignore it just because it happened differently. The man from the future had to concede that if the addiction part was going to stay the same, this version of events was infinitely better. No, it wasn't fair that Sam had this forced on him, but Dean wasn't going to lose his brother to it this time. Not by choice, and that made a hell of a difference in his book.

And if what Sam needed to keep that up was Dean's acknowledgement and support, however hard, than he'd fucking support him till he was blue in the face. Coming home to find his baby brother had gone through withdrawal, while he was fuck-all elsewhere, off on a trip purely about anger and revenge and not anything useful or even important, had been a very hard pill for Dean to swallow. One that was washed down with an unhealthy gulp of '*do better*.'

So that's what he was going to do. That's what they were both going to do.

"Okay," he said, though he knew it was probably a lot less resounding than either of them needed. He'd work on that. "We're going to kill him, Sam. Yellow Eyes is next on the list."

Sam ducked his head with a huff of air, staring at his hands. "There's a list?"

Despite not being able to see it, Dean could hear the curiosity in his brother's voice, which was as good as a smile some days. "Hell yeah, there's a list. And soon as we cross off Azazel, Ruby's next. Then you'll be right as rain."

His grip on the crowbar slipped and he stumbled painfully into the car

when his brother asked, "Who's Ruby?"

-o-o-o-

By the time Dean finished answering all of Sam's questions about the manipulative demonic skank that would trick him into the real deep, dark, no-going-back blood addiction and, oh yeah, set Lucifer free by killing Lilith, it was well past lunchtime and both boys were ready for a break. Sam was looking pretty pale and shaky, though whether that was the tail end of withdrawal still working through his system or the possible future he might start in two years' time, Dean couldn't say. Probably a bit of column A, a bit of column B.

They headed back inside, where they helped Bobby with the groceries he'd just returned with, since Dean hadn't actually picked up anything but pie. The gruff man had steaks, beer, and something that looked suspiciously like salad, which Dean declared entirely for Sam. No way Bobby was a rabbit food eater. Dean's heart wouldn't be able to take it.

The old hunter had an ancient George foreman grill out back, which needed some serious cleaning and TLC, but Dean didn't mind the chore while Sam and Bobby prepped food. He was pretty sure the old man was providing a steady, mild flow of work for them entirely on purpose. A leaky sink here, a squeaky door there. They were mostly mindless, time-consuming tasks in and among fixing up the car that provided the Zen sort of stress relief both boys desperately needed, even if they refused to admit it.

Grieving 101 by Bobby Singer: work around the house and don't talk about it. Probably a healthier coping mechanism than Dean's 101, which consisted of rebuilding the Impala just so he could destroy it himself with a crowbar or, you know, find God and punch him in the face. Chores were also easier to swallow than Sam's 101: talk it out over hair braiding and pregnancy breathing exercises.

Yeah, Dean had no problem letting Bobby quietly bully them through his grief counseling course.

They grilled up the steaks and talked about what would be needed for summoning Castiel. Dean eyed the heaping helping of rabbit food Bobby gave himself, and blamed Sam entirely for ruining the last of his childhood heroes. Bobby was obviously just trying to keep the kid happy by taking some of those greens onto his plate as well. Obviously. Dean decided he would have to be the balance that

maintained the world and therefore took none for himself. Should balance out that disgusting fact of Sam having more leaf on his plate than meat. The savage.

Meanwhile, Sam was keeping half an eye on his brother for entirely different reasons. The way he was ducking questions about summoning the angel, particularly the *when and where* detail, kept raising little curious flags along Sam's mental periphery. They weren't red flags, not yet anyway, but coupled with the talk they'd had on the way back from Pastor Jim's, Sam couldn't help but wonder what it was he was missing.

-o-o-o-

"What's he like?"

Dean paused from his spot back beneath the car, dismantling the axels and…uh…Sam assumed the other stuff that made up the underside of a car (so sue him, he wasn't a car guy). It was late afternoon now, dusk just starting to settle on the distant edges of the horizon and they'd be out of light in another hour. His brother's voice was muffled by the damaged metal between them as he asked, "Who?"

"Castiel." Sam was busy prying sheets of crunched and dented metal off the equally damaged frame of the right side of the car. Dean had finished the driver's side before lunch, but Sam had insisted he was recharged enough for the task. He'd already gotten the passenger door almost fully stripped. It had been pretty easy, suffering far less damage than the back door he was currently struggling with.

"Uh, well… He started out a total nerd angel." Dean relaxed back under the car, settling into the easy, repetitive motion of dismantling the undercarriage as he spoke. "Turns out he's a baby in a trench coat. A *badass* baby, granted, but a total baby." Dean chuckled, some unknown memory obviously occurring to him. "He was all serious when we first met, but he loosened up over the years. Even started trying to crack jokes there at the end."

The words flowed more easily the longer he talked about the angel that would be their best friend. He joked with Sam about the poor guy discovering Netflix and perfecting the binge to an unhealthy amount that had resulted in Dean confiscating the laptop and insisting the angel go reacquaint his body with that thing called the sun. And his inability to ever get idioms, even after some super-powered bookworm named Metatron had zapped all the references straight into his head.

Sam could tell Dean was skirting things – that some of this stuff wasn't all good or hadn't come from good – but he didn't call his brother on it. Not yet. It was clear from the way he spoke that Cas was important to him, and would be important to *them*. Sam still had a mountain of reservations about summoning the angel, but he was beginning to understand why Dean still wanted to.

In a way that Sam was smart enough to identify as childish, he wanted to skip the hard stuff and move right into having that best friend. Sam was introspective and honest enough to admit that he missed *friends*. Traveling the country with his brother was not a life he regretted, though how they'd gotten into it certainly was, but it could be difficult spending twenty-four seven with the same person, with very little other socialization.

Of course, it was also kind of weird to find yourself envisioning a friendship with a guy you'd never met and who, apparently, was just as likely to ruin any future you had together as he was to improve it. Right. Couldn't forget that little detail.

"What's he going to be like when we summon him?" Sam found himself asking suddenly, not quite interrupting his brother but not exactly being subtle about where his thoughts had gone off to.

Dean shrugged, not that Sam could see it, but he knew his brother well enough. "Stoic, man. Angels think they don't have emotions, so they like to pretend they don't. Except being arrogant dickwads. They embrace that one fully."

"Arrogance isn't an emotion, Dean," Sam chided, though there was barely enough eye rolling to count.

"Yeah, well, you haven't met Zachariah," his brother countered, the scraping sound of tools on metal stopping momentarily. "That guy redefined smug as a state of being. Cas was different, though. He wasn't smug, he was-"

Intimidating was the word Dean wanted to use. The angel had made his damn knees shake, if he was perfectly honest. Not that he would be, not about that and definitely not to his kid brother. The creature that had first walked into that barn, though, or that time in the kitchen when he'd almost casually threatened to throw Dean back in Hell like it was as easy as rip, toss, zip. *That* guy had terrified Dean, and he found himself suddenly struggling just to swallow. He hadn't really missed that Cas, per say, and he wasn't too sure he was looking

forward to interacting with (or *surviving*) him again.

"-intense," is what he settled on instead, thinking about the guy Cas had grown into. "He has this creepy, intense stare. Makes you think he's looking right through you. And the guy never smiled. It took him years before he figured it out."

He laughed from beneath the car, the memory of those first few attempts at human interaction – God, the FBI interviews – almost making his eyes water. "He was terrible at it."

Sam couldn't help the answering grin to his brother's descriptions, even as they tapered off into silence, clearly thinking back on memories of the angel. He kept at the paneling, reveling in the almost jovial banter and especially the grin he could hear in Dean's voice.

"This one time," his older brother started again, the laughter just barely contained beneath his words, "I took him to a brothel."

Metal clanged as Sam slipped on the door, the crowbar hitting the dirt with a loud thud after the horrendous metallic screech it made on the way down. Dean couldn't help it, he burst into a ruckus of laughter from beneath the car.

"Yeah," he choked out in response, despite Sam not having said a word as he bent down to scoop up the dropped tool. "He called it a 'Den of Iniquity.'"

The younger of the two choked as he stood back up abruptly, crowbar in hand. Good, god, his brother was a *child*. Dean rolled himself out from under the car with a grin nothing short of devilish, and Sam tried not to laugh.

"The dude's eyes were this wide," he said, forcing his mouth into a thin line and opening his eyes as wide as he could. He only managed the look for half a second before he burst into a raucous of laughter once more. "He was *terrified*."

Sam groaned, shoving the end of the crowbar back under metal and fighting against his own grin. "Why? *Why* on earth would you take an *angel* to a brothel, Dean!"

That had to be some sort of blasphemy.

Dean just sniggered, knowing Sam was finding it just as funny underneath all that pretension. He pulled himself back under the car,

the sounds of metal scraping on metal floating up once again as he got back to work. "I wanted him to experience life! You know, the stuff worth fighting for."

His words trailed off, the jovial mood still there, but dampened somehow. Sam paused in his tugging, eyeing his brother's legs at the lapse in story.

"It was the guy's last night on earth," Dean finally continued. His voice was still light – lighter than it had been in weeks – but Sam could tell this wasn't the happy part of the story. "We were snaring an archangel the next day. He didn't expect to survive it."

"Where was I?" Sam didn't know why, but he knew that *we* didn't include him.

The silence got darker: deeper and lonelier. Sam didn't regret asking, but he knew immediately he didn't want to hear the answer. He was pretty sure he already knew it, after all. *Ruby*. Dean kept working without answering, and the younger Winchester thought, briefly and with growing disappointment, that maybe he wasn't going to keep that promise he'd made.

"We split ways at that point," Dean answered, the noise actually startling Sam. "Fallout over the, uh…"

"The demon blood," Sam supplied. And the demon supplying it. A wave of disappointment, new this time, washed over him. It was for himself, which was weird. He was disappointed – devastatingly and shamefully so – at a version of him that had made bad calls, in a life he had never lived.

"It's not gonna happen this time, Sam."

Sam looked down to find his brother out from under the car once more, staring at him with earnest emotion in his eyes. He met that gaze and couldn't look away, not that he honestly wanted to. Dean was all he had left, and for once there was recognizable faith in that green gaze.

"No, it's not," he answered calmly and *believed* it.

Dean held the look until Sam turned away, back to the car and the piece of metal he had half pried off. He went back to the job, and his brother slid under the vehicle once more, the tinkering noises resuming.

"So," Dean spoke up after a moment, that grin back on his lips and in his words, "we find Cas this gorgeous little thing named *Chastity*."

Sam groaned as loudly and obnoxiously as he could. "You've got to be kidding me."

-o-o-o-

Hours later, Sam lay in the bed upstairs, atop the comforter and quilt he'd decided to keep spread across the bed. They'd changed his sweat-soaked, soiled sheets the first day he'd come downstairs, and Sam reveled in the fresh laundry smell and *cleanness* of it all. Dean was sprawled across the other mattress, staring at the ceiling. It was late, and Sam had eventually conceded the need for dinner and bed.

"We should talk about it."

His brother cast him a sidelong look, eyebrows raised but expression otherwise blasé.

"What more is there to talk about?" Dean asked in return, glancing from his brother to the lamp on the little nightstand between them. Neither had thought to turn it off before collapsing on their respective beds, and both were now just out of reach of the switch without putting in more effort than either wanted to. "It happened. You got covered, and you're better now."

"No," Sam shook his head. "Dad. His death."

Dean stilled for a moment, quite the feat considering he'd hardly been moving before, but eventually he loosed the tension in his frame and resumed his staring at the ceiling. He didn't say anything, though, and Sam figured if he wanted this conversation, he was going to have to pull most of the weight.

"Tell me how it happened the first time."

"Nothing to tell, Sammy." Dean kept his eyes forward, though he knew his brother's were on him. "I woke up in the hospital, no memory of being a ghost, and dad died. Same way."

The younger Winchester bit back a sigh, and went for attack move #3. Silence and staring. Which, after a period of extended silence without results, could be adjusted by modification 3.1: an added warning of, "Dean."

His brother made an aggravated noise, the regret of his promise clear in the disgruntled look he sent Sam's way before conceding. He began the story farther back this time. He told Sam about how Meg had gone after their friends, first Jim and then Caleb, demanding the Colt. How John had gone to meet her with a fake from an antique store, and they'd taken him instead.

Sam marveled at the way things had happened the same way, even weeks or entire events apart. The way Meg had gone after their friends – Garth instead of Pastor Jim, because Dean was the one with the Colt, not John. Yet their dad had still ended up with the gun, shown up with a fake when it was demanded in exchange for a loved one's life.

No wonder Dean was at the end of his rope. Things could happen weeks before or after they should, still in the same way, rendering Dean's knowledge of each event useless except to bitterly watch them happen, helpless to stop them. That would drive anyone to the point of seeking out God and having themselves a little screaming fest.

"Then Azazel got in him," Dean continued, the bitterness in his voice a direct contradiction to his stiff, tension filled form lying flat on the bed. "Tried to trick us, get me to hand over the colt."

"How did you know it wasn't Dad?" Sam asked it on impulse, something desperate flaring in his chest. He needed to know. He needed to know the signs he had missed in his best friend for two whole years.

Dean chortled bitterly, bringing his younger brother's attention back to the present with a twinge of something uneasy in his stomach. "He told me he was proud of me."

Sam's eyes widened, brilliant mind having no problem connecting the dots and finding the punchline in a joke that wasn't funny long before Dean finished telling it.

"I wasted a bullet from the Colt on some no-name demon." Dean's smile was brittle, filled with self-loathing and irony. "And he told me he was proud. He should have been furious. I knew it wasn't him immediately."

His younger brother didn't know what to say. He had wanted Dean to work through their Dad's death, knew he might shove it all deep down, well aware his brother was not good with grief or mourning or emotions in general. But this Dean already had gone through that, and

now he faced the guilt of perceived failure, in addition to a whole new round of grief. Sam had no idea how to walk someone through a second death, one they had known was coming, fought tooth and nail to prevent, and wound up facing it anyway.

Sam might be the closest thing to proficient in Dean Psychology, but even this was beyond his limits.

"I miss him," Dean admitted roughly, surprising Sam with the sudden confession. His voice was croaky, hands shaking atop his chest as he stared up at that water stained roof. They'd spent so many nights in this room, abandoned by the man that was supposed to be there for them, always. "He was a bastard. A self-righteous *asshole*. But I miss him so damn much."

"He was still our dad," Sam offered quietly, understanding completely. He was probably one of the few people on the planet who could almost always understand his brother, no matter the timeline.

"Yeah," Dean said, sniffing away the tears and pain. He finally turned to look at Sam, and his little brother smiled sadly from the other bed, eyes equally watery and just as silent about it.

"I miss him too, Dean."

Chapter 42: Season 2: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

-A/Ns: Welcome back to Fixing-The-Impala Part II! Thank you to everyone who left thoughts, commentary, all out screaming about how they still haven't found the bunker key (Oh, oh, oh, you poor things. You think it's going to be that easy? You think I'm going to be a *nice* author? Not a chance ;)

-Chapter Warnings: Sam's asking the real tough questions now, and Dean's stalling on more than just his answers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 9

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Fixing the Impala – building all but the engine pretty much from scratch – took four days. Sam was impressed it didn't take longer, but Dean was nothing if not dedicated. And he'd always been a good teacher. He had a way of making mounting tasks seem easy, just step by step until you're done.

It was too bad he hadn't figured out how to apply that mentality to life, or the daunting task they faced on the horizon.

The four days passed in rolling waves banter and laughter-filled highs, often juxtaposed by lows filled with difficult conversations Dean struggled to get through. But he did get through them. Some were easier than others. It helped that Sam rarely asked for information outright. He'd get Dean talking on a somewhat safe topic that would inevitably turn dark, because very few moments in their life weren't a catalyst for, or the result of, something much more devastating. Those were the hard moments: the true lows. Sam wouldn't push, but he wouldn't let Dean off the hook, either. He just worked in silence on the Impala while his brother figured out the best way to admit something he'd really rather Sammy didn't know.

Eventually Dean would cave or figure it out, because he'd made a promise and he was *trying*. Sam would keep a tight grip on his immediate reaction, doing his own part to lessen how hard this was

for his brother and, honestly, for himself. He'd ask questions, get Dean to clarify, usually concerning context. Sometimes he would ask what they were going to do to change it. Dean rarely had answers to those questions, but Sam didn't stop asking them.

The current silence was one of the longest so far, and it was a really bad time for it, too.

"Dean?"

There it was, Dean thought from the backseat, where he was laying the carpet out on the floor pans and securing it in place. The seats had survived pretty well. Dean had stripped the leather to clean the blood and buff any scratches, but they'd been lucky not to need to replace it. That shit had to be custom ordered. The carpeting was still a custom job, ordered earlier in the week on their first supply run, a rush job that had the owner of the small, hole-in-the-wall autoshop practically clicking his heels together over, since it was probably half his yearly profit.

But back to his brother currently bitching at him from the hood of the car, where he was re-assembling the engine just as Dean had shown him. He'd made the kid take it apart by himself too, just so he'd known what each piece was, what it did, what it looked like undamaged versus damaged, and how it connected in the overall machine. He was going to make his brother a capable car guy, even if he couldn't make him an actual car guy.

Sam's recovery gained leaps and bounds over the four days of light labor. He still got the shakes on occasion, despite his best efforts to hide them from his brother. But his appetite was improving, his strength returning with every task he conquered on the Impala and every forced break Dean made him take. By the fourth day, he was almost back to himself.

"Dean."

His bitchface-ing, over-demanding, younger-brother-but-I'm-still-smarter-than-you, self. Yipee.

That was Sam's warning tone. The one that meant his brother was seriously starting to worry about what was - or wasn't - going through Dean's head. Not that Dean had been expecting anything else given their current conversation. Turns out, when someone asks, *'Gee, how did you handle that round of torture with a demon so well?*' they're somewhat entitled to freak out when you don't answer them back.

While he was still trying to figure out how (***if, Dean. Be honest)*** he was going to answer, Sam pulled away from his work, all sounds of the reassembly chore coming to an end. Dean knew he had to bite the bullet and soon, or Sam would come marching around to his side of the car. Then he'd have to have this conversation while looking his brother in the face.

"I spent four months in Hell," he managed to blurt out, without a lot of thought on consequences and whatever the opposite of consequences was. Silver linings? Nope, forty years on the rack certainly didn't come with *any* of those.

The silence stretched to cringe-worthy lengths before Dean found his brother marching around the car anyway (well, not so much marching as approaching almost cautiously) and stopping just outside the newly paneled door to stare at him with an almost unreadable expression. Whatever that muddled look was supposed to mean, Sam was very clearly tortured by his newest admission.

Dean was getting tired of seeing variations of that face, more and more harrowed with each newly dropped bombshell.

Sam started to speak, then stopped and had to swallow whatever had lodged itself in his throat at the thought of his brother stretched across a rack, enduring far more than what Azazel had dished out at that cabin, and enduring it for *months*.

"How?" It was all he could get out, but it was the most important to him. *How* did his brother end up in Hell in the first place? With what Dean had told him so far, it just didn't make sense. Heaven needed him as a weapon. Had Hell dragged him under to keep him out of the angel's reach? And where had Sam been when this was going down? "I thought you said Heaven and Hell needed us. Why would they let you die?"

Dean sat back against the freshly re-upholstered leather, staring out the new windshield of his baby at the rest of the salvage yard beyond, before he closed his eyes against it all and took several deep, steeling breaths.

"They needed me in Hell to break the First Seal." He refused to look at Sam as he got back to work. Work was better than breaks and breathing and definitely better than looking at his brother's positively wrecked expression. Work filled the silence and distracted him from the void in his chest that didn't exist anymore, but somehow he knew

was still there anyway. "I told you, we both help start the end of the world, Sammy. My first gig was breaking on the rack. Picking up a blade and making others bleed instead."

"What?" The word was breathless, not out of disbelief or doubt, but out of pain. "That doesn't- You can't be the only- *Why?*"

"To break the first lock on Lucifer's cage, a Righteous Man has to spill blood in Hell." He said it bitterly, practically spitting out the title he had never wanted, nor ever thought he deserved. Maybe he actually had before he'd sold his soul, but he certainly hadn't after everything that came next. It had grated on his skin like sandpaper to hear Cas refer to him as such again and again.

Sam's brow furled, classic Sasquatch mind racing to fill in the blanks his brother wasn't saying. "How… How does a righteous man end up in Hell?"

His brother not answering him was all the answer he needed. Weight settled in the bottom of his stomach like he'd swallowed a medicine ball. Sam knew the answer before he asked the question, but he had to ask it anyway. He had to know, because he had to be wrong.

"Dean, what did you do?"

-o-o-o-

Bobby was in the study, pouring over an ancient tomb written in a language barely even recognized as a language anymore, when Sam came into the house. The way he threw open the screen door and stormed into the kitchen spoke of anger and urgency. But the way he came to a halt almost immediately inside the threshold, standing, listless, in the room and staring Bobby's way made the old hunter think he was more overwhelmed and lost than anything else.

"Sam?" he queried pretty quietly for his usual gruffness, eyebrows raised and research set aside for the moment.

"Did you know?" the boy croaked, then swallowed heavily and tried again. "About Dean's deal?"

Bobby gave a rough sigh, pulling off his baseball cap and scratching at his thinning hair. Damn that boy, sometimes. "He hasn't done it yet, Sam."

Sam's look turned, if possible, even more despairing than it had a

moment ago. They both knew that *yet* was kind of the key word, there.

"I won't let him," the giant of a man said suddenly, eyes hardening with resolve as he stared at the old hunter, though Bobby was fairly certain he wasn't actually wat Sam was seeing. "He's not making that mistake twice. I'm not worth the end of the world."

With that, Sam stomped back out of the kitchen, screen door slamming once more in his wake. Bobby collapsed into his chair with a loud, embittered sigh. He was too old for this crap, and those boys both need a kick in the pants if *worth* is where they both kept going anytime someone made a choice based on love and not logic.

-o-o-o-

Sam came charging out of the house only minutes after he'd gone charging in, and Dean prepared himself for the reaming of a life time. It would probably be very similar to the first time Sam had figured out what he'd agreed to. Of course, he knew he'd gotten of fairly light for that, given that the deed was done, there was nothing Sammy could do about it, and he didn't care what it cost.

This was going to be infinitely harder because asking for permission was sure as shit more difficult than begging for forgiveness.

"You are going to promise me, here and now, that you will not sell your soul for me."

Sam's stance was something out of a damn action movie, featuring a boss villain or some shit like that. All wide legs and power-house shoulders, offset with tightly clenched fists that made his arm muscles bulge. That brown gaze was firm and *terrifying* and could have broken world leaders.

Kid would have made a damn amazing lawyer.

Dean managed so far as to stop his work, stare at his superstar of a brother, and not much else. He almost got around to opening his mouth, but nothing came out, which just left him awkwardly staring Sammy's way with a half open jaw that clacked shut almost immediately. He looked away.

"Are you kidding me?!"

The man from the future winced at the furious anger in his brother's

voice. "I know, Sammy, okay? I know! But that doesn't- I can't- I-"

"Dean, *no*."

The older Winchester was looking away again, a weird expression on his face that Sam recognized instantly. That *'I did something you're not gonna be happy about'* look Dean got where he wouldn't quite meet Sam's eyes and screwed his face up something funny. Sam's shoulders dropped with realization and he lost all forward momentum, practically sagging away from his brother and the car.

"You already thought about doing it, didn't you? Back in Wyoming."

Dean struggled with that face for another moment before he reluctantly met his brother's demanding, disbelieving gaze. "Only as a last resort. I had some other, uh, equally stupid ideas to try first."

Sam knew Dean was trying, however poorly, to lighten the mood, but this really wasn't the kind of thing he was ready to joke about.

"You promise me, right now. If I die – at *any* time – you let me stay dead." Dean immediately opened his mouth (probably to argue), but Sam wouldn't let him. "I mean it, Dean. I'm okay dying if it means we don't end the world or start the apocalypse."

When his brother just stared at him – straight through him- with eyes as wide as they'd been when he mimicked his angel the day before, Sam finally let the disappointment – in himself, in Dean, in destiny, in *everything* – show through on his face. "Don't you think that's worth it?"

Dean looked away, past the brand new windshield and the world around them and the timeline they were currently riding out. He was thinking of the future, of a world without his brother that he had tried so hard to navigate and had failed.

"I don't know how to live without you, Sam."

The taller man sighed at the slump of Dean's shoulders and the lost look in his distant gaze. He knew that, now. He hadn't before – he had majorly underestimated his brother's dependency on him, on this life – but he knew it now. He understood it, too, even if he was the more independent one by nature. So, Sam tried to think of a world for his brother without him in it. He wasn't the only one in Dean's life who loved him, after all. "You'll still have Bobby, and Cas, if he-"

"Cas leaves."

"What?" The response was so rapid-fire that it sounded like Dean had known Sam's words were coming. Known they were coming, and then knew what happened next. Sam swallowed, suddenly very aware of just how difficult an optimistic conversation was going to be with someone who knew the future. Who had lived a future where apparently Sam was gone and Dean had learned firsthand what that was like. "When?"

Because Dean had definitely given him his death date: 2016, in a graveyard facing something called the Darkness. But there was no misjudging that look on his brother's face, even if he kept glancing off in the distance, body language subconsciously shying away from Sam. He stayed quite for a really long time, eventually going back to pulling and pushing and stretching the carpet across the floor pans. Sam let him, leaning against the fixed frame of Dean's baby.

Finally, when he'd found the right words, the man from the future morosely admitted, "We win. We stop the apocalypse, but you… You go into the cage with Lucifer."

Sam managed not to suck in that sharp breath of air his lungs tried to vacuum right up. He'd sort of figured, though the details had been off. There were really only so many ways he could bite the big one in this world Dean came from, right?

"Only way we could take him down," Dean continued, shaking his head and Sam could still see the weight of the decision he carried with him, more than five years later. "And I- I couldn't do *anything* to get you back."

He stayed quiet as Dean kept at the carpeting, silent, angry, still grieving and still resentful over the death of a brother who was standing, very much alive, less than a foot from him. Sam stayed quiet because he knew there was more to that story, and his brother would tell him when he was ready.

"Cas got his wings back-" the broken hunter muttered, suddenly digging into the work a lot harder, a lot fiercer. It wasn't hard to hear the betrayal in his brother's voice or the anger and loss in his movements. Dean had never been a hard one to read, even ten years older. All Sam had to do was bite his tongue and try not to ask how the angel had lost his wings in the first place. "-and went back to heaven."

Well, that explained some of the roller coaster of emotion he'd seen in Dean, from that first time he'd mentioned the name in the car hightailing it out of Jericho, to just the last twenty four hours of stories, both good and bad. The way his brother clearly missed the angel, to flickers of regret when he talked about him, to the clenched teeth of frustration and bad blood, and what Sam was now realizing were the old scars of betrayal.

"I was *alone*," Dean spit out, still angry but still just as broken. "I tried the apple pie life, Sam. You made me promise to try, so I *did*. I went native, took a stab at normal, and I sucked at it."

It wasn't clear what made it pop into his head so readily – apparently hanging on the sidelines for weeks now, waiting to be remembered – but the first thought into Sam's head was that little boy wrapping his arms around Dean so tightly, orange light spread out beneath them in flickers of pure, roiling happiness, and the brunette, lounging on a picnic blanket in the Baku's dreamland. The question was out of his mouth before he had time to think about whether or not it was really the right moment to be asking his brother such an emotionally charged question.

"Lisa and Ben Braeden," Dean confirmed with a nod and a flicker of a smile, his previously brutal efforts against the carpet stalling as memories flickered across his face. They seemed as happy as they was sad, and Sam was suddenly dead certain this was about more than just some woman and her kid. "They were… They were awesome people. That kid is awesome."

And if Sam heard '*my kid*', well, he doubted he was wrong.

"They took me in, put up with my shit. They…" The hunter struggled with his words, visibly swallowing back the emotion attached to them. "They're probably the only thing that kept me from eating my gun."

Sam didn't respond right away, leaning away from his brother to settle against the frame of the Impala. Dean went back to work, gentler and steadier than before. Hazel eyes stared up at the blue sky, birds passing high above, and the warm sun of a South Dakota late spring. Sam thought about a life for his brother with a beautiful woman and a son who loved him. A life that didn't have Sam in it, but wasn't all bad.

"Dean," he began softly, neck still craned back and eyes focused on that endless blue and, maybe, the Heaven that lay beyond. He thought

about not saying it, about how it would sound to anyone not in their life. But this was his brother, and he deserved to hear it. "If eating a bullet keeps you from bring me back…"

The sounds of labor slowed before stopping completely. Sam pushed off the car, turning to face him fully. Dean's eyes were unreadable, fiercely locked on his brother, giving away nothing but the intensity of whatever that emotion was.

"I don't want to die. I don't want *you* to die," Sam emphasized, shoving his hands in his pockets, gangly arms bent at the elbow. "I'd rather you go find Lisa and your son. Or tell Cas to screw Heaven and stay."

He thought he caught a light huff from the statue of a man, but Sam couldn't say if that was in response to calling Ben as he saw it, or telling an angel to suck it. Didn't matter, either way; at least he knew his brother was hearing him.

"If it means not bringing me back, not starting the apocalypse, or you going to *Hell*…" Sam was not above turning on those puppy eyes his brother so famously gave him crap for, and he used them here to their full, pleading extent. "I'd rather you be in Heaven with me, than both of us here, starting the end of the world."

When Dean didn't say anything, just turned away painfully slowly to stare out the windshield again, Sam sighed, adding, "I know it's not what you want to hear-"

"No, it sure as hell isn't, Sammy," Dean interrupted, voice cracking as he did so, but something in that tone screamed hurting, not angry, so Sam stayed quiet until those watery green eyes finally found him again. "But you're not wrong. It's probably what I *need* to hear."

He took in a deep, measured breath, sitting back on the newly buffed leather, hands on his thighs. Despite providing no upper body support, those arms somehow looked like they were the only thing keeping him holding on.

"I promise."

It came with no fanfare. Dean went back to work almost before the final syllable was out, as if he hadn't spoken to begin with. It left Sam standing there for a solid thirty seconds, wondering if he hallucinated it.

But then Dean was talking again, tucking the last of the carpet into the

corner of the rear driver's side door, trimming the edges with his box cutter. "I won't bring you back if it happens." He tossed the scraps of material through the far side door, a chunk catching Sam in the thigh (very much on purpose, he was certain). "But I'm not letting it happen."

Sam offered a hand to his brother, who took it readily and clambered out of the car. Dean dusted off his hands on filthy jeans while Sam offered a weak smile.

"I'm not letting it happen either," he agreed with firm resolution. "Trust me, I'd rather stay alive, avoid the entire scenario."

The man from the future nodded, the set in his shoulders as stubborn as his brother's. "Right. What are you doing, slacking off while I do all the work? Back to it. Mush! Let's see how you did with the engine."

With an eye roll, Sam let the change of topic slide and followed him around to the front of the car.

-o-o-o-

Dean declared the Impala done the next day. It could not have come fast enough, in Dean's opinion. Not only to get his Baby back in gleaming condition, but also to be done with the open-wound that was telling Sam whatever the hell he wanted to know. It had been ninety six hours of pain and bad memories.

Well, that wasn't completely true. Sam had asked about as many happy times as he had awful ones. Dean told him all about Jo and Ellen, that he'd get to meet them soon enough, whenever Ellen called so they'd have an excuse to go to the Roadhouse. He told him about Ash in all his mulleted glory, Charlie the redheaded little sister they never knew they wanted, Jody and her kids and that damn awkward dinner they'd shared over Alex's apparent soon-to-be-popped cherry.

Sam couldn't quite wrap his head around how much of a *family* they were going to have.

Once Baby was up and purring, a quick test run under her belt for groceries and celebratory beer, Dean declared the rest of the day free from work of any kind. Which, apparently, meant they were waiting for the following day to find a suitable building for the summoning. Sam, who was looking forward to meeting the Cas of Dean's stories but still very much on the fence about the actual angel they'd be meeting in the next twenty four hours, didn't fight much. He could use

a free evening to do some more research (which went nowhere once Dean saw what he was doing, confiscated the laptop, hid it where Sam never did find it, and plopped a freshly opened beer in front of him instead, declaring a night of celebration, not *work.)*

Bobby, again, asked why they needed to find another location to begin with. Not that he was actually opposed to summoning Castiel elsewhere. In fact, if Dean hadn't said anything, the old man would probably have protested bringing an angel to his house in the first place. What he was caught up on was the fact that Dean insisted they find someplace *safer*, which, for the paranoid hunter, was just insulting.

There was no place *safer*.

Insult aside, the need for security more extreme than Bobby's panic room and heavily warded house was worrying. He wasn't the only one thinking it, either. Sam's harried glances his way confirmed that the younger Winchester had picked up on it too.

Dean just skirted the question, saying angels tended to make big entrances and he didn't think Bobby wanted to deal with home insurance claims for lightning strikes *inside* the house. The look the two had exchanged after *that* bit of information damn near broke the apprehension scale.

So they spent the evening watching movies on Bobby's old TV, the three of them comically squished on the couch together (after Dean declared the desk chair unsuitable for movie night, given that it squeaked every time the gruff hunter leaned back). They had a near endless supply of beer, popcorn, and a dinner break for burgers on the grill with all the fixings. Sam wouldn't lie, it was the most fun he'd had in months, and it went a long way to soothe the hollow weight in his chest. It was a twisted combo of the mountain of death and destruction looming on the horizon, the ache in his veins still fading from a week of withdrawal recovery, and the still fresh loss of his father. He was pretty sure the evening was as much a balm for his brother as it was for him, so the studious hunter let himself relax and enjoyed the company of the family he still had left.

-o-o-o-

The next day they began the hunt for Dean's perfect summoning building, roaming around the outskirts of the Sioux Falls area in search of something the man from the future deemed worthy, all the

while testing Baby's new build and reassembled engine. She purred like a charm all over the county as they darted from one abandoned farmhouse to the next. Dean crossed a lot of them unnecessarily off the list, giving vague, half-formed reasons for why they didn't fit the bill. Bullshit, in Bobby's opinion, but Sam seemed more willing to go along with his brother, who thought this summoning had to meet very specific qualifications.

Bobby was pretty sure he was just procrastinating, but what did he know?

Dean insisted they were looking for something he would know when he saw it (and apparently only he, given just how many dilapidated warehouses, farms, barns, and houses, they visited in the span of one day). The sun was back on the decline by the time Sam finally had enough and called Dean on his hedging. As it just so happened, their fearless leader found the very next building they pulled up to perfect for an angel summoning. Sam rolled his eyes, Dean played it off like this was his intent the entire time, and Bobby grumbled about how he should have stayed at the house, where he could have been as equally useless to this endeavor and at least gotten his own shit done for the day. He had bills and a life, after all.

Both he and Sam stayed in the car for the last building search, having seen too many old, falling apart structures for one lifetime, let alone one day. As Dean walked back towards the car, a smile on his face and thumbs up, Sam and Bobby started climbing out of the Impala. But the man from the future just shook his head and climbed back into the driver's seat before either man was fully out of the car

With a curious frown, Sam clambered back in, giving Bobby another thing to grump about. He was too old to be squished in the back seat of this damn muscle car. Sam, on the other hand, was staring at his brother as he started up the engine and pulled away from the building he'd just (*finally*) deemed worthy.

"We're leaving?"

"Can't summon him right now," Dean replied, following the long dirt road back to civilization. "It's the middle of the day. We gotta wait till night."

The reasoning was twofold. And by that, he meant there was one reason, mostly fabricated, he was willing to tell his brother and Bobby, and one far more legitimate reason he was keeping to himself.

The first was that it had been night when he and Bobby originally summoned the angel, and since Time was a picky bitch, they should stick as closely to the original summoning as possible. Dean had even played around with the idea of driving out to Pontiac in search of that old barn, just to give the bitch even less reason to mess this up for them. But he'd decided that was a waste of gas, ultimately, even if the extra day of driving to get there was a tempting excuse to put it off one more day.

He was *nervous* about this, damn it, which was just ridiculous. It was *Cas*, for Pete's sake.

"Is *that* why the building had to be so specific?" Sam asked once Dean offered up reason numero uno on why they needed such precise conditions for the summoning. The taller of the two brothers rolled his eyes, exasperated that his brother couldn't have just *said so*. He'd wasted half the day stalling, was what he'd really done.

"I summoned yer angel with you?" Bobby asked over Sam's grievances, giving Dean a wide eyed look in the rear view mirror.

"Uh…Yes, and yes. Though, you were unconscious for most of it." Dean winced as soon as the words were out of his mouth, and Bobby's eyes rose even higher. "Don't worry, I'm sure he won't knock you out this time."

The two once more overlapped their replies, exclamations ranging from 'what the hell, boy, I thought yer angel was on our side!' to 'You said he wasn't dangerous in that sense, Dean.' The hunter just shrugged, pulling onto the highway leading back to Bobby's house.

"He will be on our side. But he doesn't start that way. And he's not *my* angel."

But Sam was hardly focused on that little detail (and, also, *yeah right*). Instead, he shook his head, eyes wide, as he realized something he hadn't before, even with everything Dean had told him about Cas starting out on the wrong side of things. His mind drifted to the container of holy oil Pastor Jim had supplied them, and suddenly he wondered what exactly it was for.

"Are we…. Are we summoning Cas against his will?"

Dean fidgeted in the driver's seat, a surefire tell that yes, yes they were. "He isn't answering my prayers. This is the only other way."

"Prayers?" Sam echoed at the same time as Bobby went back to his grumblings, only this time they were a series of increasingly descriptive expletives.

The old hunter finally harrumphed, arms crossed in the back seat, quickly realizing he was missing some key pieces of information back there. "Exactly how dangerous is this?"

"If everything goes according to plan?" Dean glanced sidelong at his brother, then back on the road. "Not at all."

"And if it doesn't go to plan?" Bobby asked gruffly, because when in hell had anything having to do with the Winchesters *ever* gone to plan? And he was asking, knowingly, years before the Apocalypse would join that list of things.

"Uh…" Dean's silence was answer enough, really. "He could kill us all?"

Sam and Bobby exchanged alarmed expressions. Dean hadn't mentioned *that* on their way back from Blue Earth. The intelligent, near-college-graduate was very certain Dean's worst case scenario had still involved them all living through it.

"He won't though. It's more likely he'll go back to heaven and tattle-tale. Which would be worse, because it'll be Zachariah he'll report to, and that pompous bag of dicks won't hesitate to serve us all up on a silver platter."

The alarmed expression on Bobby's face became something closer to panic. No, maybe not panic. Hell no? That was it. It was definitely an expression that had once been *"uh….kaaaay"* and was now *"oh, Hell no. No, no, nope, no way, just no."*

"We, uh…. We sure this is the right move?" the old hunter asked cautiously, dread in his voice manifesting itself into several dozen angry, silent '*idjits'*. Sam couldn't blame him. He'd had a week of knowing all of this, and he *still* wasn't sure it was a good idea.

At least Dean was being honest about it, for once.

"We're gonna need him eventually," Dean reasoned back, releasing the wheel to rub at his sternum. "Besides, I want answers. God wouldn't give 'em up-" or if he had, then he took them away right afterward, the bastard- "so what choice do we have?"

"We could chose *life*," Bobby grumbled miserably from the back seat.

"Don't worry." Dean settled his hand back on the steering wheel, eyes focused straight ahead. "The plan is going to work."

And if it didn't, he could probably talk his way out of it. Not that that ever worked any other time in his life, of course. Dean was much better talking his way *into* trouble. But the one exception to that rule was Castiel. And given the warmth slowly building back up in his chest ever since the explosion, Dean was willing to bet that being three years early wasn't going to change it.

Which brought up the real reason for waiting until nightfall to summon Cas. If this did, for some reason, go tits up, the fallout was gonna be major. His only hope of containment would be trapping Cas before he could make the run back to Heaven. Hence, Pastor Jim's holy oil. Which could very likely piss the angel off, resulting in Plan C not exactly going to plan.

Honestly, despite Dean's confident words, there were a million ways this could go wrong. Castiel had been a company man before he met Dean. Towed the line, thumped that bible, believed in the Plan. Worse, he believed his superiors were still getting updates on that Plan from God, and not just going off script for their own glorification and means to an end.

If he wasn't able to convince Cas that he was from the future, that the angel's future should be with him and his brother, that his place was by their side rather than in Heaven, then they were going to have a very serious problem.

But since he hadn't gotten any help from God, there was still a bubbling warmth in his chest that should *really* be concerning him, and he was pretty sure he couldn't do the rest of this alone anymore without losing his mind (given that his dad's inevitable death was all it had taken for him to run off and *dare* God to start participating or else), it was time to call for backup. He had questions that needed answering, and they all needed someone a little more familiar with the rules. Dean was at the end of his rope trying to figure this out misstep by misstep.

Plus, he missed his friend; he couldn't deny that.

So, there they were, several hours later, a little nuclear family of odds and ends, misfits and outliers, about to summon their missing member into a ring of holy fire and hoping – not praying, but *hoping* – he

wouldn't smite them for their efforts.

Okay, maybe Dean sent up one, itsy, bitsy, little prayer before he lit the match.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Could we finally – FINALLY, ACTUALLY – be getting Cas?

You know, as long as he answers the summons… ;D

(say it with me: no-good, dirty, rotten author. No, no, this time I swear, we're actually getting him)

Chapter 43: Season 2: Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Okay, couple of things. First, this chapter ended up being 29 pages long (almost three times the length of our usual chapters) because I'm friggin' verbose. I had to split it up, and I'm not happy about it. There's a character twist that spans both parts and should really be read together. However, I ran out of editing time this week and absolutely could not decide if I should hold off another week to post both chapters at once, or post this today. So here's the deal; You get part I now, and I'll post part II as soon as I finish editing it, rather than making you all wait a week.

Until then…uh…nobody freak out.

Freak Out? Yeah, about that. Welcome to the first of two planned Story-Twists-That-Make-the-Author-Incredibly-Nervous. Oh, what fun we'll have. What I ask is that you don't completely freak out (if you're going to freak out) until you get to the author's notes at the end of Part II. I have (what I think are) very good reasons for this twist, so hopefully you give me the chance to explain!

Actually, three readers have already sort of meandered into it accidentally into their awesome reviews, which has made me feel so much freaking better about springing it on y'all. I think you all will understand why immediately, but [insert self-conscious shrug] I'm a paranoid people-pleaser who's terrified you're gonna hate it.

Chapter Warnings: We FINALLY get Castiel! Which means we FINALLY get the first splashes of Destiel! Don't get too excited, it's not too much more than the show has at this point ;) Our boy's still knee-deep (more like neck-deep) in the good ole' river De-Nile.

For those of you who are not Destiel Fans but have stuck with us this far, keep sticking! I promise, we're still in slow-burn territory and, outside of Sammy and Bobby poking fun, we will be for some time.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Light innuendos and implications of pre-slash Destiel, along with some chick-flick moments, a little

pectoral fondling, and a lot of Dean trying his hardest to ignore those things. Oh, and a lot of swearing as Dean realizes something kinda important.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 10

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Summoning an angel was, perhaps, the most anticlimactic experience of Sam's life. That may only be because he'd certainly built up the confrontation in his mind, what with Dean's procrastinating, nervous fidgeting the entire time they set up the barn, and Sam's own doubts about Castiel being on their side, despite Dean's many reassurances that he was – would be – their best friend and they couldn't do this without him. Despite of all that, or perhaps because of it, Sam was rapidly losing regard for any danger this angel apparently posed, considering they were going on hour two with no sign of him.

"Are you sure you did the ritual right?" he asked Bobby, a slight whine in his voice. The look the old man shot him wasn't nice, and Sam grimaced apologetically.

"Relax, guys," Dean said from his spot on one of the only surviving pieces of furniture in the barn; an old farm table with one missing leg that they'd propped up with mildewing hay bales. The bowl of spell ingredients sat beside him, flames long since burnt out and smoky scent of singed herbs gone from the musty air. Dean swung his legs back and forth like a four year old, twirling a knife into the tabletop and digging himself a decent little hole (like an adult with the maturity of a four year old). "He's gotta find a vessel. It'll be a while."

Which was reason three to summon the guy at night, actually. If Jimmy was asleep, Cas would probably have an easier time visiting him and convincing the guy to say yes. Of course, even adding buffer time of Cas having to find a vessel kinda last minute (Dean figured Cas had had a couple of days of trying to communicate with Dean before giving up and searching for a vessel last time), this was still way longer and Dean was starting to worry the angel wasn't coming.

The spell he'd used an hour and twenty minutes ago didn't demand the angel's presence so much as strongly suggest he should show up. Dean knew how to strengthen the summons to one that could not be

ignored, but he was hesitant to do so. They'd used that method when he and Cas had bullied Raphael into showing his ugly mug during the apocalypse, which had unpleasant memories enough. However, Cas had warned him at the time that such a thing was just rude in heavenly society, and therefore a surefire way to piss an angel off.

Castiel was already going to be not-very-happy to hear about the upcoming apocalypse and Heaven's role in it. Then there'd be the whole holy fire bit, too. Dean really wanted to reduce any other factors likely to piss off the nerd angel.

"Well, how long is that gonna take?" Bobby asked, huffing in annoyance as he mindlessly tapped the shotgun laid out across his legs, despite the fact that Dean told him he wouldn't need it. No hunter was dumb enough to go into a situation unarmed, no matter what that situation was. "Should we leave a note?"

Dean rolled his eyes at the sarcastic suggestion, but even his patience was starting to wear.

"So…" Sam shifted awkwardly against the old barrel he'd dragged into the center of the room once he'd realized this was going to be a while. "He's going to show up possessing someone?"

Dean immediately got the unease in his brother's voice. He hadn't been a big fan of the angelic method of visiting Earth much himself, though nowadays (or…er…future-a-days) it was such a commonplace thing that he stopped thinking twice about it years ago.

"It's voluntary," he supplied, hoping to ease the kid's conscience a bit even as his own started perking up. "Angels have to get permission to enter a vessel."

"What poor SOB says yes to being possessed?" Bobby snorted derisively, shaking his head at the prospect. Dean just shrugged.

"A religious one, apparently."

Sammy wasn't looking any more comfortable with the idea, and Bobby let out another disbelieving huff. "And what? They forfeit up their life to be some angel condom until the thing's done with its grand ole' tour of Earth?"

"Or till the humans kicks 'em to the curb," the man from the future offered with another shrug, but the movement was tense, shoulders hunched forward and his words a bit too clipped to be as relaxed as

he'd been going for. The hunter was unaware of the defensive body language and growing aggression in his tones, but he was getting antsy as they stayed on the subject of vessels.

Or maybe it was just Bobby referring to angels as things (and yeah, alright, Dean probably would have referred to about 99% of that population in a similar manner, but it was the 1% currently poking his conscience with a stick.)

"Are they awake? Like demonic possession?" Sam was staring at him, eyes somehow wide with curiosity while simultaneously filled with mounting worry. He was clearly upset by the idea. He'd never been possessed – not in this timeline – but he had seen the victims (*survivors*) and he knew their horrific recounts of seeing everything, feeling everything, but having no control over their own bodies.

"For parts of it, I think." Having never actually served as a vessel, Dean couldn't speak from personal experience. However, he remembered Jimmy Novak's opinion of angelic possession well enough, along with his relieved desperation to be over and done with it. "They can't shield all of it, but I know Cas tried with Jimmy. Guy said it was like being strapped to a comment."

"Jimmy?"

"Cas's vessel," Dean responded to his brother, but his words were distant, distracted. His brain was busy thinking about all the other angelic vessels he'd met over the years, but he couldn't come up with a single one outside of Jimmy that they'd actually talked to. Which was pretty incredible, given how many angels they'd met. How many they had killed. Sweat was breaking out across Dean's palms as he counted back through each angelic encounter he'd had. That *any* of them had had. The body count of vessels, innocent humans who said yes to serve what was a just and noble cause in their minds, was piling high. Higher than he should ever have let it.

The only two he'd known to survive their ordeals were Jimmy, who they'd talked to the one time he'd gotten away, and that poor son of a bitch Raphael had possessed. Jimmy ended up forced back into servitude to save his family, who had been *hunted by demons* the minute he earned his freedom, and in the end he'd died a vessel as well. Blown up by an archangel. Never mind the other guy, who ended up comatose in a hospital. And that poor SOB would be lucky if he died peacefully in that place and not under the blade of some demon seeking information he couldn't even process after the angelic

lobotomy he'd survived.

Quite suddenly, Dean couldn't get enough air.

"So…this Jimmy guy is going to offer up his body because *we're* summoning Castiel?" It wasn't the only thing Sam asked, unease winning over his natural curiosity as he let lose a barrage of questions Dean was barely hearing. "You said Cas was still with you in *2016*. That's- that's *ten years* from now. Does he even know what he's getting into?"

Dean wasn't paying attention, though. His brain was stuck on a single thought that, once thought, couldn't be un-thought.

Claire.

"Dean?"

Claire Novak. That badass woman warrior, that pain in his ass kid, that beautiful young lady who had grown from a life of pain and ugly into something truly awesome. Dean loved her, like a daughter-baby sister combo. Like he'd loved Ben; like he'd loved Jo. Like he'd loved *Charlie*. Even if Claire tried to drive him (and Jody and Cas) up a tree *and* grey on a monthly (sometimes weekly) basis. That incredible young woman who was becoming one hell of a hunter under his (and, yeah, fine, okay, Jody and Cas') tutelage. The girl who was hell bent on hunting down the supernatural baddies of the world and saving people, like she hadn't been saved, when an angel came and took her father from her. When her mother followed after in a foolish attempt to get him back. When she was left an orphaned teenager, jumping from foster homes to detention centers, running from deadbeats to douchebags looking for a family to fix the one she'd lost.

All because Castiel had taken her dad from her.

Shit.

Shit shit *shit shit shit!*

Dean couldn't breathe. He'd just rung the dinner bell, invited the angel to take Claire's father from her *again*. Years earlier, actually. She'd been, what, ten, eleven the first time? Great, now she'd lose Jimmy at *eight*.

What the fuck had he been thinking?

He was taking away a kid's – an amazing kid's – childhood, ruining it and setting her up for a shit future of hurting and hunting and loneliness. Even with Jody and Alex making up their odd but endearing little family, even with Cas and Claire forming some sort of awkward friendship in the face of her missing father, even with Sam and Dean there whenever she needed them, none of that could ever make up for an honest to God childhood, a loving mother and father, school and homework, first dates and prom and friends; a *normal life*.

No one deserved the road of a hunter, not if it was preventable, and Dean could have damn well prevented it by leaving Cas out of all of this.

God, his chest hurt just thinking it, and he knew he couldn't follow through. He *needed* Cas; he could not do this alone. He'd reached the end of his rope, and he'd spent enough years hunting and facing down ends of the world to know when he was out of his depth and in need of help. But he couldn't take Claire's father – her childhood – away from her, either. Not if there was an alternative.

Son of a bitch.

They were going to have to find Castiel a different vessel. Someone who wouldn't leave behind a kid, a family or loved ones who would miss him when he followed the Winchesters to the end of the world.

"Son of a bitch!" he swore, ferociously, just under his breath.

Sam didn't have a chance to question the sudden exclamation, though worry and irritation was written clearly across the wrinkles of Dean's brow, because of course, *of course*, the single working light in the barn chose that moment to start flickering, and the wooden slats making up what was left of the roof above them began rattling in the building wind.

-o-o-o-

Both Sam and Bobby had their guns up and trained on the barn door. Dean jumped off the makeshift table, heart thumping against his ribcage so loud he was sure the other two could hear it. He stepped up between them, eyeing his brother's handgun and Bobby's shotgun with trepidation.

"Don't shoot him," he said suddenly, eyes and words desperate as he met Sam's confused brown gaze over the curve of his shoulder. Dean licked his lips nervously. Cas could take a bullet or a shotgun blast,

but what about Jimmy? He could just heal him, heal his vessel, right? Still, Dean was suddenly really uncomfortable with testing that theory.

He'd never been so happy to have lost the Colt.

Even if the normal guns couldn't hurt him, there was the slim chance that shooting him would piss him off and he might take flight before they could stop him. What if he left with Jimmy, back to Heaven? What if Claire lost her father extra permanent this time because he was a fucking thoughtless idiot?

Of course, a knife straight to the heart hadn't exactly translated into '*fly away!*' for the angel last time. At that time, though, Cas had been on a mission from God, not summoned without explanation in the middle of apparent 'peace times.'

Dean settled his hand atop the site of his brother's gun. He didn't put any pressure in the grip, didn't force him to lower the weapon or try take it away, but the gesture was clear. "Just don't shoot, alright?"

Sam looked loathe to acquiesce to that, but he gave a hesitant nod all the same. His gun lowered a couple inches, but he kept it gripped tightly between his hands, still held out in front of him. Bobby had no such reservations, shotgun tucked securely into his shoulder and raised right on the door. He wouldn't shoot unless whatever they'd summoned gave him reason to, and Dean just had to pray an overly prideful, slightly dick angel wasn't reason enough.

The wind was picking up, the barn doors rattling in the howling gusts, the roof shaking above them, dust and bits of rotted wood shaking loose to rain down on them. The single light gave a high pitch, electrical whine before it exploded spectacularly, glass tinkering to the straw-hewed ground.

All three hunters jumped at the flare and shattering glass, the barn falling dark around them. Lighting struck outside, blue-white light flashing through the barn, illuminating their silhouettes against the dark backdrop.

There definitely hadn't been a storm in the forecast for tonight.

"Balls," Bobby breathed out against the butt of the shotgun, grip tightening on the trigger and barrel. Dean cast him a precautionary look, but the old hunter wasn't watching and he probably wouldn't have bothered responding even if he had.

Castiel's entrance was just as dramatic as the first time. The doors burst inward with another brilliant flash of lightening. The smell of ozone and charged electrons filled the barn. Hay and dirt swept across the floor beneath their feet, swirling about in the tumultuous winds that only settled once the angel crossed the threshold of the old barn.

Bobby adjusted his grip on the gun in warning, but the man that entered the barn was oblivious to the very clear threat. His fervent blue eyes were locked solely on Dean and did not stray. The older Winchester's hand was still resting atop Sam's gun, and the young hunter struggled not to raise it back up to train on the thing now in the building with them.

Dean had been half right with his Holy Tax Accountant description. He'd gotten the tan trench coat, dark, messy hair, and intensely blue eyes dead on. Sam was pretty sure the navy and white striped pajama bottoms and old grey t-shirt were a little more off-menu than normal for the stoic angel, though. The fuzzy maroon slippers *definitely* were.

Despite the unintimidating form, the being they'd summoned in front of them, now strolling toward them, was powerful. The air damn near crackled with it, his gaze all but glowed from it, and every step closer might as well have been accompanied by individual lighting strikes for all the charge in the wide open space.

It was suddenly not hard to believe this wind-swept, slipper-wearing, tax accountant was an angel on mission from God himself. Especially not when he locked that unwavering, single-minded focus on his older brother.

"Dean," Sam breathed out, the name half question, half warning. Every muscle in his body screamed to shoot it. Black hair, and the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Just like Missouri Moseley said, and suddenly he couldn't quite get over how much sense it made for Dean to be afraid of this thing. Sam's grip on the barrel of his gun only tightened and, against every instinct his life and father had trained or bullied into him, he took his eyes off of that powerful creature to look at his big brother.

There was something heartbreakingly hopeful in his gaze, locked as surely on the angel as the gaze he was receiving back, and Sam found himself lowering his gun before his brain could protest in a voice that sounded a hell of a lot like John Winchester.

Castiel stopped several feet from them, ethereal eyes finally moving to

the other men in the room and carrying the weight of Heaven behind them. In response to that intensity sweeping over both of them, the two men not from the future nor familiar with the supernatural badass standing in front of them, stiffened under the inspection. With weapons drawn, game faces on, shoulders up, they presented a formidable wall of strength and intimidation for any of the supernatural community.

Except, perhaps, the angel standing before them.

"Why have you summoned me?" Castiel asked, and Sam blinked, surprised at the deep voice. He hadn't expected the holy tax accountant in front of him or the guy his brother described to have a voice that gargled gravel every morning and smoked three packs a day.

Metal clicked and Sam looked over Dean in time to see him raise a lighter, thumb flicking the wheel and spark igniting.

"Sorry about this, Cas."

The flame danced through the air as the Zippo fell to the straw-strewn dirt beneath them. All three hunters stepped back – two hurriedly and one regretfully – as flames leapt to life, tracing a circle of oil poured long before the angel it encased had arrived. The heat was strong, far stronger than a normal fire would produce, and Sam and Bobby staggered another half step away, leaving Dean standing out to confront the suddenly stormy angel alone.

Although Castiel did not move, the way he canted his head to gaze at the circle around him gave off the impression of a predator all but stalking the flames in a slow circle. Sam could feel more than see just how close Bobby was to shooting him out of pure instinctual need. The way those now fierce eyes settled back on his brother, Sam could hardly blame the older hunter. There was the Warrior of God his brother had spoken of, and he had *not* done him near enough justice in his descriptions or his warnings.

Castiel's eyes flared angrily at the man – men – imprisoning him. The circle was wide, far larger than they should have made it, giving him the freedom to move without risk to his wings. A mistake they would regret, he would make sure of it as soon as he found the weakness in this entrapment.

"What is this?" that deep voice boomed. Bobby swore under his breath and Sam struggled not to take another step away from the low,

seething outcry that was followed by a flash of lightning from *inside* the barn. Shadows tore up the old walls and Sam did stumble back as the darkness took the shape of huge, looming wings.

Shit, Missouri Mosely had it right all along. This guy was worth fearing. Sam had never encountered power like that, nor presence. His eyes alone said it all, and Sam now understood the awe in the psychic's voice when she'd described them.

Dean hardly seemed phased, though, and Sam tried to find his own resolve in that. Just the way his brother stood there, looking half a second from cracking open a cold one with a shrug as he discussed the pros and cons of various machete brands, the expression on his face more annoyed at the dick show of power than intimidated by it in the slightest. That, or given the nervousness he'd been displaying all week, it was one hell of a good mask. Sam could not deny the impressiveness of either one, since he was embarrassingly close to needing a new pair of pants.

"We need to talk," his older brother spoke firmly, the listen-to-me-if-you-want-to-live hunter voice cranked to full-power.

In reality, despite his Dean-perfected disinterested façade, the man from the future was pretty much right there with his brother in terms of needing a change of clothes, although his was less from fear of the impressive being in front of them so much as what was riding on Dean not fucking this up. A.K.A. their entire future and the end of the world. No pressure. It was not helping that he had forgotten how much of a dick First-Time-Cas could be (he really hadn't, but he might have been a little too hopeful thinking maybe he'd exaggerated the memories over the years).

Castiel's eyes narrowed at the obstinate human standing before him. The man who had prayed to him relentlessly for months, more often than not impertinent in his demands. For whom he had broken Heaven's rules, in part to fulfil a misplaced curiosity. A choice that had led to the death of his brother and friend.

"Who are you to command me?" the angel challenged, once more eyeing the flames at his feet, looking for the weakness or error that would allow his escape. This time, he would be reporting his infraction to Heaven right alongside this ridiculous and unheard of behavior of a hunter summoning and imprisoning an angel of the Lord.

Dean huffed in response, the sound as incredulous as it was genuinely amused. Staring at his best friend – or the guy he hoped would once more become his closest friend, ally, *family* – the hunter couldn't help himself. "I'm Dean Friggin' Winchester."

The angel looked unimpressed, expression unchanging from the intense, near blank wall of stone that was Old-Testament Cas. Pre-Winchester-Gospel Cas. Dean could only internally shrug. Future Cas would have thought that was pretty damn amusing.

"This's my brother, Sam, and our friend, Bobby," he said instead, pointing over his shoulder at his brother and jerking his head towards his surrogate father, who was looking mighty twitchy with that shotgun. Realizing the current conversation needed to start going places, lest Bobby get an itchy trigger finger, Dean pulled his game face on. "Look, Cas-"

"That is not my name," the angel returned immediately, and Dean couldn't stop his eyes from rolling (so much for game face).

"*Castiel*," he bitched back with emphasis that had the angel tilting his head ever so slightly to the side. "Happy?"

Those blue eyes narrowed again, which seemed to be answer enough that no, he was not happy. Dean couldn't help but think *his* Cas would have pointedly slid his gaze to the flames, with all the sass and eyebrow action that came from being a Winchester.

"Look, I'm sorry for summoning you and for the, you know, holy oil," Dean conceded with a glance at the flickering fire, which Castiel matched with one of his own, albeit it was a far more cautious, infuriated gaze. He'd kind of hoped the extra large ring would maybe be seen as the peace offering it was. But, yeah, considering it was still one hundred percent imprisonment, no matter the leg room, he'd known it had been a pipe dream kind of hope. "Trust me, it's as much for your protection as ours."

"I am an angel of the Lord," Cas answered, drawing up to his full height, which seemed so much more than the six feet of vertical space he actually occupied. "I do not need your *protection*."

Damn, but was Castiel bitchier than he remembered. Memory wasn't exactly the most reliable of the senses, Dean knew that better than anyone, but maybe he had gone into this relying a little too heavily on what he thought he knew. This wasn't his Cas, though. This wasn't even the Castiel he'd first met. That angel had raised him from Hell,

fought through fire and demon alike to raise the Righteous Man because he honestly believed, with everything he was, that he was doing God's good bidding.

This angel had just been pulled down from Heaven on an unwarranted summoning and trapped in something that could very easily kill him if he so much as *tripped*.

Dean bit down on the edge of his tongue as he stared at this proud, angry, and honestly confused angel with a sudden lack of understanding and utter uncertainty. Well crap. He kinda hadn't factored this totally predictable can of worms into the conversation, and now had no clue how to proceed.

"I need you to look at me," he blurted out, wincing as soon as he'd said it, but also knowing there was no way he was taking it back, chick-flick meter maxing out at 10 or not. The whole point of summoning Cas into a ring of holy oil was to get him up to speed, and that wasn't gonna happen by *talking*. "Really look at me, Cas….tiel."

The angel continued staring at him, unblinking. After a long moment of silence, the barn so deathly quiet but for the crackle of burning oil, Dean let out an annoyed growl.

"My soul, Cas." He couldn't help but roll his eyes at his entirely too literal friend. "Look at my soul."

Bobby made an immediately distressed sound cleverly disguised as disgruntled, shotgun still sharp in his shoulder and pointed straight at the angel. He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a warning of, "*boy*," but Dean only held his hand out to the side and tried to back him down with a small flapping motion. He never took his eyes off the angel, whose gaze had settled directly on the hunter's chest. Dean tried not to squirm under the scrutiny of a guy who could see clear through him. Hell, who he'd just asked to see clear through him.

Cas tilted his head to the side suddenly, a light frown pinching his eyebrows together in a move so fucking familiar as to be physically painful for the man from the future. "You are not from this time."

He could hear the shuffle behind him, the deep intake of quite breaths from the rest of his family and, yeah, okay, that was fair. It was one thing to suspect your brother was from the future, another to hear him admit to it, and an entirely new experience to have some stranger confirm it in what was practically the first words out of his mouth.

"Deeper," he ground out because damn it, he already knew that part (*you're the one that did it, assbutt.)* What he needed Cas to see, what he himself needed to know, was buried beneath that. *You already know the truth, Dean, you just want to hear it from someone who's not a demon)* (*whoa, déjà vu…God damn it, God! Come on!*)

Dean pulled out of his internal ranting at friggin' primordial, all-powerful, memory thieves to look back at his angel just as Cas's eyes snapped up to lock on his, wide as he had ever seen them. The celestial creature took a step back out of shock, which might as well have been a rock stepping out of the way for an ant, as Dean well knew what it took to physically move something like Castiel when he didn't want to be moved.

"H-How?" the angel asked and Dean already knew. He'd always known, damn it.

"It's grace, isn't it?"

Castiel's searching eyes darted between his own, then down to his chest, and it was all the confirmation he really didn't need. Dean caught the way Castiel's hand twitched at his side, raised for only a moment towards him – to touch his chest, to connect with that grace that was surely his – but he pulled back when the heat of the flames reached his vessel's skin.

Watching the angel watch his soul, the paradox of heart-aching familiarity and the possibility of the completely unknown, Dean made a stupid decision and he made it easily. With two steps, he was through the flames and within the circle of oil, coming face to face with his angel. Castiel didn't move even an inch (of course he didn't), bringing them almost chest to chest.

Oh well, like Dean wasn't uncomfortably used to having no personal space around the guy, even after years of trying to teach him the difference. He tried to ignore the heat that crawled up his back, having nothing to do with the burning holy oil, at the thought of Sam and Bobby seeing it for the first time all over again, though.

Of course, given their cries of surprise and cursing, respectively, along with the shuffle of a second gun joining Bobby's, trained on the scary-ass, unknown, soul-reading creature Dean had just put himself flush up against, the awkward intimacy of the situation was probably not what his family was worrying about so much.

Castiel wasted no time, raising his hand and splaying his palm across

Dean's t-shirt, encompassing as much space across his pectorals as he could (*Damn it, should have done this alone. Fuck Sam and his dynamic duo, the last thing this utter chick-flick moment needed was a god damnaudience)* The angel's hand was warm – no, scratch that, his hand was *hot*, and holy shit it was like the warmth that had been in his chest for months now was doing backflips now that it was so close to its actual owner. It was like butterflies in his god damn heart and no, fuck you very much, he was not going to read into that, shut up.

Dean had to swallow hard – way harder than he should have had to, damn it, he was *fine* – as he watched Cas's face, those blue eyes widening as the connection instantly formed between them at the physical contact. (And, yeah, no way the angel wasn't feeling it, what with the way his eyes were practically glowing and he looked more freaked than he had at that brothel.)

"It's yours," he said with a rough voice and then practically choked on the words. That heat flaring up his backside friggin' quadrupled. Shit, that was not something he ever expected – meant – to say, especially to another dude. Especially to another dude while his heart was doing backflips and front flips and sideways flips in his chest while butterflies danced around his rib cage like it was a god damn midsummer night's dream (*What, he reads (besides, they made a movie of that one.)*)

And he absolutely did not hear a stupid school girl in a dumbass skirt and a dumbass beret, with a dumbass, smug smirk on her face as she winks at him and says *'Subtext!'*

Fuckity fuck fucking *fuck*. This was ridiculous is what it was. Still, he didn't move away from that hand and he really kind of hated himself for it. Just a bit.

"Cas?"

The angel finally took a step back, pulling away and looking just as damn reluctant about it as Dean felt. His insides sunk and sagged at the loss, and the hunter rubbed at the warm skin under his t-shirt to try and diminish the weirdly hollow, disappointed feeling that he internally insisted was not his own.

"The grace is mine," Castiel confirmed, blue eyes locking on Dean's and somehow drying out his entire mouth. "However, it is not from me."

Dean could only nod. That made sense, he supposed. Still, he felt it

necessary to tack on, "Not yet, anyways."

"I…I sent you through time." The angel's shoulders dropped somewhat at the confirmation-slash-admission. The mix of emotions was a muddled mess on his face as he stared at Dean's chest in both awe and utter confusion. "I do not understand."

Still, there was something about the human before him, who had sent months of prayers and blasphemies, who had entered his prison voluntarily where Castiel could kill with a single move, who carried a sliver of the angel's own grace in his chest. No, Castiel did not understand, but the ever yearning curiosity and need to understand outweighed every other logical thought in his head, and he knew he would not pass further judgment on these men without answers first.

"Explain."

The human huffed out a half laugh, but his body language immediately loosened. He was even smiling as he stepped away and to the side. It opened the angel up to the weapons the other two men carried, but Castiel was neither worried nor bothered. The firearms could not hurt him, and he suspected if they were going to attack, they would have done so already, despite the obvious uncertainty in their tense stances.

"How much time you got?" Dean asked glibly, pulling the angel's attention back to him. There was a giddiness about him, a definite mix of Castiel giving them a chance and the still fuzzy warmth beneath his sternum. "Cuz that's a long story."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Don't freak out! But do yell at me. I hate where this ended too, but I am legitimately out of time; I'm actually late to a screening of Incredibles II, posting this from a café across the street from the theatre . But my friend (and a reader/fan :D) sitting next to me waiting to go to the movie while I have a panic attack about whether or not to post just told me to friggin do the thing cuz she'd rather have Cas sooner than wait. So…blame her? Yeah, let's go with that XD

I will get the next chapter and the resolution of the twist up as soon as it's been edited. Probably by Wednesday, though if you all yell at me lots you know it might happen sooner cuz excited fans may as well have me wrapped around their little pinkies -_-

Cheers till the next chapter!

Chapter 44: Season 2: Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Thank you all for the ridiculously awesome flood of feedback to last chapter. I would have had this chapter up sooner, but this is the earliest I could do. And I should so be asleep right now .

Chapter Warnings: Okay, so, I wrote last chapter and this chapter in the same go, and when I finally got to Castiel, I went from accidentally writing ridiculous innuendoes (not kidding, first few were totally accidental) to throwing them left and right because, screw it, I can and we've waited **forty** chapters for this, damnit! ;)

So….uh… to those not Destiel Fans who I told last chapter to stick around cuz it's totally subtle…..my bad? Hopefully you enjoy the humor of Dean's entirely unfortunate situation ;)

Actual Chapter Warnings: Implications/Innuendos/over-the-top hinting at pre-slash Destiel, along with some serious Dean flustered-ness, and a lot more gay [insert jazz hands here]. No actual slash but, oh boy, Bobby's gonna poke some fun and Sam's starting to catch on.

On a less fun note…. kind of one hell of a cliffhanger on this one.

Untagged event below:: for those of you that don't like unexpected twists in stories (but launched into this giant beast that began with an authors note warning about plenty of twists and turns ahead and yet had almost no actual informational tags attached to it...), be warned. I have not (and will not) tag anything that happens in this story outside of triggering material, as you should well already know, having made it this far through plenty of surprises that weren't in the tags. I don't agree with tagging a story with everything that's going to happen, nor the way a fic is judged by its tags without ever having been read. I've always believed a story deserves the chance to speak for itself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 11

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam was flagging. Justifiably, in his opinion, though he'd be damned if he was going to let any of it show.

He'd recovered a lot over the last five days. A far cry from the shaking, weak mess who could barely grip, let alone use, a crowbar. But waiting around for an angel in an old, poorly insulated barn had done him no favors (despite the growing summer heat, the May nights were still in the fifties). It was also way later and longer than he'd stayed up for a pathetic number of days now. Despite his recovery, he was still taking cat naps through the day, sleeping hard and heavy for more hours more often than he was happy to admit.

The wait had ended up being humiliatingly exhausting. All he'd wanted to do was lay down, and he knew he was in trouble when the straw-strewn ground started looking good. He'd refused to go lie down in the car like Dean had offered several times once Sam was no longer able to hide the minute trembling in his hands (his brother finally reduced to just muttering it beneath his breath as the hours ticked on). Now, the heat of the flames had him breaking out in a sweat out while his body kept trembling as his internal regulation went haywire. It left him a weak, shaky mess confronting the strongest, certainly the most intimidating, supernatural creature he had ever met.

How Dean just stood in front of the angel, like he couldn't feel the tension in the air, the power radiating off the pissed off being, or that intense blue *glare*, Sam didn't know. He certainly wasn't feeling as strong as his brother right now. He was barely keeping his gun level, and he knew with that trembling in his hands, however fine it was, he'd be an unreliable shot at best.

The kickback from his handgun would probably land him on his ass right now. Pathetic.

He refused to bow to it, however. He wasn't going to leave or show this weakness, especially not a weakness caused by demon blood. It didn't matter how Dean had tried to reassure him, didn't matter if he knew this wasn't his fault. He would *not* be the 'boy with the demon blood' this time. He would not be an abomination to the angel standing in front of him. He promised himself that much.

"Sam," Dean called slightly over his shoulder, though he no longer had his back completely to them now that he'd stepped to the side and given himself a little more breathing room. "Put the fire out."

Sam blinked at the request. They'd brought a fire extinguisher with them, though they'd hidden it in the back of the barn so it wouldn't give away the trap. Not that Dean actually thought the Castiel of this time knew what a fire extinguisher was. Or maybe he would know but a trap probably wouldn't occur to him right off the bat. As far as his brother had said, the angel hadn't been too hip to modern stuff, at least not in his first few months on Earth.

However, Dean never actually expanded on his plans for the extinguisher, or the fire itself. Only that they needed to trap the angel so he couldn't run off to Heaven before they'd talked some future sense into him.

Sam may not be an expert, but he had kind of expected (still did, actually) that would take more than a handful of sentences and some manboob fondling. But what did he know? His best friend wasn't an angel of the Lord. At least, not yet.

Bobby balked aloud and unabashedly at the proposal, never losing his grip on the shotgun. He cast a look at Sam that clearly said *'don't you listen to that foolheaded brother of yours, ya idjit. Yer both idjits. That angel's an idjit too.'* Sam turned back to Dean with conflicting orders and a look that said he was clearly backing Bobby on this one.

"It's okay, he's with us." Although the words were spoken to Sam, they were clearly directed at the angel, even though Dean somehow did so without taking his eyes off of Sammy or his shaking hands. "Right, Cas?"

Castiel tilted his head to the side slightly again, pupils dropping to the hunter's chest for another drawn out moment. When he looked back up, it was with the weirdest mix of perplexed conviction. "I…believe I am."

So, the younger Winchester stumbled his way to the back of the barn to retrieve the extinguisher, although he was still working through his list of reasons why it was a terrible, terrible idea. He tried to hide the fact that he almost tripped on weak legs the best he could. He was pretty sure 'the best he could' wasn't very good at all, considering the looks Dean and, oh crap, Castiel too, were regarding him with once he returned.

He ignored them both, particularly his brother, though the scrutinizing eyes of the angel were perhaps worse in many ways.

Abomination.

Boy with the demon blood.

Addict.

Sam hefted the extinguisher in his arms, pulled the pin, and depressed the trigger. The holy oil doused easily; once a part of the circle was broken the rest seemed to snuff itself out. It allowed Sam to set the hefty metal canister onto the floor a bit sooner, which was good because he was pretty sure he was only a couple minutes away from dropping it.

Damn, he really thought he'd come further than this.

At first, Castiel did not react to the diminished flames or his newly found freedom. Even as Dean backed off a couple steps, breaking past that circle of scorched ground, the angel remained still, staring at the youngest Winchester. Under that piercing gaze, head tilted like a curious bird, and body unmoving in a way that was very *not human*, Sam felt incredibly self-conscious. Dean looked about to interfere, glancing between the angel and his brother, when Castiel stepped forward with an intense purpose that frankly frightened the young man barely standing on his own two feet.

"Cas, wait-" Dean went to grab the angel's arm but only pinched tan fabric. Bobby stepped right in between the angel and his boys, barrel of his gun pressed straight to Castiel's chest and his own body blocking the way in a suicidal move worthy of the Winchester family. Somehow, despite all that, Sam still found two fingers pressed to his forehead, even as he leaned back at the sudden proximity and unexpected contact.

"Bobby, don't!" was all he heard before something warm and fresh and *healing* spread through him. He gasped in surprised, the sound drowned out by the blast of a shotgun way too close for comfort. Sam stumbled away from the gunfire instinctually, and blinked in shock as his legs held steady beneath him and his lungs expanded free of the tightness and ache that had been weighing heavy across his chest for days.

"What?" he whispered, barely getting the syllable out, as the reality of what happened refused to register in his bewildered mind. The first

thing he could think to do was raise his dominant hand – his shooting hand – and stare at the outstretched limb, fingers splayed at chest level, steady as a rock. No tremble, minute or otherwise.

Sam forgot how to make his lungs work. For the first time in days he had the full lung capacity and muscle strength to do it, and he just couldn't breathe. He hadn't wanted to admit it, even to just himself, but the persistent trembling for days now had started to eat at him like rot. The other symptoms had all lessened while the tremor remained. You couldn't be a hunter with a shaky gun hand. You couldn't kill demons who could disappear in the blink of an eye. You couldn't stop the apocalypse as a handicapped, ex-addict with the shakes.

He patted himself down absently, realizing that the residual pain in his bones and joints and muscles, lingering for days, was completely gone. He felt good. He felt *strong*, but not like he had on the demon blood. This strength felt like himself and, he realized, blinking away the watery emotion that rebelliously filled his eyes, he felt *clean*.

"Sam?" His older brother was still holding Cas's sleeve, for all the good it did them. Sam stared at the picture the three of them made for a moment: Dean clutching the angel's coat like a child, Bobby's shotgun braced in his shoulder, barrel still smoking, while the old hunter stared in shock at the ease with which the angel had gripped the barrel and forced the gun to the side, harmlessly shooting buckshot and salt into the already crumbling ceiling. Castiel seemed oblivious to both of them and their surprise, standing like an unmovable statue regarding the healed Winchester.

"Dean?" Sam echoed vaguely, still surprised at the healthy feel of life in his bones. He stared down at his hands again, amazed.

"He heal you?" Dean asked kind of cautiously, though it was obvious from the growing smile on his face that he already knew exactly what the angel had done.

"He can do that?" Still dazed, Sam sort of mumbled back, the question rather wasted, since the answer was obvious.

"Partially," Castiel interrupted, hand still on the gun, arm still (sort of) restrained by the older Winchester. He hadn't bothered moving, standing there like some wax sculpture in a sleepy-time tax accountant getup. "I could not cleanse you of the infection entirely; the demonic taint is too rooted in your blood. A small amount

remains."

Sam fought off the wince, but was somewhat relieved that the angel's tone remained completely neutral about the infection that rotted beneath his skin and made him not completely human. And, in Sam's opinion, not completely *good* either. But that was an internal discussion for another night. Dean looked pretty darn pleased with Castiel's neutrality as well, standing there grinning like a kid at his sixth birthday party when all his friends – even the ones who lived *really* far away – showed up. Not that either of the Winchester boys knew what a birthday party was actually like.

Castiel turned towards the older of the two brothers, releasing the shotgun so Bobby could finally lower it. He immediately looked to Sam, eyes wide and filled with parental concern.

The angel raised his hand, fingers splayed and palm hovering over Dean's chest once more. "May I?"

Dean fumbled with the sudden return to uncomfortable territory, unable to stop himself from glancing at the others. But he couldn't deny the way his chest flipped and *sung* at just the possibility of that connection again.

God damn chick flick crap.

"It's your grace, dude," he replied with forced nonchalance, eyes darting again to his surrogate father figure, who was giving Sam a quick once-over and hunter-esque run down to make sure Cas hadn't done more than heal him. So far, it looked like the gruff old man might finally *not* shoot the angel as soon as he got the chance.

Then that hand was pressing against him and his chest was flipping the fuck out, and Dean had to work hard to breathe through the warmth and overwhelming happy. Which was just friggin' ridiculous.

Castiel stood solid for several long, silent minutes as he stared straight past his fingers, through Dean's chest to the grace settled beyond. His expression slowly tightened, eyes narrowing and brow beginning to pinch as that focus deepened.

As the moment dragged on to the point where Dean was thinking an awkward cough or throat clearing was definitely in order – anything to make the angel realize he was standing practically flushed against him, hand on his chest like a friggin' damsel – Castiel pulled his hand back.

Or, at least, he tried to.

The angel's hand drew back, palm and fingers spread wide and straining, and Dean's chest followed without his consent. Though the hand on his chest remained flat against him, the hunter felt the pull as surely as if the angel had fisted his shirt and tugged him closer. He leaned into the weight a few inches before he realized what he was doing and started drawing back.

Cas frowned at his hand, stuck flush to the hunter like he'd glued it there, and tried again. Dean just moved with the limb, no space created between the angel's palm and his chest. He had to take a step forward that time to counteract the sharper tug.

The hunter stared wide-eyed at the physical connection between them, oblivious to the equally panicked eyes of his family beside them. Castiel's face screwed up in concentration and Dean let out a little gasp of surprise as the pull behind his sternum manifested like a bowling ball rolling straight into the wrong side of his body. A warm, wriggling bowling ball that Dean suddenly realized was Castiel's grace.

His friend only frowned and tugged harder.

"C-Cas-" Dean was finding it a little harder to breath at the uncomfortable pressure that continued to build with each of the angel's failed attempts. He wasn't exactly sure how to phrase his concern as anything other than '*I don't think it wants you doing that, buddy*.'

The angel's eyes sharpened into that dangerous land of righteous *I-Am-An-Angel-Of-The-Lord-And-You-Will-Listen-To-Me,* and he pulled hard enough to make Dean stagger forward with a weak cry as that heavy mass tried to get from the inside to the outside, *Alien* style. Sam and Bobby were between them almost immediately, fast enough that if Dean hadn't been dealing with something kind of terrifying and definitely painful at the moment, he would have been impressed and just a touch honored. Sam caught his brother before he could hit the deck and probably give one of his knees a real good tweaking. Bobby bodily shoved Castiel away, staunchly planting himself between the entity and one of his kids once more. He didn't bother training the shotgun on the angel – not enough distance between them to do so and no point anyway, he was realizing – but kept it raised as a warning barrier, even knowing it was nothing but a peashooter to his opponent.

There wasn't a need, it turned out, as Castiel allowed himself to be pushed and stayed there. His expression was just as surprised as the others, eyes blown wide as he stared at the gasping hunter and tried to process what had just occurred. The angel obviously needed a minute himself, shaking off the after effects as he straightened once more.

"I-" he cut himself off, clearly out of sorts still. "My apologies. I sought to alleviate you of my grace."

Dean managed to right himself from his half-bowed position, hand pressed to his sore chest. His heart was beating a mile a minute and he didn't know if that was him or Cas in there ratcheting up his blood pressure. Could have been from fear or the actual physical danger that had left his torso feeling like it had taken a cannonball to the chest, only in reverse. Either way, Dean promptly ignored the way his chest constricted at the very idea of losing the warmth buried happily in there (*not happily, that's friggin' girly. My chest doesn't do **girly**. It's just buried in there, damn it.*)

"Yeah," he wheezed out instead, giving a light cough to clear his recovering lungs from their tightness. "I'm guessing Dorothy didn't want to go back to Kansas."

Castiel immediately tilted his head to the side. "I do not understand that reference."

Dean could kiss him, he really could. No, wait, scratch that. Dean could hug him, he really could. Dudes hugged all the time.

"It seems I cannot extract it," Castiel continued, oblivious, but looking bereft at the perceived failure. "Your soul is inexplicably tied to the fragment. It will not release it."

Bobby immediately huffed, still standing as a human barrier and not looking like he would be moving anytime soon. "You telling us Dean's got an angel's soul wrapped around his?"

Dean fought off the flush that tried to heat his cheeks. There was no *wrapping* involved here, damn it. This wasn't some rom-com snuggle up. Cas was just inside him, alright? No, *shit*, that's not what he meant. Damn it, he had *not* just thought that. He'd thought… uh… Cas was just…he was riding around in his chest, alright? *Jesus*.

Castiel turned from staring at Bobby to staring at Dean, confusion and a little concern starting to change that stoic expression spread across

his features. It didn't last long (just enough for Dean to start panicking about the angel reading those pesky surface thoughts and oh, yeah, they were going to have to have that talk again) before Cas retrained his intense gaze on the older hunter. "That is a… crude analogy, but not entirely incorrect. Angels do not have souls, nor are we capable of…wrapping around anything. However, our grace is our essence and, as such, could be considered equivalent."

"So…yer essence is all up in Dean's business?"

The older Winchester let out an undignified sound that was in no way a squawk – *no way* – and followed it up with one hell of a glare in his surrogate father's direction. This night just kept getting better and better, didn't it? Thank God that Castiel, at least, remained oblivious.

"The slice of grace within Dean's soul is very small: an almost unnoticeable sliver, unless you are looking for it. It should not have had the power needed to integrate with a human vessel." The angel frowned, eyes shifting down to the Winchester's chest once more. "Even if it did, Dean's soul should have acted as a barrier. They should have remained separated as the soul rejected the presence of foreign power once its trip through the timestream was complete."

Castiel just stood there frowning at his rib cage and Dean could suddenly empathize with bugs and frogs and whatever else kids pinned down and dissected these days.

"For the grace to resist rejoining mine so strongly, I suspect Dean's soul initiated the integration and is now refusing to let go."

Well that was just *insulting*. He was Dean Friggin' Winchester, damn it. He was not *clingy*.

Bobby snorted something unseemly, which had Dean glaring at him again, but the more distressing reaction was Sam's climbing eyebrows. The kid was clearly starting to catch on to Bobby's amusement. Dean opened his mouth to cut that off right at the head, here and now, damnit, when Castiel looked up at him rather than down at his chest.

"It is most unusual. You would have to be intimately familiar with my grace for such a coupling to occur." Those blue eyes never left his as he moved around Bobby to approach Dean, who didn't try to stop him (and damn it, *now* the old man was going to side with the angel?!). That was his excuse for why he practically jumped out of his skin when Castiel's hand found its way back to his chest.

What a friggin' site they made, the pair of them. Why was it his feet refused to listen to his screaming head (*back the fuck up RIGHT. NOW.)* all because his chest was back to melting into a pile of useless, humiliating goo.

"Have I – the me from your time – put a part of myself inside you before-"

"Okay, you know what-" Dean cut in before Cas could fully finish that flat out ridiculous line of questioning. It was too late, though. Bobby damn near choked on his own saliva, covering it with a coughing fit and gesturing at the dust and straw on the floor as a piss-poor excuse. Castiel turned his head to stare at the ailing hunter in confusion and the beginnings of concern. Sam, meanwhile, was biting his lip trying not to laugh, arms crossed over his chest as he stared expectantly and with no small amount of glee – evil, ugly, smug, son of a bitch, little brother *glee* – in his eye.

Dean's legs finally got the message from his all-out-screaming brain and the hunter backed the fuck away from his friend, whose hand was still splayed against his chest. Dean shoved the disappointment from the loss of that touch down so hard and so fast, the soles of his feet hurt from it. As well they *fucking should*.

"I didn't realize you were into having angel parts inside you, Dean," Sam offered almost casually. Nonchalantly, even. The *bastard*.

"It would be unhealthy if he was," Castiel interjected, completely serious, because angels didn't fucking *do* sarcasm. No, scratch that. Almost every angel the Winchesters had ever encountered – would encounter – had no problem with sarcasm. It was just *this* angel (of course).

Said angel was turning back to him, concern and a little bit of horror bright in his eyes at the implication that Dean was partaking in angel grace like it was mother-friggin' cupcake and he was a fat kid in a candy shop. "I have no idea the consequences of merging grace with a human soul, but I doubt they are good. If the me of your time has been inserting himself into you-"

By that point, Bobby gave up trying to hide that he was flat-out dying, attempting his darnedest to snort and choke his way into an early grave. Worse, Sam was only a few steps shy of joining him, not so inconspicuously wiping at the corner of his eyes as he laughed outright. Ignoring them both, because *fuck* that, Dean

proclaimed, *loudly*, "You raised me from hell, you stupid son of a bitch!"

Castiel, concerned gaze turned once more to observe what he perceived as two ailing humans having inexplicable trouble breathing, snapped his head back around so fast the motion was nearly a blur. It made Dean choke on whatever words were left on his tongue because, *damn*, that was not exactly how he'd meant to break that particular sheet of ice.

His brother and Bobby managed to quiet down as well, composing themselves rather quickly given their previous state. Of course, *now* they were serious. Typical. But Sam hadn't heard the entirety of this tale yet, and Bobby had only gotten the cliff-note version.

Cas was still staring at him, eyes wide, before that blue gaze sank, so damn slowly, to his heart and the eighty-year-old soul hidden beneath.

"Your soul has been in Perdition," he practically whispered, vessel sucking in a breath it didn't need. Castiel didn't know how he had missed it before. Well, yes, he did; he had been justifiably distracted by the presence of angelic grace – his grace – where such a thing should not be.

But now that he was searching for it, Castiel could see the scar as clearly as the rest of the dancing ball of light and life. A dark blemish that ran the length of the otherwise bright and astonishingly *good* soul. The fragment of grace sat, heavy in the crevice like molded clay, filling the expanse left from years in Hell, burrowing into the edges to seal off the crevice from the rest of the human's soul. Protecting it. Trying to *fix* it, like such a thing was possible. Castiel was not in a place to evaluate the plausibility of such a decision, made by a version of himself he hardly recognized.

The edges of the mark where the sliver clung to had traces of the same essence, only older: faded and grown into the fabric of the soul as if it had been there at its construction. No, its *re*-construction. *He* had remade the bindings of this soul. He had meshed together the broken pieces, irreparably altered and shattered by their time in Hell, and bound the revitalized life to the human flesh that stood before him. Castiel resisted the very un-angelic need to step away from that realization and all that it entailed.

"Sold my soul to save my brother," the man was answering the question Castiel hadn't asked, and the angel used the distracting sound of his voice to draw his attention away from the chaos and panic overtaking his mind.

Dean's answer was rote. Calm. Even. Simple fact. Green eyes darted over to his brother's, meeting the uncertainty, the fear of a terrifying future, and the determination to never see it come to pass, all in one. With a nod to Sammy, Dean turned back to his (hopefully) future friend, who was looking incredibly freaked out.

Well, at least that's how he looked to the only person in the barn able to read him that well.

"Do you know what breaks the First Seal, Cas?"

Castiel found his vessel trying to swallow, unnecessarily, around a large and painful lump in his throat that had not been there seconds ago. In fact, there were many growing causes for alarm happening with his current host. There was a dampness to his palms, the heartbeat was growing erratic, and his stomach felt as though it at a pit as concave as the lump in his throat was convex. He checked James Novak over quickly for the source of the disturbance, but there was nothing ailing him. Nothing to pinpoint the flush of heat or pounding heart. Nothing to further distract from the damning words the Dean Winchester had spoken.

"So it is time," Castiel spoke softly, gaze dropping off to the side. It explained the increased presence of demons on earth, why they had appeared so quickly and in such great numbers when he and Balthazar had touched down. It explained other things too, things he hoped didn't need explanations. "There have been rumors in Heaven. My superiors were investigating the possibility."

"They're in on it." Dean winced at the way Cas's eyes locked on him. The fierce '*no*' in that gaze was something he knew he was going to have to break. "I'm sorry. Read my memories, use your mojo on me. It's the truth. I'm the Righteous Man, Cas. In two years I break that seal, and Heaven doesn't lift a finger to stop it."

Castiel realized, as he began to identify the growing pit in the bottom of his borrowed stomach as horror, that he didn't need to read Dean Winchester's mind. He believed him. Which was unsettling in a way he was unsure he had ever before experienced. He knew the man before him wasn't lying. He could sense it, without trying, and more

than that, he just knew. It may have been the grace within the man's chest oscillating with his own, or perhaps the influencing fraction he had absorbed when trying to remove it. It could have been that he'd known Zachariah was lying all this time, though he hadn't known quiet what to call it or just how big the lie was.

Still, it should take more. He should need more to be so wholly convinced, to so readily accept this man's horrific words as truth.

A truth that was… enormous. The implications alone were… well, *apocalyptic*. This was something that needed proof, not the whim of a mere feeling. Feelings he shouldn't even possess. Castiel had always been different. Built wrong, he sometimes thought. Angels did not operate on feelings. They investigated. They were precise. They processed and assessed. And then they reported their findings to Heaven, as was their duty. A soldier had no use for *feelings*.

"I believe you," was what he heard himself say instead, voice coming out far rougher than he'd intended and not forming any of the words he had surely been thinking. It was frustrating, the way this body betrayed him when he was certain he had complete control over it.

The angel squared his human shoulders. This was no time for fear or uncertainty; he was a Warrior of God. A little voice in that back of his mind (with an unnecessary British lilt) decided to suggest that this was the perfect opportunity for uncertainty. Very definition of the right time, in fact.

Castiel pushed Balthazar's voice back down. This was not a time for wishful thinking or nostalgic dalliances or for voices of dead brothers to be speaking about in his head. He was a warrior of God, and whether or not he had known it going into the summons, he now had a mission. Castiel could not act until he determined the human's words as truth or fiction. (*'You already know it's the truth, Cassie') ('Stop speaking, Balthazar. You're dead and I've things to do.')*

So, the angel focused on that small wisp of grace he had managed to ease away from the human who had held it so close and refused to release the rest. The drop of power might have been near nothing in comparison to the vast ocean the rest of his grace comprised, but it was, by the very nature of angelic essence, an ocean unto itself. In this case, an ocean with a message in a bottle floating along the top.

"The Darkness?"

Dean straightened at Cas's unexpected rebuttal. The angel had done

that thing where he turned inward, gaze not focused on anything and eyes just a little glazed over with *otherness*. That slight, *not human* thing that all supernatural creatures seemed to possess in one way or another. Dean assumed he was working through the giant-ass bombshell he'd just dropped on the guy. You know, the one that had taken months, a battle-to-the-almost-death-of-his-vessel, bible boot camp, and a painful, final confrontation in a room decked out by friggin' Louie the XIV, before Dean had finally gotten through to Cas last time.

God's sister wasn't exactly what he'd been expecting the angel to come back with.

"You remember?" he asked, trying and failing to quash the hopefulness in his voice. But Castiel was already shaking his head in the negative.

"I was only able to absorb a fraction of the grace left within you. It contained information, not memories," he gave as an answer, eyes still a tad too unfocused to be entirely in the here and now. He seemed to be struggling with the words of a language he spoke fluently but not culturally. "My future self left…a note? Is that an accurate analogy?"

"Yeah, that works." Dean nodded, because it did, near enough. He absentmindedly rubbed at his chest, where the skin was still warm and the grace beneath had finally calmed the fuck down, apparently cluing in to the tone of conversation going on. "So you can't get the rest out, huh?"

He didn't know if he was asking out of disappointment or relief.

Castiel shook his head once more. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Dean's answer came way too readily for that previous emotion to ever be disappointment. He chose to ignore the side-eye his family was giving him and then promptly moved the hell on. "Did the note say anything else?"

Cas straightened in a way that screamed military training, like he'd just been handed his marching orders rather than a chunk of what was essentially his soul carrying a note from the future. "It said to trust you. To assist the Righteous Man and stop the Apocalypse."

Dean couldn't really quantify the relief that flooded him at those words. From the reaction of the rest of his family, the feeling was felt all around. Given that he might have implied anything from death to imprisonment by Heaven as a possible ending to this meeting… well,

Dean could hardly blame them for breathing a sigh of pure relief.

Until he noticed that look in Cas's eye. That look he got every time he knew he had to disappoint Dean. This angel probably wasn't very familiar with it yet, but Dean could spot that thing from a mile away, mid battle. It was the look Castiel had given him in Zachariah's holding room when he'd begged the angel to give up everything to save Sam. Not the world. No, Dean knew what he'd been asking and it hadn't been for the sake of the world or for what was *right*, as much as he swore it at the time. It had been for Sammy, and the look Cas sent his way, the look he was wearing right now, said he knew it.

"You can't, can you?" Dean offered, since Cas looked like he was struggling to say anything at all.

Those blue eyes looked away, down to Dean's chest again. The hunter felt more than saw his brother come up beside him, just over his shoulder. He knew the sasquatch had to be tense, that worried little frown pinching between his eyes. Sam knew the consequences of this particular angel not playing ball, which sounded dangerously like what was about to happen.

"Cas?"

"That is not my name." The angel still wasn't looking at him, and the response was *miserable,* as if it was the only fight he had left. Dean didn't like being the reason his friend sounded that way. He'd done it an ample number of times in the years he'd known the angel. Certainly long after Cas knew him well enough to know what he was in for each time. It was a new and quite particular variety discouragement to cause that in a Castiel that had known him all of twenty minutes.

So Dean didn't scoff at that fact that *yes it was* his name, but he didn't correct himself, either.

"I need time," the angel supplied finally, taking a breath he didn't need as he squared his borrowed body and faced the three hunters with as much resolve as an angel in the middle of a crisis of faith could have. "I…I need to process this. It is a lot of information to assimilate. I need…"

"Time to think," Sam supplied helpfully, a far more gracious and understanding expression on his face than his brother's. Sam turned to Dean, that look growing a hell of a lot more expectant, which just wasn't fair in Dean's. "We can understand that."

"Yeah, alright," the man from the future grumbled, trying not to take it personally that Cas wasn't prepared to drop everything he'd ever known, including his home and his family, for some guy he'd just met. Really, Dean could understand all of that. He'd just…hoped. Stupidly. What else was new in this damn timeline he was doomed to repeat. "Take whatever time you need. When, uh, when you've made up your mind, you can meet us at Bobby's."

He rattled off the address, and Castiel nodded solemnly, committing the information to memory immediately. The angel stood there another moment, silence stretching between the three in a way that he understood was incorrect but did not have the wherewithal to identify as awkward. Castiel was just about to leap into the ether, the conversation obviously concluded by the lack of further discussion, when Dean Winchester spoke again.

"Cas, wait."

The tension in his wings, gripped close to his true form but angled in preparation to catch the currents of the ether, dissipated with a single thought. He lifted his head and trained his borrowed eyes on the man he had sent through time, who was staring at him with something very akin to desperation but looked a lot more like anger.

"Yes, Dean?"

Something shook loose in those green pools, and Castiel tilted his head. Humans made such little sense, and he did not understand how something as simple as the hunter's name could so quickly distract him of whatever fears he'd had. The man's surface thoughts were of little help, as Castiel had no idea what a 'catchphrase' was.

"I know you need time," the hunter started speaking, drawing the angel's focus back. He really needed to strengthen control over his wandering thoughts. It was unprincipled and inexcusable. And worryingly akin to the voice of his deceased brother. "Whatever you choose, I get it, alright? But you can't tell Heaven about this."

Blue eyes locked on the human *instantly*, and whatever focus Castiel had been lacking before was suddenly laser-sharp. Dean winced beneath that gaze, knowing what he was asking but, in true Dean Winchester style, he didn't care. The world was kind of depending on Cas not running off to tell Heaven all about this powwow, and that was all Dean needed to be demanding about it. He opened his mouth to say as much, probably as unhelpfully as possible, so it was a good

thing Sam beat him to it.

"Did the note say what's coming?" Sam's words were softer, more understanding, and definitely not what Dean would have blurted out. He sent his kid brother a look that was probably as annoyed as it was thankful. The returning bitchface said Sam got the message (#9: *'You're really bad at this, so shut up and let me do the talking.')*

Castiel's piercing gaze shifted to the younger Winchester, and Dean managed not to wince again, but just barely. Sam handled the sudden, intense scrutiny with grace, though Dean knew the kid well enough to see how nervous he was. Beneath it all, sometimes Sam was still that thirteen year old kid in his freshman year at his fourth high school in as many months, who just wanted people to *like him*.

"Did it say how everything turns out?" Sam clarified, for lack of anything else to do under that harrowing stare. The angel nodded, though he looked particularly wrecked to do so, and Sam couldn't help wondering if it was even possible for a human body to move that solemnly, like living stone, or if it was purely an angelic thing. "Then you know we can stop it. We're going to stop it. But right now, Heaven wants the apocalypse to happen; they'll try and force it. If they find out Dean's from the future, that he knows it's coming and can stop it…"

Sam glanced to his brother. Dean gave him a barely perceptible nod to keep going.

"I know we're asking a lot of you." The younger Winchester turned back to the angel who, though his expression had hardly changed, looked even more wretched with each damning truth Sam was speaking. It was something about his eyes. Sam couldn't explain it, and now he knew why Dean hadn't even tired. "You barely know us-"

"I know enough," Castiel cut him off, rock-gargled voice deep and without hesitation, despite the expression that hardly matched that sureness. In fact, he looked like he hadn't even meant to say it aloud, which was almost comical on the stoic angel. Sam blinked, though, because that sounded like they'd just won him over. At least, maybe on the not-reporting-back-to-Heaven clause, which Sam honestly thought would be the hardest fight.

Distractedly, he wondered what that note could have possibly said to cause the angel to believe them. Whatever it was, it must have been convincing, because Castiel straightened to his full height, which was

nothing on the brothers, particularly Sam, of course. Still, he presented like a stone wall and Sam didn't doubt for a second that there was little in this universe that could take the guy down.

"I understand. I will return in an hour with…" Castiel paused, once again at loss for the word he was looking for, only now realizing he was not entirely sure what it was it was he was agreeing to return with. He had just agreed, against every aspect of his training, of his duty, of his own creation and purpose, not to report back to Heaven. Now, though…. These men would expect a resolution, he supposed. A decision as to whether or not he was…what?

You're with us. Right, Cas?

With them. That was the question they were asking.

It's okay. He's with us.

Which meant… *not* with Heaven.

Castiel supposed this was what panic felt like, or as close to it as an angel could come. He shouldn't be feeling anything like this at all, but that only seemed to be worsening the problem. What he needed was time and distance and silence.

Most of all *silence*.

He should seek revelation. Surely God would have something to say on this matter. Guidance, at the very least, though command would be preferable. Of course, none in the Host had heard from their Father in some time, but surely *this* – the Apocalypse, a flagrant disruption to time-space continuum, the dissolution of a plan He had written to fruition – surely *that* would be worthy of His attention.

Castiel could not move forward without his Father's consent. He could not disobey the will of Heaven, unless they had truly broken from their Father's hand. Only then could he return with whatever it was the Winchesters were expecting of him.

"I will return with an answer," he finally supplied, though that didn't sound quite right. He was at a loss for what else to say, however, and decided rather than taking the time to further question it, or wait for one of the humans to supply it for him, it would be best to take his leave. Castiel was a second away from launching into flight – he needed that silence and peace *now* – when distress flared from the grace that wasn't his and wasn't in him. He very nearly stumbled from

a completely standstill position and managed not to from sheer will power and a counter flap of his wing.

Castiel looked down at his grounded vessel to find Dean Winchester's hand wrapped around his wrist. The angel stared at the fingers curled atop the tan coat that Jimmy had put on as he left his house, hoping not to wake his wife or child as he spoke with the angel asking him to say yes. How strange the touch felt, now. Castiel had not taken a vessel in a century or more, and angels did not share physical contact in the same way as humans.

Focus, he (and apparently Balthazar) thought. Castiel raised his eyes back to the hunter.

"Cas." Dean started to speak and then faltered, even as the angel tried to assess what had caused that flare still echoing through both of them. Dean continued to flounder, tongue working but no words coming forth. Castiel's eyes narrowed as he sorted through surface thoughts for the cause of this new, baffling distress keeping him from his silence and revelation.

'*Claire*.'

The name meant nothing to him, but it stirred something deep within his borrowed skin. It took the angel a moment to realize the sensation was Jimmy Novak, waking, and he frowned at the change. He did not like to cause unnecessary strain or stress to those who served as his vessel, and he knew that containing an angel was not an entirely pleasant experience.

He was just about to push the human soul back into peaceful slumber when Dean spoke.

"You can't stay in that vessel."

His teeth ground together in a way Castiel knew, though he was unsure how, meant the man did not like what he was having to confess. His body was rigid and there was a fight in his stance. Were it anyone other, Castiel would be preparing to physically defend himself. In this human, however, he understood it as resolve. Pure stubbornness of the Winchester family line, which Castiel was unlikely to win against. In conclusion, Dean disliked asking what he was asking, but he would not back down from this request. No, that wasn't right. Demand. Dean Winchester did not request things when he was like this.

How Castiel knew any of this was baffling and deeply troubling. He was beginning to think that fragment of grace had more than just information.

"That guy, Jimmy, he's got a family," Dean continued, still through gritted teeth, still clasping Castiel's coat. "A wife and a kid. Damn it, Cas, he's got an *awesome* kid. And if he doesn't go home to them… it's gonna fuck 'em up. Bad. They don't deserve that; *Claire* doesn't deserve that."

Castiel stared, surprise flaring within him, at the desperate, pleading, *goodness* of this human. He could not explain it. He had met many humans throughout his millennia of living, and many of those souls had been good. But Dean Winchester's shone brightest of all his Father's creations he had yet seen. He had grossly overlooked it in that house some time ago, before a Baku had made itself known and demons descended.

Now, though, he was baring witness to what he had missed, because he could feel the ache of Dean's request. It was buried deep in the human's words, and that drop of borrowed grace was translating what he could not decipher for himself. Dean held some unknown attachment to this vessel that Castiel did not understand. It seemed to center around the tan article of clothing he was currently grasped onto, but that made little sense to the angel.

Furthering the grief eddying through his conscience were thoughts a young woman, blonde and fierce and foul-tempered, but Dean's emotions towards those memories were fond and proud. This was clearly Claire, aged to the time that Dean had been sent back from, and he obviously held some parental love for this child. That relationship would not exist if James Novak were returned to his family. Still, Dean asked (no, *demanded*) not for himself, but for her sake.

"You gotta find someone else, man. Someone without a family to leave behind or a life to fuck up."

Dean's tone was adamant. Castiel understood his request. For deep within his borrowed body, Jimmy's soul rejoiced at his beautiful daughter grown up, and yet simultaneously wailed in terrible grief, seeing and hearing all that Castiel did. The angel was humbled by the human's love and pain, as he was humbled by the honorable soul his Father had chosen to bare the weight of being the Righteous Man.

However, Castiel did not believe Dean understood what it was he was asking. The difficulty of such a task – the improbability of success – outweighed the sentiment and honor behind it a dozen times over. The angel tried to say as much. "What you're asking is difficult."

"I don't care," Dean cut in sharply, causing the angel to stare. "Get it done, Cas. You can't stay in Jimmy; Claire deserves a father."

Behind him, Bobby cleared his throat and Sam made an aborted nudge at his back. Dean caught both, but he didn't care. This was non-negotiable. Claire Novak wasn't going to end up losing her father and her mother twice. Castiel could go find some old geezer on the edge of death with no family to abandon or be hunted down by demons should shit go south (which it always, *always* did).

"Ask him," he said instead, no less fiercely, as he nodded at Castiel. "Ask Jimmy. Claire's an amazing kid, and she's going to grow into a kickass woman, but she deserves a life with her parents. She deserves a *childhood*. Don't take that away from her twice, Cas."

Castiel hardly needed to converse with the soul he guarded to know his answer, but he did so anyway. James was his charge, and as such, his health and well being were Castiel's responsibility. Jimmy was an honorable man; the angel knew he would not renege on their agreement to serve as his vessel, but Castiel could also tell he wanted to. The sheer panic flaring through the soul in painful bursts was enough for the angel to understand how desperately James Novak wished to return to his family, despite his noble desires to serve God and Heaven. Castiel was quickly becoming certain that nothing else would calm the agitated soul, and this current state of alarm was hardly healthy. As his charge, Castiel had no other discourse but to return him to his family to ensure his well being.

'*You keep telling yourself it's for that soul in your chest.'* That British voice was back. '*And not to see those pretty green eyes go all mushy again.'*

"I understand," Castiel announced, firmly ignoring his dead brother's voice in his head, half of whose words he didn't understand anyway. How a voice in his head could say things he himself did not know the meaning of was beyond him. He may have promised not to report these proceedings to Heaven, but he was very seriously considering reporting Balthazar's voice, if only to be free of it. "Your request is neither easy nor pertinent, but I will do what I can to fulfill it."

Then he was gone.

-o-o-o-

Sam was the first to break the silence that settled in the sudden absence of the angel. (*And thanks for the warning on that one, Dean. 'Angels can teleport,' that's all you had to say. Jerk.)* He skewered Dean with a look that was one part little brother, two part bitchface (mostly #5: *'Did you really just say that?'* with a hint of #7: *'Really, Dean. Really?'*)

"What?" the older of the two rebuked defensively, rolling his shoulders as he tried to release some of the built up tension he hadn't even realized he was carrying throughout that encounter. It could have gone a lot worse, he supposed. Could have gone better, too.

"You don't think that was a little…"

"*What*?"

Sam rolled his eyes, annoyed, and shrugged defensively, "I don't know, *harsh*?"

Dean scoffed, looking at Bobby, but the older hunter wasn't exactly rearing to back him up. He gave an apologetic one-shouldered shrug that pretty much said, *'yer brother's got a point, kid.'* Dean looked back at Sam, annoyed that he was more annoyed than he should be. "Seriously? The guy's an *angel*. He can take it."

"Maybe your Cas could," Sam answered, shaking his head, "but that Castiel doesn't know us yet, Dean. You pretty much demanded he go find another vessel, something you told me aren't just hanging out on every street corner."

"He can't stay in Jimmy," he argued immediately, again more defensive that he knew he had a right to be and unsure why he was so damn frustrated by Sammy calling him out on this and Bobby backing him up. "You don't know Claire, but she doesn't deserve this life, Sammy. She's gonna grow up *normal* this time. Don't you get that?"

"No, I get it, Dean. I do." Sam sighed, some of his bitchface slipping at how damn desperate his brother was looking under all that hotheadedness. Dean had always had a soft spot for kids, even if he tried to play it off like he couldn't stand them. It only got worse with kids caught up in the wake of the supernatural, like he had been. "I'm just saying, we're asking the guy to turn his back on his home, his family, without much more than our word that he should. You could at least be *nice* about it."

Dean was halfway to telling them they didn't have time to coddle the guy, words already formed and flowing from his mouth, when he realized that wasn't true. For once in their lives, they *weren't* on a ticking time bomb of a deadline to the next end of the world as they knew it. They had the time to do this right, and Dean just hadn't wanted to… what? Patiently wait for his friend to come around?

He'd never been great at that, though. Even he knew that when it came to Cas, he wasn't the most patient or understanding guy. He'd seen firsthand how maybe not-well Cas handled expectations he couldn't possibly live up to.

Dean sometimes forgot that his friend was so much more than just an angel. Sometimes he got lost in how powerful Cas was, how seemingly untouchable and, yeah, a handy guy to have in your corner. But he also remembered plenty well – well enough to wish he didn't – the times when Cas hadn't been that angel. When he had been hurting, down for the count or struggling with things no angel was ever meant to deal with, like PTSD or Falling or becoming the new Lucifer in the eyes of his entire family. Things he had walked right into for the sake of saving the world. No, that wasn't right and Dean knew it. It wasn't the world Cas cared so much about, it was the Winchesters. Always had been.

Maybe seeing that all-powerful, entitled dick from seven years ago, the one who wasn't ready to lay down on the wire for him and his brother yet, had kick-started those old fallbacks.

'*I needed to be useful.*'

Dean swallowed down the reactionary noise at that memory, of a dead angel standing on a dock in his head with that miserable look on his face, claiming he'd unleashed Lucifer on the world, let the damn Devil possess his body, so he could still be something to the Winchesters.

Instead of doing what he really wanted to do (which was swear like a sailor and maybe break a few things with his fists until his chest felt better), Dean let out a frustrated, garbled noise and ran a hand through his hair. Alright, so Sammy had a point. Maybe demanding shit of the angel they'd only just met wasn't the coolest move.

He'd apologize to Cas when he came back in whatever grandpa skin he found.

Of course, all of that went right out the window when Castiel flapped into existence in Bobby Singer's living room exactly fifty nine minutes

later, wearing nothing but a hospital gown and possibly the most gorgeous woman Dean had ever laid eyes on.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A/Ns: *Before anyone goes freaking out, lemme esplain! (For those of you not freaking out, feel free to skip the novel-length author's notes that were too long for the NOTES section of AO3, lol, and review instead ;)*

-No Jimmy? *Not yet, I'm afraid. First things first: this* ***isn't permanent****. We *will* be seeing Jimmy Novak (as Cas) again. In the meantime, why did I do this? Well, when I started the story, I made a commitment to stay true to the characters. I take great pride in writing them believably, but it comes with consequences. One day I was thinking up how Claire was going to end up in the story, and it was like I hit a brick wall of 'oh shit.' Once Dean thought about Claire and what losing her dad did to her, he would never let Castiel stay in Jimmy.*

Well, crap.

So that was that. I realized I had a problem on my hands. I could get rid of it the easy way: have Cas refuse or find some reason why he couldn't leave Jimmy. But if there is one thing I've learned in storytelling, it's that limitations breed creativity. If you throw away an idea or use a shortcut because it's convenient, your writing will suffer. So here we are! Castiel needs a new vessel.

…..Great, so now what?

-Why A Female Cas? *I decided pretty quickly that if *I* couldn't have Misha!Cas, I was gonna screw over Dean so hard his boner- I mean bones would hurt. Because I'm a dirty rotten author and he's a stubborn douchebag for making me lose out on Misha. So I'm gonna put that best friend of his that he has questionable emotions about right in front of him in a body he can't ignore (and let's be honest, if Chuck ships it, he'd totally pull this dick move too). Which leads my next point, actually.*

-But…but…where's my Destiel?! *This story is still ultimately Destiel (and despite what you read above, it's still gonna be the slowest burn on the planet) and it will be M/M by the end. However, here's the second half of my reasoning for this choice: from everything I've seen in the show and the character analysis I've done on Dean, he's not actually gay. (Non shippers sticking with this story for the content not the romance, rejoice! ;P)*

*But *GASP* you said this was Destiel! You said you liked Destiel! Lolz, don't freak out: it is and I do.*

Here's my thinking (and I've done a lot of it). Dean has never shown physical attraction to a guy on the show. He's certainly not homophobic (he's been fairly open about man crushes, his siren was a male, there was that gay hunting couple he had no problem with, and he's generally very sex-positive). At best, he could be bi, but I think that physical attraction is still missing. Like I said, when I decide to stick to a character, I do it thoroughly. So, how does someone like me think Destiel is a thing? Well, I believe Dean is emotionally in love with that angel, or, at the least, all those emotions are there but they may not have taken the shape of love yet. Because a relationship usually requires a physical side (and Dean's a physical guy) something has to change for that love to develop or be realized. There needs to be either a physical push or a mental one. It's why, personally, I feel a lot of Destiel stories are OOC for Dean, because they don't explain or take into account the gap in his character from 'not physically into men' to suddenly 'very physically into one man'. And that gap is totally fillable, you just need a push. Which is what we're doing here.

-Welcome to my Push: *So far, Dean's been able to utterly ignore any emotion towards Cas that might border on the 'more than friends' bit, because he's written it off as close (very close) friendship due to a lack of physical attraction. But put Castiel in a body he can't deny being attracted to, and he's going to start rethinking some of those pesky emotions he's got. I assure you, his panic will be downright adorable, as many of you are probably hoping for. And right around the point where he finally gives up and accepts that he wants Castiel, I'm gonna throw our favorite angel back in a male body and maniacally laugh as Dean has a mid-life, mid-apocalypse, straight up identity crisis. (You know Chuck would do it to, don't deny it.)*

In other words, Dean was asking for it; it's his fault we lost Misha!Cas to begin with!

*Plus, I've got more than one scene of Castiel going to Sam because he does not understand why Dean's avoiding him *again*. And Sam gets to explain sexual repression and emotional constipation to a genderless angel XD*

-Character Study*: The third and final reason I decided to do this is that, as an author, this is an awesome challenge. Angels have no gender, which means that there should be absolutely *no* difference between Cas and Fem!Cas. You shouldn't even notice if I do it well, and that is going to be a hell of a thing to get right. See, some of you may have guessed this already, but I'm, well, human. Yup, I said it, now you all know. And as many of you may also know, humans have male and female genders, which means I have a gender bias by default, whether I like it or not. We use different descriptors for men and women; the two primary genders speak, move, and*

*act differently. So I've got to somehow drop *all* of that, twenty plus years of societal training, and write a genderless character. I'm excited, guys. And you all better keep me on my toes about how I'm doing, because I won't always get it right.*

(case in point, be prepared for me to mess up a lot in the beginning and still refer to Cas as 'he'. It's ingrained in me. This is gonna be tough.)

(Also, I need to add that I know there are many, many more than two genders and I do not mean to exclude anyone by only mentioning the stereotypical male and female for this argument. I do my best to be a very inclusive writer and ally, but please call me out if you see otherwise! No other way to learn to be better :)

***-You Done Blabbing Yet, Woman?** Almost. In con clusion, what I'm hoping is that, this far into this little beast of ours, I have:*

1. Hooked you all well and good by now and you'll just have to stick it out because you gotta know how this time-screwy story is going to end (and oh, the places we'll go first!)

2. Proven that I have the writing chops to maybe, just maybe, pull this off. (That's a real maybe guys, not sarcasm. Like I said, I'm nervous about this, too!)

(Side note: this doesn't even cover #3: You're totally fine with/actually excited about this twist and you only read the author's notes because you like it when I babble.)

*Anyhoo, I get this may not be what some of you signed up for. After consulting several other writers and friends in an absolute panic over this decision (certain I was going to piss off readers and have people mad at me for not putting this sort of stuff in warnings at the start of the story), the overall response I got was write the story **you** want to write.*

So that's what I'm gonna do. And that story comes with these kinds of twists. I'm excited for it, and I hope you all join me for that ride. Also, Congrats on getting through the two whole pages of Author's Notes. Have I mentioned I'm verbose?

Chapter End Notes

-Reviews: I would love love love to hear your thoughts on this, so send them my way! And if you are upset about this choice, or disagree with it or anything I've said, please remain civil in your comments. I would still like to hear them.

-Up Next:We get things from Castiel's point of view as he goes through the realization that he already has an answer, he just has to get over how badly it's freaking him out. To be fair, it's freaking Dean out just as much, too.

-Untagged FemCas: If this decision bothers you because there was no tag warning you about it, I understand your frustration. I've set down many a book, fic, movie, and tv show that went places I had no interest in following, annoyed that something I loved stopped being such. Know that leaving off here is okay, and I hope you can take what you loved up till this point with you when you go. But do not waste your time or energy telling me to add a tag to this story. You can read through the comments below for an in depth explanation as to why I will not.

I hope you understand that I did not write this story for you; I wrote it for every fan out there who ended up loving it for many chapters more than this one. Imagine how many of them would not have read this story had I tagged everything about it just so *you* could have avoided it. I would rather have a handful of people disappointed and quit this story than dozens never give it a chance and miss out on something they would end up loving.

Chapter 45: Season 2: Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Okay, phew, okay okay. So we had about what I was expecting (hoping for, really) in reviews! Other than a crap ton more of them, that is. You guys really blew it out of the park! We seemed to have about 75% excited, and those that aren't are of the *grumble, grumble, you make excellent points, but I *don't like it** variety. Which I can work with ;)

Clearing A Few Things Up: For those that bypassed the author's notes: **This isn't permanent.** We will see Jimmy (as Cas) again. For those who didn't like the 'most gorgeous woman ever' bit, I totally understand. Don't worry, I'm a big believer in beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder theory, and we'll get to that. For those of you who were worried about Dean jumping this chick's bones just cuz she's hot, fear not. It would not be very in-character for Dean to forget it's his best friend in there, and most of his inner freak out is going to stem from the juxtaposition of 'I am totally attracted to that person' and 'that's my best friend and I don't feel that way about my best friend'. Remember, **slowest. Burn. Ever.**:P We've got a looong way to go, and I will be aiming to keep everyone absolutely in character throughout this entire thing! For now, we just get to see the initial freak out of 'wow, she's hot! No, no, no, that's Cas, damn it, get a grip, man!'

Reviews: I am massively behind in answer reviews. I've gotten through about half of them, and will continue to reply until I'm through them all. Sorry for the delay if you haven't heard from me! It's coming, I promise :)

Chapter Warnings: We back track a minute and a half because we've got some freaking out to do, humans and angels alike. Meanwhile, Bobby's having a drink because house guests, and Sam's back to having visions. So, party all around, really.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 12

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean made it all of about six and a half seconds from Bobby's front door to the den before he lost every inch of that cool, calm, collected hunter he'd portrayed in the barn for the last hour while the rest of his family did their best not to wet their pants, or worse.

"What did we just do?" Dean paced Bobby's living room hard enough to leave track marks in the rug. The owner of the old house was just watching him from his desk chair, hat tossed on the cluttered surface and eyebrow raised disparagingly. "We just let the only chance we have against the Apocalypse *fly away* to have a friggin' panic attack!"

Dean kept moving, back and forth and back and forth, and Sam couldn't help but mutter under his breath about who was having the panic attack. Dean shot his brother a nasty glare (and gee wasn't it *nice* to see that with his health restored, *Sassy Samantha* was right back in the driver's seat) but otherwise didn't slow down for a second.

"We shoulda made him stay." The man from the future paused long enough to run his hands through his short hair, tugging at the poor strands with uncontained frustration. *Worry*, Sam identified, correctly. "No reason he couldn't think it through right here, damnit!"

Where they could keep an eye – and maybe a ring of holy oil – on him.

"He said he'd come back, Dean," Sam offered, trying for consolation but not fully getting away from annoyed younger brother. When Dean got like this there wasn't much anyone could do to talk him down from it. He needed action, and waiting around for their one shot against the end of the world to show back up with a yes or no wasn't really doing it for him.

"No, man, didn't you see him?" Dean shook his head. "He was freaking out."

Sam exchanged a helpless look with Bobby, who just shrugged. But with another, more pointed look from the youngest Winchester, the hunter cleared his throat. "His expression didn't really change. At all."

He deliberately ignored the look Sam sent his way that said *'Thanks. How incredibly helpful of you, Bobby.'*

"Trust me; he was freaking out," Dean answered, looking like all he wanted to do was start pacing again but one look from the old hunter had him staying rooted in place. "He's gonna report it to heaven. That's it. We're all screwed."

"Dude," Sam cut him off before his brother could really get going. When green eyes turned on him for interrupting his building tirade, Sam just gave a little shrug of his shoulders as if to say *'nothing we can do about it now'* and then followed the look up with the words, "There's nothing we can do about it now."

Dean narrowed his eyes at him.

"We just have to wait," Sam continued, oblivious to his brother as Dean added a newly minted bitchface to his mental counter (a special subset he entitled 'bitchshrugs'). "He said he'd come back, and I thought you said he's not much of a liar."

That managed to pull Dean out of wherever his head was (the location varied depending on whether you were asking Bobby or Sam), and he let his shoulders drop, some of the defensive tension easing out of his posture. "No, he's not."

"But is he gonna bring half of Heaven back with him when he comes?" Bobby asked. Dean tensed again and Sam shot him a glare, to which he just shrugged in a *'bite me, we oughta be prepared'* way. "Wouldn't be a lie."

Dean went back to grumbling about being so screwed.

"So…. What? We're just going to sit here and freak out for the next-" Sam made a show of checking his watch. Three could play the drama game- "thirty nine minutes?"

His brother made a grumpy noise at that and headed for Bobby's liquor cabinet. "I need a drink."

When his sidelong and, admittedly, judgmental look went unnoticed by both men – Bobby barking at the boy to fetch a second glass – Sam just sighed and told Dean he might as well make it three.

-o-o-o-

Castiel intended to seek a location that embodied the solace and silence he so desperately needed, perhaps a secluded forest lake or the top of a mountain. Nepal was truly one of his father's many masterpieces, and Everest its crowning glory. It would be a worthy spot to commune with the Almighty and seek His guidance. But Castiel never made it. A single powerful flap of his wings sent him soaring above Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and a flash of bright colors against dark greens brought him straight back to the ground. He was

barely conscious of the change in course, finding himself standing quiet suddenly in a front of an empty playground, silent and peaceful beneath the bright moon.

After a moment of contemplation, listening to the echoes of children at play, four legged animals in the fields and trees, parents talking – all the life that this park had seen for many years – the angel sat down on a bench and stared at the vacant, colorful structures. There was a reason Castiel's favorite memory of Arthur Staten's heaven was the park near his childhood home. This was not the same park, and even if it was there would be many years difference, but it carried with it the same beauty and life that Castiel had found so calming when he' first stumbled upon the autistic man's personal paradise.

Castiel closed his eyes and listened for the bright, happy souls that had touched this place. He let them calm the chaos just barely at bay beneath his borrowed skin. As their light soothed his thoughts in tandem with his grace, and he turned his focus inward to contemplate Dean Winchester's words.

God would have an answer for this. It was too big, too much, for Him not to have a say, to not have been the orchestrator of it all. If Heaven was acting against His will, then surely God would do something. If *this* was His chosen path – pitting two humans against the Apocalypse raised, in part, by his own children, with Castiel as their only support – well, as insane and desperate and improbable as such a plan would be, Castiel would oblige. *Had* to oblige.

But how was he to know if Heaven was acting against His will without God's guidance? Had the End not been written in stone, by His hand, millennia ago? He had only the word of a human whose opinion of God left very much to be desired, and a future version of himself he barely recognized. Less than barely. *Could not* recognize.

"Oh, that's a load of horse shit and you know it."

Castiel closed his eyes and resisted the very human urge to groan. When he opened them again, his brother was still standing in front of him, despite the fact that he was most certainly not, because he was *dead*.

"Go away, Balthazar. You're not real."

"Real to you," came the biting, English lilt, followed by a shrug as though the angel had no cares in the world. Which he didn't, because he no longer walked it. "Come on, you were just wishing I was alive so

you could talk this thing through. And here I am!"

Castiel ignored the flourish in his brother's gesturing. He hesitated, reluctant to take up the offer to console in a hallucination of his own making. It sounded like a terrible idea. An insane notion. But he'd only be talking to himself, right?

"What would you do?" he asked before he could stop himself, and Balthazar's eyebrows went up.

"If I was in your shoes? Run the hell away." The angel threw his thumb over his shoulder for emphasis, despite Castiel's eyes narrowing on him. "I'd skedaddle right out of that mess while I still could. Front row seats to the apocalypse, and with a couple of hairless apes for sidekicks? Yeah, think I'd pass."

This time, Castiel did not bother to hide the groan, though he wasn't quite sure he'd done it right. It was a weird noise, rumbling through his larynx, but the release of it felt good, so he supposed that was why humans did it.

"You are not helping," he groused at his brother, resting his head in his hands, elbows propped up on his spread knees.

"You don't need my help, Cassie." Balthazar shrugged one shouldered, leaning his hip against the back of the bench and crossing his arms lazily. "Because I'm not you."

Castiel sighed and picked his head up to stare pleadingly at his brother. He knew where Balthazar was leading him, and it was someplace he did not want to go. Because his brother was right. He already knew the answer to this question. "What would I do?"

Balthazar snorted softly, pinning Castiel with a look. "Be a complete, noble idiot, like you always are. You'd rush head first into this, because it's the '*right thing to do.*' Or, you know, something along those ridiculous lines."

"How do I know it's right?" the angel whispered, staring down at his hands, perched atop his legs. The thought of Heaven turning its back on the world, *trying* to end millions of lives, hurt deeply, down where his heart would lie were he human. "How can it possibly be right?"

"Because Heaven's been wrong for a long time, brother." Balthazar wasn't looking at him, eyes off in the distance, past the empty playground. Castiel raised his gaze to watch his imagined brother, and

the sadness in his face matched Castiel's own. The angel did not know if that, too, was his mind projecting his own sorrow, or an accurate memory of his brother. "We just didn't want to admit it."

Castiel stared at his brother, dawning horror stretching across Jimmy Novak's human features in ways that angelic faces never did. Were never supposed to. He whispered, the astonishment lost in the soft noise, "That's why you knew how to leave."

The question was on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't are ask it. Didn't want to ask it.

Would you have?

The look on Balthasar's face was answer enough, as though he knew well the question Castiel refused to ask. Maybe he did, because he was only in his head, so he knew it all. Worse, that meant it was Castiel himself putting that guilty, regretful, but not sorry look on his brother's face. Castiel had known all along, he just hadn't been willing to see it. He'd chosen ignorance and ran away as surely as his brother had been planning to.

He closed his eyes and could not decide which was more painful: the betrayal of one of his closest kin or his own blindness.

"Go away, Balthazar." When Castiel finally looked up again, the imaginary angel was gone. He honestly did not know if it made him feel better or worse.

What else had he turned a blind eye to?

'Father?' Castiel shut his eyes and sought revelation, but not from Heaven. He desperately pushed aside the sinking feeling in his grace – a feeling entirely new to him – that he would not get an answer. The certainty in that dread frightened him more than anything else had this day, and it was turning out to be a very long day.

'Father, please, I need your guidance.'

Castiel sent prayer after prayer, seeking direction. Was this God's plan for him? To assist in the derailment of the Apocalypse? Or was he being led astray by the humans and his own doubt. He was not without that, sinful as he was to admit it. But it had no place in his life, in a soldier's life, in the life of a Warrior of God, and to embrace it would be to disobey.

The angel waited for an answer, any answer. He waited. And waited.

"Castiel?" The voice that answered back was soft, hesitant, internal, and far too familiar to be the voice of God. Castiel turned inward, to the soul of his vessel tucked safely in a corner of his mind's body, now very much awake and aware. The angel did not respond, but he let the human know he was listening. "*If you need someone to talk to-"*

Jimmy faltered, and made a noise Castiel recognized as self-deprecating. *"I know I must seem small compared to all this – what could one human possibly offer an angel in advice – but… if you need someone to talk to, I'm here. I'll- I'll listen."*

The offer was flawed, tentative, and Castiel could sense Jimmy's regret in offering almost instantly. Not out of insincerity, however, but self-flagellation. James Novak was a good man; all he wanted to do was help others, to be of service, to God, to the world, to his family, and Castiel found deep honor in the man's soul, no doubt what had led him to say 'yes' in the first place.

"I will return you to your family as soon as I am able," Castiel promised instead, unsure of where the solemn vow had come from, but not bothering to deny it. What would be the point? He intended to keep that promise, despite how difficult finding another vessel would be.

If he even intended to stay on Earth, that was.

"*Thank you*," Jimmy breathed out in a relieved rush. "*I miss them. I always felt my life was missing a bigger purpose, but I- this- seeing Claire all grown up and h-hearing what she'll go through without me-"* Jimmy was struggling to finish his thoughts, cutting himself off abruptly one sentence after the next. Castiel understood the feeling. The human took a deep breath, trying to calm the edge of hysteria that had crept into his voice. Castiel understood that too. "*They are my purpose. They were all along, and I need- I… I would like to go home to them."*

Jimmy silenced himself once more, easily worked back up to an emotional state that wasn't going to benefit the angel he was currently playing host (and apparently counselor) to. This wasn't the time for hysteria, nor did he want Castiel to think so little of him. "*But that's not why I offered."*

Castiel was silent a moment as well, marveling at the strength and kindness of this human, and in no way thinking the little of him he feared. "I don't know what to do."

He didn't even know what Dean Winchester was asking of him.

"*It sounded like they were asking you to be on their side*," Jimmy answered the fear Castiel had not voiced aloud, though he supposed he didn't need to, not when sharing this body. Perhaps he ought to tighten his control over his thoughts and emotions, though he didn't see how that would help this conversation. After, however.

"Their side against who?" The angel replied back as miserable as the human had ever heard him. "Heaven? How can I possibly choose a human I barely know over my own brothers? My home. My Father."

"*Well,*" Jimmy tried to sound reasonable, tried to forget that it was an incredibly powerful and ancient celestial being he was talking through a problem, and instead thought of it like any other conversation he'd held with his young, confused daughter as she continued learning about the world. *"Do you think Dean's telling the truth?"*

He knew he was. He just didn't understand how he knew, and that scared him.

"*What would you do if it is the truth?"* Jimmy asked, feeling Castiel's surety more than hearing any response.

"Stop Heaven." The answer came immediately, and Castiel closed his eyes against the truth of it. He was learning much about himself that he had chosen to ignore for so long. There was no point going back now. "If they are acting on their own, in the name of God but against His will, then they must be stopped. Thousands of innocents will die."

It was the least satisfactory answer he had ever come to. Castiel felt no closer to resolution or action than he had before he'd been asked it. Before he'd answered the summons. Before he and Balthazar had left Heaven. Before everything had changed.

"Castiel, can I ask you a question?" Jimmy's voice was back to being hesitant, and the angel suddenly dreaded whatever his inquiry was. *"You…You may not like answering it."*

Regardless, he inclined his head in the affirmative, though Jimmy could not see it, but he didn't need to.

"What if… If this ***is*** *God's plan, and Heaven is following it…"* The human faltered, and Castiel had the oddest urge to lick his lips and rub his hands together. *"Thousands of people are still going to die. Would you do nothing then? If- if it was part of the Plan?"*

Ice flooded Castiel from head to foot, straight through his grace like a lance, up into his wings like freezing lightning. He couldn't breathe.

No, he thinks. *It can't be. No.*

Because the answer to Jimmy's question came readily. Easily. Everything leading up to this point, to that question, was nothing compared to the horror filling his borrowed bones, icing over his body until he could feel nothing but the cold. For the first time in his life, Castiel knew true fear, and he hadn't had to leave the park bench to feel it.

'Love them. Love them as I love them,' God had commanded, voice rich with pride as he surveyed the heavenly host and, beyond, his newest creations. '*Guide them as their Shepherds, for they are now your Flock.'*

Castiel had obeyed his beloved Father's orders, and he had done so sincerely. He saw the beauty and wonder in all his Father's creations, and had been earnest in his watch over them. He had loved humanity, and the birds in all their colors, and the four legged beasts of the plains and the jungles and the mountains. He loved the plants and the trees, the flowers pollenated by bee and butterfly. He loved it all.

If God commanded the Apocalypse now, what was Castiel to obey? He could not do both. He could not love and destroy. One command or the other, he would disobey.

He couldn't breathe. He was drowning in the ice.

Was this a test? If so, what was the correct answer? Was he to be the good soldier? Or a good son.

He couldn't *breathe*.

"*Have you ever heard 'the Charge of the Light Brigade'?"* The question broke through his panic, if only because he had to think so hard to parse it. It was a non-sequitur, irrelevant, and Castiel was busy experiencing his first panic attack.

"*It's a poem,*" Jimmy continued without a response from the angel, "*about six hundred soldiers who charged into a battle they knew they couldn't win*."

Castiel still couldn't breathe.

"Their leader messed up. There was a miscommunication, and I think some

of them had to know it, but they went anyways." Jimmy had first read that poem years and years ago in high school. An impassioned catholic school teacher had drilled a message of courage and honor and tragedy into her students that year. It was one of those offhand things Jimmy never really forgot, perhaps because it had so clearly aligned with his own faith and his own doubts. *"The poem talks about honoring those soldiers, for charging on even when they knew following that command would get them killed."*

Castiel could not yet see the human's point. Did he not have two conflicting commands? He could not love humanity and be the one to open the doors to its destruction in the same breath. He *couldn't*.

"It wasn't about orders, or blind faith. It was about honor. Dying for a cause worth fighting for, I suppose." Jimmy almost laughed at how unfair it was for him to say that. He was going home; Castiel was not. "*Faith is a choice; I've learned that much. That's why blind faith and following orders without question, just because they're orders and you're a soldier, can be so dangerous. You open yourself up to corruption."*

The angel had two choices in front of him, and the decision had to be his and his alone. God wasn't testing him, of that Jimmy was certain. He was only waiting for His son to make up his mind.

"Pick the cause worth dying for, Castiel, and you won't have made the wrong choice."

Castiel opened his eyes and had his answer.

-o-o-o-

"We gonna talk about you having a chunk o' angel in yer chest?" Bobby was well into that glass of whiskey, and had waited for Dean to match him finger for finger before bringing it up. The kid flushed a little (and Bobby couldn't help but think '*nailed it*') and finished half of what was left in the glass with one gulp.

"What's there to talk about?" Dean asked, voice agitated and body language purely on the defensive. "It's fine, Bobby."

"Having some supernatural thing's *soul* in you ain't exactly what I'd call *fine*, boy," Bobby chided back, watching the kid wince and wondering if it was the disapproval or the fact he'd called the angel a thing. Or maybe it was how much like John Winchester he knew he sounded. He wasn't taking it back, though. Dean might be fine with this, and hell, he could even be right about it (though Bobby had his

doubts), but he wasn't getting away with it until he explained why exactly they shouldn't be freaking out.

"I trust him, alright?" Dean sent a glare Bobby's way, daring him to argue with that. "It's Cas, and I trust him, so it's fine."

Bobby didn't bother saying just how not-Dean it was for him to be trusting something so blatantly inhuman. He knew that a lot changed between now and when his boy was from; a lot more grey had started showing up in a world that was usually black and white. Still, seemed kind of stupid to him to go carrying around an angel battery in yer chest without at least putting up a fight about it. Or getting more information on the darn thing. Like were there gonna be consequences to that chunk of power riding shotgun in a human soul? Cuz it sure sounded like the kind of thing that would have *consequences*.

"Besides," Dean grumbled into his glass as Bobby sent a look Sam's way that his younger brother returned in full, "the grace hasn't done anything to hurt me in the last six months. Why start now?"

In fact, he was pretty sure Cas had saved him a couple of times, or at least acted as an early warning system. He hadn't realized it, but now that he knew something was up with his chest, it was pretty obvious that it ached anytime they were near demons, for starters. And Cas had pulled him out of the Baku's dream in time to save Bobby when Meg showed early.

So, yeah, it could stay right where it was, thank you very much.

"Except to detonate a bomb that almost killed you," Sam countered a little acidly, pulling Dean back to the present conversation.

"Please," he rebuffed, downing a hefty gulp of his whiskey, "that was a defense against a demon soul-searching me. It's not like that's a common thing."

"Unless they're trying to blow you up," Bobby added, most unhelpfully. Dean glared at him.

"And kill themselves in the process? This thing almost took Azazel out." He patted his chest, pretty proud of Castiel's little temper tantrum. Served that yellow-eyed bastard right.

"And you with it," Sammy muttered, eyes dark as he remembered begging his brother to just breath.

Dean continuing talking like he hadn't heard him. "No demon's going to go after a bomb at ground zero and blow themselves to kingdom come."

"You've obviously never heard of a kamikaze attack," his genius brother snarked, shaking his head from his seat on the old couch, whiskey relatively untouched, though he took a pretty healthy sip from it now. Bobby huffed something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh *and* agreement. Which was just doubly insulting.

"Okay, *look*," Dean interrupted the both of them before they could get started any further. "Low-level demons are almost always about saving their own skin. And you don't use a general in a kamikaze attack. I do *read*, you know."

"You watch World War II movies," Sam bit back, though he didn't argue the rest of Dean's point.

"Same thing. Aren't they all based on books anyway?" He fetched the bottle of whiskey off Bobby's desk, pouring himself another finger despite having not finished what was in there already. "My point is, it's *fine*."

Whether Sam stopped arguing because he knew a lost cause when he saw one or he was hoping to keep his brother at least somewhat sober for when Castiel returned, the discussion concerning the grace sitting pretty in Dean's chest ended there.

-o-o-o-

The search for another vessel would not be easy. Jimmy's soul had called the loudest as soon as Castiel had reached out for one, and the vessel's particular bloodline seemed a good match to the angel's grace.

Several of Adam and Eve's decedents had been chosen by God to be blessed by angels, to cleanse them of their parent's sin after Cain committed the first murder and it became apparent that something had to be done. It was not a purifying ritual, although each of the angels sent from Heaven were more than capable of doing so. God had not sought to rid humanity of the consequences of their ancestor's choices, but there was a balance to be maintained, he'd said. Or something like it, since the words had come through the Gardner and the Scribe, rather than God himself.

From there, those children, bearing traces of angelic grace in their purified veins, gave birth to the bloodlines able to host a heavenly

body. Each of those descendants reacted differently to an angel's grace. Some bloodlines were more attuned to particular celestial wavelengths and the different Spheres of Power than others. James Novak's heritage – that of the son, Ishmael – was clearly such a line for Castiel.

That was as good a place to start as any. At least it was a place, Castiel figured. He would seek out Jimmy's blood relatives and hope that one of them, by the work of a miracle, would fit Dean's strict criteria. Castiel was painfully aware how unlikely that was, and certainly not within the hour deadline he had inadvertently set for himself before learning Dean's final request. He would likely have to return to the Winchesters in his current vessel and complete his search after he delivered his answer.

It was with some surprise, then, that the first blood tie Castiel was able to locate was not only capable of hosting an angel, but was also braindead in a hospital in Waimea: the result of a drunken driving incident that had killed both her parents and her fiancé less than a month ago. Her remaining kin, a great aunt and three distant cousins, had flown to the island to sort the aftermath of the tragedy. They were no longer able to cover the cost of care or continue the extended period away from their jobs and families, and were now discussing terminating life support with the attending physician.

Castiel could hardly believe it.

Jimmy had no surviving parents, nor grandparents; his mother and father had passed while he was in his adolescent years, and he was an only child. So Castiel had had to start further back. The bloodlines were as seared into his mind as the names of the prophets or the history of Man, and so he knew that Ishmael's blood has passed to Jimmy through his father, Gregory Novak, who had no full-blooded siblings, only a half sister who did not carry the line. Jimmy's grandmother, Anabelle, had eight siblings for Castiel to track down. The first, Jimmy's deceased great aunt, had three daughters, all with children and grandchildren of their own now. The angel proceeded with the oldest, which took him to the island of Kauai, where Melanie Novak had gone to school, met and married an island native, and started a family there. The couple had two children, a son who passed at a young age from a childhood disease, and a daughter, whose hospital room Castiel currently stood in.

Angela Anne Garrett was Jimmy Novak's second cousin. Despite the diluted blood between them, the familial resemblance was still

present, at least to the angel's trained eye. He could see it in their bone structure and in their blood. Jimmy's great grandmother must have had very persistent genes.

Castiel hesitated as he reached out to the small, withering soul within the dying body. This woman met each of Dean's demands, an impossible improbability that could be none other than his Father's hand at play. This was the path he was supposed to be on. It must be.

As long as Angela Garret said yes.

-o-o-o-

Sam had just finished his glass (not nearly enough to get him buzzed, but seeing as both Bobby and Dean were well into their second helpings and *someone* had to be in their fully right and cognizant mind when Cas came back…), setting it down on the floor beside the couch, when the headache hit. It started as a dull ache, building pressure behind his zygomatic arch and spreading behind his eye and up to his brow. It was like a sinus headache, the kind that builds up over time until your head felt like a giant balloon, or that throbbing pressure that sometimes came with large weather changes. Only, unlike those, which were drawn out, this thing moved quickly.

One second Sam was rubbing at his cheek and brow to try and relieve that mounting ache, the next he was doubled over on the sofa, slipping onto the floor, grabbing at his head as it exploded in pain, like someone had driven a spike straight through his skull. He heard his brother and Bobby both shout for him, felt their hands on his shoulders and the hardwood floor beneath his knees. Then he wasn't in the house anymore.

It was dark, and it hurt, and despite the lack of any real source of light or definition, everything still came in blurry flashes that Sam struggled to discern. He was in a cave, of some sort, though the walls around him swam and settled and flickered in a nauseating pattern.

The more he strained to see, the more he tried to discern, the worse his vision – and the pain - became. Sam ground his teeth through the agony and forced himself to relax into it. To let that last speck of demon blood rule his veins. Everything still blurred at the edges and his solidity within the dreamscape kept flickering in and out, but the room did clear enough for him to focus.

It wasn't a cave, but some sort of dark, cavernous structure. Huge stone pillars supported the ceiling, and the walls were made of blocks

of reddish brown stone. The light was incredibly dim, and Sam couldn't actually identify a source, but he could make out the shapes of great stone sarcophagus lining the walls of the large, open room and a circular staircase of the same brick that descended both up and down, disappearing into the darkness.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

Sam spun at the voice, the familiar, ugly sound that sent a shiver traveling down his spine to pool as dread and fear deep in his gut. Azazel was standing only a few feet away, eyes shining yellow in the darkness. He wasn't looking at Sam, though.

There was another person in the tomb, standing in front of a large, square entryway with huge metal hinges hanging empty and useless, bolted into the walls. The wooden doors they once clung to were long since lost to time, the last bits of which scattered the threshold, petrified from years in the undisturbed dark. Sam couldn't see much beyond the large entrance, but what he could see was both incredible and terrible. An impressive ramp gave way to a city below, in an expansive darkness that held no stars in the sky and could only be some great cavern far underground. Half standing walls were all that was left of the buildings, half covered in waves of sand that had built up over what could only be centuries of dust and settlement. The city was in ruins, and Sam had the great and awful feeling that it wasn't just time that had caused such destruction and decay.

"Not all in the city deserved this fate."

Sam's attention was brought away from the dreadful and yet incredible sight to the person standing in the doorway. It was a woman, her short stature, long dark hair, and curvy figure giving that away just as surely as her voice. Sam chanced a glance back to Azazel, who was grinning at the unknown woman. The hunter took a moment, hesitating only a little at the adrenaline and healthy dose of fear, to wave his arm in front of the yellow eyed demon. Azazel didn't so much as shift his gaze.

Full vision then, Sam thought, and he was just walking through it. That was good. He really, really didn't want to be this close to the demon now, or ever again.

"Exceptions should have been made," the mystery woman was speaking again, tone full of spite and bitterness. Behind her, behind them both, Azazel snorted.

"Exceptions were made."

"More than a man and his family!" the woman snapped, and Sam could practically feel the anger radiating off of her in waves, despite not really being there. Curious now, despite the thrum of fear racing through his body and urging caution, the hunter tried to move around her while still keeping his distance. However, no matter how he tried to round her body or creep into the large doorway, he never could see her face. It was as though she turned with him, even as her bare feet never moved on the stone, and he didn't get more than the same view of the back of her head.

Sam glanced back at Azazel, then her. He must be seeing this through the demon's eyes, despite his very three dimensional presence in the room with them. Azazel could not see her face, and so Sam could not see her face. Or, so he guessed; he wasn't exactly an expert at vision walking. It would explain the weird, dulled lighting without a source. Demons probably had night vision.

"Don't take it out on me, little lady," the demon replied with utter indifference, shrugging his borrowed shoulders. "I didn't do the deed."

The way her head jerked to the side suggested she was seething, biting back whatever fierce retort was on her tongue as she refused to so much as look at him. Sam couldn't help but glance between the two of them again. What was this?

They continued their disparaging conversation, mostly exchanging useless shots at one another that Sam wasn't really paying attention to. Instead, he tried to take in as much of the building he was in as possible, and the city outside. Anything to clue him into where he was and what Azazel could possibly be doing here, but there just wasn't much to go on. Some of the tombs were inscribed with a language Sam didn't recognize, but he did his best to commit it to memory. The city beyond the doors, what he could see of it from the raised position of the structure they were currently in, was old. Really old. The buildings that were still standing looked mud-built, but they were so far deteriorated that Sam wasn't even sure. The ruins disappeared in rolling hills of sand and dirt, quickly disappearing into the darkness of the secluded world this place existed in.

"-and this Sam Winchester, he is important?"

Sam's head snapped around at the sound of his name coming from the woman. She still had her back to him and Azazel, hands crossed over

her chest, staring out into the ruined city.

"You could say that." Behind him, the demon smirked. "We have a very special task for him. If he survives long enough to fulfil it."

"This is why you came for me?"

There was something stiff about her words. Both of their words, actually, and Sam realized quite suddenly that they weren't speaking English. He didn't know what they were speaking, but Azazel's lips didn't match the understanding Sam had, and he realized that as surely as he was staring at this woman through the demon's eyes, he was hearing the conversation through him as well.

"I hear guiding lost kids is sort of your thing."

Sam immediately filed that away, glancing back at the mystery guest as he tried to reason who – or what – she could be. She clearly wasn't human. Although she looked the part in a pair of skinny jeans and a black tank top – that still had the tag on it, Sam realized after a moment, staring at the little white slip of cardstock peeking out of shirt's arm-line – her bare feet and unearthly presence suggested otherwise. Plus, he was pretty sure there hadn't been anything human in this place in a long, long time. At least, nothing living.

Whatever she was, she gave an indignant snort at the demon's words, tossing long, badly tangled locks over her shoulder with a shrug. "Where is it you hear these things?"

It definitely wasn't English, whatever they were speaking. Sam tried to place the verb and noun placement, the lack of descriptors, but it wasn't enough to go on. And every time he tried to focus his head pulsed like it might explode on him if he didn't *stop*. Besides, he didn't know how much was true translation and how much was Azazel's interpretation of the language.

But if he could figure out what they were speaking and the writing on the sarcophagi, perhaps he could identify at least the country this city used to belong to. Along with its deities and monsters.

"We are not alone."

The hunter snapped to attention as the conversation abruptly shifted. Fear flooded his system with adrenaline and a fight of flight reflex as the woman's head jerked to the side and he got the first impression of a cheek and a blazing green eye, locked sidelong right on him.

"Someone is watching us."

Sam sat up in Bobby Singer's living room with a huge gasp, clutching at his pounding skull and eyes that he would gladly claw out of his head if it would end the stabbing pain behind them. His brother was on him immediately, surrogate father at his side with a glass of water, but Sam couldn't get those glowing eyes out of his head.

He'd seen them before, only he had thought it was a withdrawal-fueled hallucination.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Sorry to cut if off there, folks. Like the last one, this chapter grew well into the twenties in page count and I had to split it up again. I gotta stop writing such long chapters if I'm ever gonna get ahead of the posting curve, aaaah!

Up Next: Cas meets Angela Anne Garrett and tries to talk her out of being his vessel, for reasons neither he, nor the voice of Balthazar in his head, entirely get. Guilt is a weird thing. They're working on it, though. Jimmy offers another helping hand, and Dean gets his first taste of how screwed he really is.

I hate to do this to you guys two posts in a row, but it's going to be another two week delay. My roommate adopted a dog last weekend, and while she is an absolute delight, she's also a puppy an a lot of work. I'm ridiculously exhausted and have had no time to write this week whatsoever, so I continue to fall further and further behind in my chapter stockpile (we're dong to a buffer of exactly one and a half chapters O.O) Hopefully as Theodosia becomes more comfortable in her new home, I'll be able to get some better rest and a little more 'me' time to get to writing.

See you next time!

Chapter 46: Season 2: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: You all beautiful readers get this chapter a day early! In part because I'm off on a hike but mostly because I had a good two weeks where I got four chapters out. That deserves a little celebratory posting, I think :)

Chapter Warnings: We meet Angela Anne Garrett, who's surprisingly chill about an angel all up in her head (then again, she'd take just about anyone showing up in her head at this point), Sam's talking green eyes and Bobby's getting out the books, while Dean's about to find out just how screwed he is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 13

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam's hands were shaking again. His head was killing him from where he sat, almost doubled over on the couch between his mother-henning brother and a worried Bobby. He was never touching demon blood again, but he couldn't deny how much easier those visions had been when he was on it. Couldn't help but miss that unforeseen benefit, even as he hated himself for it. Honestly, though, Sam had forgotten how much his head *hurt* after a sober vision, at least before Azazel had blackmailed him with Layla Rourke's life all those months ago.

His hands were shaking again.

Sam took a deep breath, held it, and fisted his hands slowly in his lap. When they opened again, air flowing out of his lungs in a slow release, his fingers were far steadier and Sam chose not to think about how damn relieved he was.

"I'm alright," he finally muttered, having spent the last several minutes in a tense, jittery silence between the three of them. As far as his brother and Bobby knew, he'd been fine one minute, and keeled over having nothing short of a seizure on the floor. They'd both seen him having a vision at least once, so they'd both correctly guessed what was happening. To Sam's relief, they'd waited to hound him with

questions until he could see straight again.

"What'd you see, Sammy?" Dean asked, trying and mostly failing to keep his voice even. The tension and terseness that was so *Dean* couldn't be contained, though. Neither could that strict, worried expression on his face.

"Seemed like a bad one," Bobby offered, nailing the parental, worried-but-casual tone a hell of a lot better than Dean.

So Sam told them. It hadn't been a bad one, at least not content wise. No one had died a horrible, bloody death that he was forced to bear witness too. There wasn't a desperate, ticking time bomb the brothers had to rush against in order to save some innocent's life. Still, his head rung like the worst of them, and he had a weird pit in the bottom of his stomach that told him whatever Azazel had been doing in that place, whoever that woman was, it wasn't good.

It was somehow worse that it had been his second vision of her. He remembered that place, the cavernous darkness and tombs. Remembered being in the bottom of a stone grave, Azazel reaching down to him. He remembered those angry green eyes amid pain and fever and confusion. Sam had had a vision in the middle of his withdrawal, lost in the other hallucinations and symptoms.

Dean's tightly pinched brow, low over his eyes in that sort of confusion that bordered on angry (standard Dean reaction to news he didn't understand and liked even less), was not doing Sam any favors in the comfort department, either. Nor was the way it deepened as Sam connected the dots between his two visions out loud.

"Do you think it was Ruby?" the younger Winchester asked, a little weakly. He cleared his throat and accepted the glass of water Bobby offered. "Or, um… Lilith?"

Dean shook his head, shoulders lifting and falling in anger at his own lack of knowledge. He crossed his arms over his chest only to pull them away to fall back at his sides again. His gaze roamed across Bobby's den, but he what he was seeing was a long string of apocalyptic memories. "I don't know. Ruby was Lilith's lackey. Doesn't make sense that Azazel was down in some ancient, wrecked city digging her up."

That place certainly didn't sound like the Hell he'd seen firsthand. But the pit was endless, with many different layers, or so he'd heard rumors of during his time down there (and what he'd read here and

there suggested it was true). He supposed each of them could look different, though he'd only witnessed the one where they took new souls to break, and he doubted any corner of Hell was actually quiet like the place his brother had described. Sam said the city in his vision had been dead – literally.

"And Lilith?" Bobby asked, eyebrows up because Lucifer's First Born and Princess of Hell was the last thing they needed to be worrying about right now.

Again, the man from the future shrugged in frustration. It didn't sound right, but he honestly didn't know that much about Hell's bitch queen. Only that she'd been one hell of a big-bad, had wanted Sam's head on a spike as a red herring for what they really needed his brother for, and liked to dress up in little kids. "You said this chick had green eyes?"

"They were glowing," Sam confirmed with a nod, wincing at the pain spiking through his temples. He couldn't get that single eye out of his head. Fierce, bitter, so *angry*, suffused with an unnatural green light. And all of that had been aimed straight at him through a curtain of black tangles.

"Lilith and Ruby are demons. They're true forms ain't pretty, and they possess different people when they're topside. They could look like anyone," Dean reasoned with a small shake of his head. "But Lilith's eyes are white. Ruby's black."

"So," Sam reasoned slowly, drawing the word out with a breathlessness that encompassed how they were all feeling. "She's something new."

Dean didn't have a clue, but she wasn't ringing any bells. And given how Time seemed to hate him, that was probably a bad sign.

Bobby started pulling out books on ancient languages and civilizations that had been sacked, Sam grabbing several for himself as the old hunter handed them over. Dean sighed, cast his half drank glass of whiskey a wistful look, and resigned himself to sobering up for research and the return of a tide-turning angel.

-o-o-o

Angela Garrett's mind, upon realizing it was in severe trauma and very near death, took the shape of her childhood swimming pool. It was a community pool just off a private beach, outdoors with palm trees and

large-leaved bushes and, her favorite, Naupaka plants blossoming in the sand along the beach side.

She'd grown up with the legend behind the little white flowers with their weird, semi-circular blossoms that made them all look like they were missing half their bloom. Her mom always loved legends, especially creation stories, and those surrounding the Hawaiian Islands were no exception. She'd loved telling her children those old tales. Angela just loved falling asleep to her mother's voice, something even adulthood hadn't driven from her.

The legend of the Naupaka was about a Hawaiin princess of that name, who fell in love with a commoner she was forbidden to marry. When a temple priest in the mountains confirmed there was nothing he could do to change their fate, she pulled the white flower from her hair and ripped it in two, giving half of it to her lover.

'Go back to the beach,' she said, heartbroken, '*and I will stay here, in the mountains.*'

That was why the flowers only bloomed in halves, and why the Naupaka that grew on the beach looked different then the same plant that bloomed in the mountains. Angela had always loved that story, both for the whimsical explanation of a biological quirk and for the tragic beauty of its star-crossed lovers. She'd always had a thing for those.

"They are quite beautiful."

Angela spun at the voice, surprise coating her features. The pool and community center had been empty all this time, nothing but the lapping of chlorinated water and the distant crashing of waves. Nothing like her actual memories, full of screaming and laughing children, vendors shouting food orders out the concession window, seagulls crying in the sky, traffic on the main street beyond the bushes and parking lot. That's how she knew this was all in her mind, a dream of some sort, where she was stuck and couldn't leave. Because it had been this way for *days*. Well, Angela could only guess that it had been days. Nothing changed here. The sun didn't set, didn't even move, so it wasn't like she had a way of tracking time. Really, it felt like weeks, but she doubted that was anything more than her boredom turning her dramatic.

"Who are you?" she asked of the stranger now standing a dozen feet away from her, staring at the Naupaka plants with intense

concentration. He was dressed ridiculously for a summer day at the pool. Striped, cotton pajama bottoms and a t-shirt under a tan overcoat of all things. He was a laughable hallucination after all this time of loneliness and waves.

"My name is Castiel," he said, voice deep and raspy, eyes wide and blue as he turned to face her, though he didn't come any closer. "I am an Angel of the Lord."

She didn't bother calling bull, in part because at the same moment he said it, she could almost *feel* it was the truth. It wasn't something she saw, or at least, she didn't think it was, but suddenly there was an impression of wings, of swirling colors and bright, beautiful light, and she knew that sure, yeah, this was an angel dressed in fuzzy slippers and a beige coat.

"Are you here to take me to heaven?" Angela had never been particularly religious, but she was a believer. Faith more than the Church had taught her there was an afterlife, and if there was an angel visiting her right now, she guessed it had been right.

The angel shook his head. "It is a reaper's duty to ferry the souls of the deceased."

"Oh." Angela tried very hard not to let *that* little tidbit freak her out as much as it did, picturing a creepy figure wrapped in black and death, coming to collect her with a terrifying scythe. The angel titled his head to the side, looking remarkably like a bird observing something it didn't understand. She ignored the immediate *'cute*' that came to mind. It probably wasn't okay to think of an angel as cute. "Then… why are you here?"

"I have….work to do on Earth," Castiel answered, his struggle with word choice suggesting he wasn't confident that was the right one. "I am unable to appear before most humans in my true form, including those that I must work alongside."

"Oh," she said again, and mentally kicked herself for sounding like a numb idiot. She was usually more loquacious than this, really. God, Mark would be making fun of her so much right now. He'd double down when he realized that she was fighting back the urge to ask whether the slippers were part of that true form or not.

"How…uh, how can I help? I mean, what does that have to do with me?" And now she was being rude. Angela kicked herself again, and the angel redid that little head tilt. It occurred to her, rather suddenly,

that if he was in her head, he could probably *hear* her when she did that.

"I need a vessel," Castiel continued, not mentioning it if he could, indeed, hear her thoughts, for which she wasn't sure if she was thankful or just paranoid. "A human form so that I can operate on Earth."

Angela stopped paying attention to that head tilt or telepathy contemplation and instead blinked, mind adding two plus two and getting *what the heck*. "Me?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Darn it. (*Full sentences, girl!*) Angela took a deep breath, commanding her brain to start thinking in more than single syllables. "Um, how does that…uh, work, exactly?"

"You would need to grant me permission to enter your body, where I would assume control of your actions until my work is complete." The angel said it so matter-of-factly, like they were talking about putting together an IKEA bookshelf (not that those were ever actually matter-of-fact either). Angela kind of couldn't decide if it was the blandness of having been *here* for weeks or the angel's tone that had her feeling just as calm about it, too. "After that, your body will be returned to its current state."

"Will I be awake?" she asked before Castiel had quite finished his previous sentence. She spared another half a second to chastise herself again for being rude, though the angel didn't seem to take notice or care, which was good, because she wasn't quite sure she cared either. Truth was, she didn't plan to ask whether or not he could heal her. Give back her life. She may believe in God and Heaven, but she didn't believe in random miracles. Besides, she got the sense that if Castiel was here to do that, he would have done it already. But if he was here to get her out, one way or another, that was something she had plenty of questions about.

"It is the practice of most of my kind to put the soul we are sharing a vessel with into a slumber, so we do not disturb-"

"Could you not?" At Castiel's surprised look, Angela cleared her throat awkwardly. Darn, she really was being rude. She gestured around her, to what so many would see as a paradise, until they were trapped in it

for days. "I've been praying to die forweeks now. I gave up praying to wake up, honestly. At this point, I just want to be *not here*. Not alone, in this place that never changes!"

She took another deep breath, trying to reign in the anger and futile frustration that had been building for days.

"If you're going to use my body, I get to see the world again, right? I can live a vicariously through you. At least a little longer." Angela smiled as she said it, trying to take some of the bitter sting out of the words. She really wasn't trying to chase off the angel asking to borrow her body, which she apparently wasn't even using right now. "That's what's happening, isn't it? I'm dying?"

"Yes," Castiel confirmed, though he was slow to do so, almost hesitant, she thought. He seemed to think for another moment, not so much to give her time to process what she already knew (though it was still a whammy to hear it) but because he was thinking over her request. "I believe it can be arranged to leave you awake. It may not be entirely pleasant, however."

"Anything would be better than this," she replied, this time unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

There was another moment of hesitation before Castiel opened his mouth and all but blurted out, kind of ungraciously for a supposed angel, "Your kin is in the hospital."

She blinked at that, hope suddenly flaring in her chest so strongly that she swore the world around them got brighter. "My parents? Mark?"

It was immediately clear on his face, by the way those ocean blue eyes widened and the swirling colors she'd gotten an impression of darkened, that he'd made a drastic mistake. The hope sank like the Titanic, taking that brightness, and the lives of her family, with it. Like clouds passing in front of the sun, the world grew a bit colder and got a lot greyer.

"No," Castiel answered roughly, an apology clear in his rather expressionless face, which seemed to be a thing for the angel of the Lord. "Your immediate family and fiancé were killed in the car crash that put you here."

Despite the fact that she'd thought of nothing else for days on end – been certain for days on end – her eyes still watered and stung. Her heart hurt so much, she clutched at her chest even as she nodded,

because she'd *known*. She didn't know how she knew, but she had. She's spent days sitting on the edge of the pool, feet in the sun-soaked water, listening to the waves crash, waiting for death so she could see them again.

Everything came in impressions here, wherever here was. Impressions of light and swirling colors and wings. Impressions of people and laughter and happier times. Impressions of speed and pain andmetal on metal. Impressions of being truly alone.

Castiel tilted his head again, this time with a slight chin turn that made it look like he was listening to something. And then he was in front of her, one arm reaching out to rest awkwardly on her shoulder in some parody of comfort that he clearly didn't understand. She almost laughed at that terrified look on his face, but it came out as a sob and Angela leaned into the first physical contact she'd had in so long that it hurt. She buried her face in that stupid, out-of-place trench coat and cried.

A second arm joined the first in the most awkward hug possibly in the history of humanity, but Angela didn't care. Awkward or not, it was comfort and she needed it, even if she wished she didn't. It was the hesitant, slightly-too-hard pat on the back that finally had her pulling away, choking on a small laugh, heavy with phlegm and emotion.

"Thanks," she whispered, wiping at her eyes. The angel nodded, those blues eyes still wide, causing her to laugh a little again, even if it was a sad, pathetic little sound. "I figured they were… I figured."

She looked around helplessly at the pool she couldn't leave, that she'd spent so much of her childhood at, with her parents teaching her to swim, or lying in the sun, or playing in the pool. Her dad had taught her to do front flips off that diving board on days when the pool was less busy and the life guards less likely to yell at them. Her mom had caved to her and her brother's whining and bought ice cream from the concession stand almost every trip.

"You'll see them again," the angel spoke, his voice no less gravely nor firm, but somehow still soft. Comforting, as that hug had intended to be. "They are in heaven, at rest now."

"They're happy?" She didn't know why she needed to hear him say it, but she did.

He nodded, blue eyes intense and almost glowing in the grey light. "In my Father's halls, each soul resides in a paradise of their fondest

memories. Your loved ones are happy. They are with you, and you are with them."

The angel looked troubled saying it, though Angela couldn't fathom why. She gave up on the mess that was her tear-streaked face and folded her hands across her stomach loosely in a loose self-hug. "So, what 'kin' is here, then? I don't have anyone else."

"I believe they are…distant." There was that head tilt again, lesser this time, and Angela wondered if Castiel did that every time he fumbled with words, or possibly emotions, or if it was just because he was clearly uncomfortable now that he'd brought up her loss. "The only relatives the hospital were able to contact were your great aunt and several removed cousins."

There was another awkward pause as that troubled look worsened. When he spoke, he looked reluctant to do so, though his words reflected none of his obvious indecision. "They are discussing terminating your life support."

Angela blinked, surprise coloring the world around her once again. "What, right *now*?"

Castiel started to nod, stopping halfway through the gesture to tilt his head, listening to something she couldn't hear. She looked around the empty pool and grey, clouded skies above, but there was nothing. The angel resumed his nod. "Yes. I believe they will make a decision shortly."

She couldn't help but suck in a breath, which rattled out of her in a nervous little laugh. Ridiculous. She had prayed for weeks for the isolation, the nothingness, to end. Whatever way that had to happen, she promised herself (and the God she'd been praying to) that she'd be fine with. Anything to get out of this limbo.

Now, it seemed those prayers were going to be answered, and she was *terrified*.

So, Angela did what she'd always done when she was afraid. She thought about something else, and she did it in a big hurry. Her brain latched on to the first thing waving a big yellow 'distraction' flag.

"Why would you tell me that?" Her brow pinched together in confusion, the words out of her mouth before she'd really thought about them. But yeah, no, this was a great distraction. Because Castiel needed her help to operate on earth, and she was getting the feeling it

wouldn't work out so well for him if they pulled the plug before that happened.

She kind of got the feeling that was what that troubled look was all about.

"You deserve the choice," Castiel confirmed, a look flittering across his face, colors running just underneath his skin in a way she could never look straight at but could sort of see if she only looked at him sideways. Angela would have sworn those colors were shades of regret. Though, of what, she didn't know. "If you agree to be my vessel, it may be some time before you join your family in Heaven. If you wish the wait to be over now, I will not interfere, and you will be taken to my Father's Kingdom once your body passes."

"But…" Angela was still working double time to ignore that whole death thing looming just underneath this conversation. Heaven sounded nice, of course, but it was still *death*. "You need a, what did you call it? A vessel."

"I will find another." That look was back, stronger, and Angela almost called bull aloud before she realized that was probably blasphemy or something in front of an angel.

"What work is it you have to do on Earth?" At this point, it was a heads or tails toss up whether she was just putting off the inevitable and distracting herself from having to make a choice that was robbing her of breath, or if she was curious about what would bring an angel to Earth. Given the stiff way this one talked, that wasn't a super common occurrence.

Castiel hesitated again, and Angela suddenly realized she shouldn't have asked. He didn't want to tell her, which was a weird thing to see after he all but gave her a way out of this.

"I have to avert the Apocalypse."

Could you choke on air when you weren't even awake? Angela did a darn good job of trying to answer that question. "The- the apocal- you're joking right? Oh my god, you're not joking. Holy…"

She cut herself off, taking several deep breaths through the hand she slapped over her running mouth. Nothing in those intense blue eyes suggested he was joking and she wondered what she'd done in a past life to get herself stuck in these kinds of situations.

"So, you're literally asking me to help you save the world?"

"I…suppose I am." He was back to that regretful look. "Failure is a very real possibility. In the case of your body perishing in my service, your soul will be guided to Heaven."

"Wow." It was all she could say. Maybe not a huge step up from 'oh,' but she didn't have anything else in her to say. This was… just *wow*. So, rock, meet hard place, and both ended in death. Well, honestly, that made her decision so much easier. "Okay, so what do you need from me?"

The angel just stared, and she realized he hadn't been expecting that answer.

"Would you rather not be united with your family?"

It was almost cute to see how baffled he was, and the way he clearly wanted to kick himself for asking. That troubled look was making so much sense now that Angela almost laughed. It was tempting to remark on why he kept giving her outs in the first place if he didn't think she'd say yes, but she held back. It would be cruel, she figured, and he seemed off balance enough already.

"Honestly?" Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, she chewed on the soft tissue as some of her humor died, replaced with the somber reality around her. She glanced at the pool, at the community center and the palm trees, at the Naupaka flowers delicately moving in the breeze. Angela tried to focus on the good times that happened here, the echoes of laughter and happy screams. But all of that was tainted now by how long she'd been stuck here: miserable, alone, afraid, and angry. She didn't want to stay anymore, but she wasn't ready for what came next, either. Even if she'd thought she was.

"I'm scared." She let out a little laugh, despising how weak and nervous it sounded, but this was *death* they were talking about. The great unknown, even if she was standing in front of a man who had all the answers. Uncertainty was healthy, she told herself. It was human.

"Death is nothing to fear."

Angela smiled up at him, but shook her head. "That's good, cuz it sounds like it's coming either way. At least this way I get to see a little more of the world first, right? And help you save it, I guess."

That got a more real laugh out of her. God, she was going to save the

world. What a story she'd have for Mark when she saw him again.

"Are you sure?"

Having enough with the angel apparently trying to talk her out of a decision he clearly didn't want to talk her out of (and yeah, she'd picked up on *that*), she leveled him with a look. "I can't believe I'm about to use a line this cheesy, but Heaven can wait. It doesn't sound like you can."

Castiel's shoulders sagged minutely, just a centimeter of tension gone from his solid, brick wall of a stance, and Angela knew she'd made the right choice.

"So how do we get this show on the road?"

"You say yes."

She quirked an eyebrow at him. That sounded ridiculously easy. Probably a good thing it was an angel asking her to do this and not something more deceitful, because if a single word was all it took to steal someone's body away from them, that seemed way too easy to misuse.

"Then, yes."

-o-o-o-

Castiel sat upright, pulling wires and tubes tight with the movement. High pitch noises began screaming from the machines lining the wall around the bed, and the angel waved them into silence with a hint of annoyance. The new location in the hospital room was disorienting, as was the weakness of this new vessel, being kept alive by grace alone.

Jimmy stumbling into the mattress, bracing himself on locked elbows as he gasped and struggled to right himself, was far more grounding. The human was justifiably unbalanced at the sudden return of control, and Castiel touched two fingers to the man's temple to insure no residual damage remained from the brief angelic occupancy.

Jimmy jerked away instinctually, then leveled apologetic blue eyes at the angel, who had taken no offense to the reaction.

"Castiel?" His tone was hesitant, as though he wasn't sure just who he was talking to.

"Jimmy," she returned with a slight nod, doing a quick assessment of her new vessel, as grace filled out every limb and organ, repairing what it could and restoring life to the rest. Castiel pulled the hospital sheets off her new form and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. They were stiff from disuse, but the angel knew that would lessen with time and her grace. She stood, ignoring the arm Jimmy offered her, as she did not require assistance.

"Stay here," Castiel ordered and, with a short flap of her wings, was gone from the room.

Jimmy barely had time to take a deep breath and revel in controlling his own lungs again when she returned. He jumped, staggering away from Castiel out of sheer primal reaction of something not being there and then suddenly *being there*. He clutched at his chest and the tried to calm the pounding of his heart. Boy, he hadn't missed feeling that sensation.

"What did you-"

"I altered the memories of the doctor and Angela's kin. They will think they successfully disconnected her from life support and passed her body on to the appropriate recipients." Her voice was deep, with a raspy quality that Jimmy was starting to think was entirely Castiel. He'd heard his own voice in his ears while the angel possessed him, and he'd known it had been much deeper than what came naturally to him. Jimmy knew the normal cadence of Angela's voice wasn't so deep either, having heard it for himself while inside her head (and thank goodness the angel had brought him in, since he'd – was it she, now? – certainly needed some guidance on offering the grieving woman comfort and reassurance).

In fact, overall it was very odd to see the angel that had visited him just hours ago, who had worn his body, and was now standing, somehow still intimidating, as someone completely different and yet entirely the same. Angela was several inches shorter than Jimmy, with atrophied muscles and dark circles under her eyes that, even now, were clearing up. They shimmered with a barely visible light just beneath her skin that Jimmy knew must be grace. She wore nothing but a hospital gown, and still the human felt cowed by the commanding presence that was entirely Castiel.

Jimmy opened his mouth to suggest finding her some new clothes, because intimidating or not, Jimmy had spent enough time in a hospital after his appendectomy to know that her rear end was very

much not covered right now. But the angel leaned into his personal space, cutting him off before he even got started.

"I will return you to your family now."

Before Jimmy could manage a step back, two fingertips were pressed to his forehead and they were suddenly back in his home in Pontiac, Illinois. The house was quiet and the darkness of the first level suggested his family was still asleep. Amelia hadn't noticed his absence from their bed yet, and he was so overwhelmingly grateful that his knees grew weak.

Castiel gave a single nod, waves of thick, brown hair shifting in juxtaposition to the solemn movement, and Jimmy found himself moving before he could think better of it. He wrapped his hand around that slim, malnourished wrist before Castiel could take flight. He could almost feel the phantom wings spreading wide, that ghostly flicker of tightness in his back that was no longer there. Jimmy tightened his grip without meaning to.

Fiercely blue eyes – so close to the ones he saw in the mirror every morning – were now locked on his from a completely foreign face, and Jimmy swallowed heavily in the weight of that gaze. Even know, he knew why he had said yes to this incredible, beautiful, powerful thing that had asked for his help. He understood why Angela said yes, too.

"Thank you." He hoped his gratitude, his honest-to-God sincerity, came through. He really could not mean it more. "I know finding someone else… it wasn't easy."

Actually, it had been shockingly easy, Castiel thought, which was why she was now entirely certain God had a hand in it. A sign of His approval, His support to continue on this path, no matter the obstacles. The improbability of their recent success suggested no other solution. However, it was not relevant to the current conversation, or to Jimmy's point.

"You are welcome," she said instead, dipping her head in acknowledgement of his gratitude. He was a good man, and she was glad to be able to give him this. "Live a good life, James Novak."

Then she was gone, and Jimmy sank to the floor in the middle of his foyer and broke down, sobbing into his hands. He stayed there on his knees, uncertain his legs would support him or his lungs would withstand anything more than breathing through the relief and terror and joy. He thanked God for His endless mercy and grace, and prayed

He would watch over the angel who now charged into a war that Jimmy, thankfully, had no more part in.

Claire's worried voice broke through his fervent, tearful prayers, and Jimmy's head shot up to find his beautiful baby girl at the top of the stairs. He smiled up at her, the most wondrous thing he was sure he would ever see. He shrugged off his coat carelessly, giddy with his blessed return, leaving behind the tan fabric as he climbed the stairs of his home and scooped Claire into his arms. He would calm his young daughter's fears, then he would wake his wife just to feel her in his arms, and he would never again wish for anything more in his life than this.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

When Castiel returned, it was with a sound so strikingly akin to wingbeats that Sam expected to see giant, feathered appendages behind the angel. However, there were no wings when he spun towards the sudden fourth presence in the Bobby's den. A figure not there a blink ago, now standing just to the side of the desk, causing Bobby, who had his feet propped up, to nearly tumbled out of his chair.

Forget wings, Sam thought. He was too busy staring at the entirely foreign and *very* different person now in the room with them.

"C-Castiel? Is that you?" he managed through his surprise, which was more than Bobby or Dean accomplished. That might be because Bobby was too busy clinging to the desk, getting all four legs of the chair back on the floor (all the while swearing like sailor) to care much about what poor schmuck the angel had returned in. But Dean certainly wasn't saying much, standing there staring – slack-jawed and wide eyed – at the very female (and definitely not an old geezer) currently watching Bobby with a familiar head tilt and vague concern.

"Yes," the angel replied, turning back to the brothers once she determined the grumbling older hunter was not in need of her assistance.

And it was very, very much *her* assistance.

Castiel's new vessel was tall for a woman, maybe five eight or nine. She was slim but fit, with dark skin tinted a reddish-brown, the same striking blue eyes as Jimmy, and dark, wavy hair. Sam identified her as likely mixed race, probably Polynesian and Caucasian. She was older than him, for sure. Possibly older than Dean too. Late twenties

certainly, early thirties maybe. All of which was secondhand observation, natural to a hunter, and which each man in the room had noticed and filed away in their information-trained minds without really thinking about it.

Sam's active mind was busy with that part where the new human in the room with them was dressed in nothing but a hospital gown. Bobby was pretty busy noticing that too, partly because he had a damn more revealing angle, to which he was very purposefully turning the other cheek, keeping his eyes on anything but the angel's bare ass half a foot from him.

Dean wasn't thinking at all. His brain hadn't rebooted after *most gorgeous woman ever*.

Okay, so maybe she wasn't the *most* gorgeous woman Dean had ever seen. That honor went to Vera Ellen; the all-American beauty with a German sweetheart face and the grace of a goddess. God, Dean must have watched *White Christmas* every year it was on TV (even stole a VHS tape once from a Blockbuster when it hadn't been). Every December the 25th, holed up in some dingy motel, with Sammy in his lap and Dad god-knows-where, they'd put on the movie. Vera Ellen was his Christmas mom, each holiday that had passed without his own. She was an angel, in every sense of the word.

And boy, could that woman *dance*. Something Dean would *never, ever, under pain of death*, admit to falling head over heels in love with. Or ever watching in the first place.

But Castiel's new vessel certainly wasn't the ugly, wrinkled, sagging, *male*, grandpa Dean had been expecting. Or, unknown to him until just this moment, apparently hoping for. God, her eyes alone. The same damn Novak blue that apparently ran in that friggin' family. Bluer than frickin' *blue*, which was just ridiculous. They'd been powerful in a good ole, family man like Jimmy. But in this woman, whoever she was, with her sun-darkened skin and stupidly fist-able hair… it just wasn't *fair*.

And it wasn't like she was lacking in the other departments, either. That floral-print hospital gown sure didn't show off much, but Dean could tell she was athletically built, trim and fit rather than curvy, muscles filling out and flexing in a way that looked like she'd just worked out (Dean wasn't thinking about that, he *wasn't*). His idle brain wondered if this lady trained, or if she was just one of the yoga, health-nut, naturally fit, freak types (okay, so he was totally thinking

about that).

Maybe both. Body like that, Dean bet she was pretty damn flexible.

And, oh god, he was killing that line of thought *right the fuck now*. Cuz this was Cas he was thinking about, darn it.

Holy shit. *Holy shit!*

This was *Cas.* This wasn't just some random, hot stranger he was appreciating. This was Cas. *Cas.* Fucking Castiel, Angel of the Lord, Warrior Badass Extreme, Nerdy Angel Tax Accountant *Cas*! In a drop dead gorgeous female vessel. In a drop dead gorgeous, *fuckable*, vessel.

Hot damn shit *fuck*.

He was a terrible person.

He was a friggin *screwed*, terrible person, was what he was.

Sam was crossing the room with a blanket he'd pulled off the couch, and Dean was able to stop staring at Cas long enough to realize what his brother was doing. He held the fabric out for the angel, making a gesture with quiet words that Dean could only hazard at. Castiel didn't seem to understand the need for it, but allowed the knitted throw to be draped across his shoulders to cover his backside.

'*Her*, *Dean. HER backside. Her very naked, exposed backside.'*

Dean's eyes were suddenly skyward as he thought of something – anything – other than this woman's naked body. God, he was going to Hell. Again.

Bobby let out a relieved noise as the angel gripped the ends of the blanket and seemed at least on board with the plan, if not understanding why it was necessary. The hunter rolled his eyes as he straightened back up in his desk chair and once more had free reign of looking wherever the hell he wanted in his own house. Now that he could, the angel was the obvious candidate for observation.

"What'd you do, rob the coma ward?" the old hunter groused. Castiel turned at the question, brow pinching as she tried to parse the intent of the man's question. Bobby gestured to the angel's getup with his chin, and she looked down at herself curiously, pulling at the flowered fabric beneath the blanket.

"Yes." The answer was blunt, and left Bobby blinking. Castiel looked back up, releasing the meager clothing she was wearing and locking eyes with Dean, who could only gulp and try to remember how to breathe and, oh god, go back to thinking about *nothing*. "This body was comatose, mortally damaged in a car crash that killed the rest of her family. Her mind was intact, but her body had become a prison. She agreed to serve as my vessel."

Dean was too busy thinking *absolutely nothing,* while simultaneously trying to look away from those eyes – and shit, shit, *shit*, they really were the same damn blue eyes and *are you fucking kidding me?* – to form actual words. Not that he wasn't trying. He really, really was. It's just, despite popular belief, mouth movement required actual thought, and he was trying oh-so-hard *not* to be thinking anything right then.

While Dean failed to figure out the complexities of human language and *words*, Castiel frowned and continued, voice a little tighter, "She has no surviving next of kin, or any family left to leave behind. Is she acceptable to your terms?"

'*Hell **yes**!'* Little Dean shouted at the same time his bigger head rebuked, '*fuck no, Cas, I told you to find some old geezer!'* and what came out of all of that was, "Your eyes are still blue."

What? No, shit, wait, that's not what he meant to say. Sam and Bobby were sending him weird looks now, and he racked his brain for actual words so he could try again.

Castiel tilted her head to the side and, damn it, it was like looking in a friggin' female mirror verse. "This vessel is of the same bloodline as Jimmy Novak. A distant cousin. It was quite fortunate, as vessels are rare and your restrictions were…limiting."

There was definitely a hint of annoyance in there (more than a hint, actually, but this Castiel didn't have the balls to be outright with it. Yet.) and the beginning of a warning tone Dean knew well, even coming from a different mouth. Knowing Castiel well enough to hear the *'I am a Warrior of God, I do not serve you*,'and know there was little he could do in the face of it but be cowed, Dean simply nodded. Maybe a little too enthusiastically, looking back on it.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's good- fine. It's *fine*." And now he was just gushing words like a blushing teenage virgin asked out on her first date. *Awesome*. "Of course it's fine. Thanks, Cas. I- uh, I appreciate it."

He sort of choked on the word, other parts of him trying to speak up

about all the other things he was currently *appreciating*, but he clamped down on those with such vicious discipline that even Sister Marybeth, a teacher at the Catholic school Pastor Jim sent him and Sammy to the spring John left them in his care, would have been proud. That sanctimonious bitch.

There was another pause. Sam was still watching him with a *look*. Bobby was just rolling his eyes like it was an Olympic sport. Then Castiel nodded and they, *thank fuck*, moved on.

Dean let out the biggest breath of his life, though he had to do it subtly, lest Cas – or, god forbid, *Sammy* – notice. The conversation continued without him, while Dean spent far too long thinking of ghouls and Hell and dead puppies and *autopsies*, until his upstairs head was the one back in control and he could rejoin the discussion as an actual decent human being.

God, he was so *screwed*.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: That's about as in depth as we'll get for Miss Angela Garrett, other than the how-to-act-like-a-human input she'll have for Cas, since she's a mostly awake vessel (and the absolutely guaranteed 'nice butt' remark she'll have about Dean) That's about as bad as we'll get on Dean's hots for Angela, as well. He'll struggle for a while, but nothing's going to be as bad as first-meeting-in-a-thin-mostly-naked-hospital-gown.

Up Next: It's time to get planning. Dean's got his angel on board and a time-advisor, now it's time to put him- er, *her* - to use, at least before she returns to Heaven. Wait, whut? Cas can't return to Heaven! (although it might do Dean's blood pressure some good)

Chapter 47: Season 2: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Pronouns: Alright, get ready for this to get confusing. While Castiel is in a female vessel, the narrator (that's me!) will be referring to him as she/her. However, when Dean is the one thinking or bleeding into the narration, he'll still identify Cas as he/his. So there is gonna be some flip-flopping around, and hopefully it reads clearly as the difference between Dean being obstinate and the narrator actually knowing which gender that angel is currently wearing. (Which is only if I don't fuck up....which I already have...three times, so far, and counting since I posted this chapter and noticed them <.<)

Chapter Warnings: Dean's having problems, Cas is getting new clothes, Bobby's seeing even more of an angel (that he asked to see less of) than before, and Sam can't decide between enjoying his brother's dilemma or lecturing him right into the ground for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 14

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

There was a lot for them to sort out. The first of which was *clothes*. Clothes that actually met in the back with full coverage all three hundred and sixty degrees. God damn but did Dean need those clothes. Needed full coverage. Head to toe, maybe. That would be good.

Guess he owed the Puritans an apology: turned out, ankles could be *very* sexy.

Of course, of the three occupants in the house, Dean's clothes were the closest in size. That wasn't saying much, given the new vessel – Angela (and *Christ*, her name was seriously *Angela?* Really*?)* – was still several inches shorter and far slimmer than the hunter, even with her athletic build. Which meant that whole three hundred and sixty degrees of

coverage did a whole lot less when it was a pair of worn jeans (cinched tight with a belt they'd added an extra hole to) and an old Zepplin shirt doing the covering.

That was Dean's wet dream right there. Angel or not. Too-big clothes or not. A hot woman with bed-tussled hair (wind-tussled, but really, not much difference there) wearing one of his oldest and most favorite band shirts.

God, he was so screwed.

Bobby had been the one both brothers unanimously volunteered to help the angel get dressed, seeing as Castiel had never done so before. Dean was an obvious no-go and he disinvited himself to that shindig right away. Sam had put the full effect of the puppy-eyes to work until the old hunter just swore under his breath, grumbled about how he was too friggin' old for this, and grabbed the angel by the elbow to lead her to the first floor bathroom, clothes in hand. Which left the two brothers alone in a now noticeably quiet house.

Dean realized his mistake almost instantly. He should have made Sam go.

"Dude."

The words were barely out of his brother's mouth before Dean was snapping back, "I know, shut up."

"*Dude*." Sam aimed those big eyes his way and fired away with *The Look*.

"I said shut it, Sammy."

His snot-nosed little brother put his hands on his hips like some kind of disappointed soccer mom and Dean was rolling his eyes before the lecture even started. "I've seen you bad, Dean, but I've never seen you *this* distracted."

"Well, Cas shouldn't have come back looking so damn distracting!"

The Look doubled in strength, but petered off at the tips with just a slightly too-high eyebrow that Dean picked up on right away. He waved a hand, perhaps a little too animatedly, in the direction of the bathroom door. "You're seriously going to stand there and tell me she's not gorgeous?"

That too-high eyebrow got a little higher and his brother gave an awkward, embarrassed little shrug. "I mean…sure, she's pretty, but…"

"Unbelievable." Dean's posture deflated like a hot air balloon with a hole straight through its guts. He stared at his brother and wondered how it was they were even related. "There are so many things wrong with you."

"Me?" Sam balked, *the Look* finally giving way under a wave of exasperated amusement. And disapproving amusement, too, of course; Mother Samantha didn't give up the fight that easily. "I'm not the one drooling when I try to talk."

"Thought I told you to *shut up*."

The bathroom door opened with a loud creek, ending their discussion extra permanent style as Bobby ambled out with rosy-tinted cheeks, shutting the door quickly behind him before either brother could glimpse the angel still inside. Despite desperately wanting to turn the conversation onto anything but his own current embarrasment, Dean wouldn't touch Bobby's blushing with a forty foot pole.

He liked living, thank you very much.

-o-o-o-

The second thing they ended up discussing was Dean himself, despite the fact that every fiber in the man's being was busy playing ignorant, swimming knee-deep in denial, or (eventually) kicking and screaming as he was dragged forcefully out of that river by a scary hot nerd angel.

See, Dean had a problem. And for once it wasn't an Apocalypse, or a crisis, or a hunt they couldn't figure out. No, this was an entirely new problem, a first for Dean Winchester in a long history of other problems, and one he had no idea how to handle.

Dean's body wanted to bone Cas's body, and that was a *serious friggin' problem.*

The hunter had always been one to… *appreciate* a beautiful woman. In fact, he was known for it. Had that look, some ladies said. It got him laid more often than not, and he took no offense to those women who took offense; at least he laid it out to bare – just looking for a good time here, no strings attached – and didn't bother with anything more than his looks and his hot-blooded male need to get him there (and

certainly her, too; he was all about equal fun). Problem was, he'd never had to hold himself back. It was an 'are you in or out' question, half the time not even verbalized, at a local dive bar with a gorgeous woman he'd probably never see again. Holding himself back wasn't a necessity when one-night-stand shopping at some hole in the wall. So Dean had never seen a reason to shy away from *appreciating*.

Unfortunately, none of his encounters had ever been an angel in a hot vessel (and not one of those wearing some back-ass ugly suit like they *all* somehow did. What, did vessels only come in cheap salesmen?!) who didn't know how to give his body that blatant '*not interested*' signal it very very desperately needed. Dean was great with boundaries. Fan-freaking-tastic, actually. Apparently, he was so good with them that his body didn't know how to *back the fuck down* with anything less than the universal '*down, boy*' that every woman in every bar seemed to know.

So now, Dean had a problem. A very *large* problem, if he did say so himself (and, of course, he did, so he would).

In a male vessel, or even when that vessel had become his own body, Castiel stood stiff and unmoving, always, but in a lost sort of way. Like he didn't know how to stand still, but standing still was the only thing he knew to do. With Jimmy, it gave him a softer edge than the rest of his dick brothers. A socially awkward side that kind of won people to him; got waitresses to call him honey and sweetheart. Old ladies always offered him iced tea and inquired about his marital status (for their granddaughters, of course). It made him, well, not approachable in the slightest unless you were middle aged and female, but more approachable than any of the other halos. It made him a nerdy little angel.

In this body it was downright distracting. The slight downward curvature of her tightly drawn shoulders: the twitch of a finger: the unblinking stare that saw straight through your bullshit and into your soul. It screamed lost, maybe a little bit crazy, but a whole lot of *hot*. Those legs spread just ever so slightly wide in a fighter's stance, ready to defend at any moment or stand solid for hours. The head tilt, now complete with a wave of hair that would slide off a cotton covered shoulder. Sometimes strands would get stuck on her t-shirt and Dean just wanted to brush them back and then curl his hand around the back of that slim neck, hair caught in his fingers before he'd lean in and-

"Dean!"

Dean jerked back to reality when his brother's foot connectedly solidly with his shin and he hissed at the sharp jolt. "Jeez, *what*?"

His gaze darted from staring off into space to his brother and back again, only to realize Cas was the space he'd been staring at. Or, well, *through,* since it really wasn't the angel he'd been seeing. Nope, he'd been seeing Angela Garret. Definitely just angela, not the angel. At. All.

Cas, standing just over Sam's shoulder at the kitchen table, was staring right back with those bright, ocean eyes. The Samsquatch in front of him was pulling one hell of a bitchface (#3, *'Grow up, Dean.')* Castiel leaned around him to brace an arm on the table surface stiffly, hand splayed out on the table. It was an awkward enough move to draw even Sam's attention and raised brow to the arm just over his shoulder and up to the fiercely stoic angel, who didn't seem aware of the oddity.

Dean didn't really notice either. Cuz now he was staring at her damn perfect cleavage, positioned right at eye level, two friggin' feet away. Damnit, T-shirts weren't even supposed to be revealing, and this one wasn't an exception. How the hell was she making his old, worn out clothes *sexy*?

God, he was *so* screwed.

"This is the third time now that you are displaying physical stressors, Dean." That deep, raspy voice brought him back to the present again, and Dean snapped his eyes back to Castiel's face. "Your temperature has risen, your heart rate has increased, and blood is flowing to your-"

Dean was up and out of the chair in a millisecond flat, the wooden legs scraping across the cheap linoleum loudly enough to cut the angel short.

"Can I talk to you? Outside? Now*?* As in *right this instant.*"

He didn't wait for an answer, instead moving around the table and heading for the screen door. He kicked Samantha in the shin as he passed him, his snot-nosed kid brother trying and failing to hide his smug, laughing face. "Shut it, bitch."

Castiel followed him outside, the amused, "Jerk" making it through the door before it slammed shut behind them.

"Dean, I do not understand. You are not physically unwell. I don't

sense any sickness in you. But you're flushed and breathing heavily-"

"Jesus, Cas, just stop! You can't – Christ, you can't say that sort of stuff. Especially in front of- of Sam. Or Bobby! Or anyone!"

Castiel's eyes narrowed. "I was merely listing the symptoms of whatever is affecting you."

"You're affecting me!" Damn it, that's *not* what he meant to say. Dean closed his eyes and took a deep breath, counting to ten as he did, and then doing it again in Latin just for the hell of it. Lot of good it was doing him. "Yeah, I get it, but don't. Don't list symptoms, don't try to find something wrong with me. Just ignore it, alright? I'm fine."

Castiel took a step forward, eyes still narrow. Dean gulped on instinct, taking a step back as the angel got dangerously close to putting his very, *very* nice, new body flush against him. *Her* body. Damn it. Dean took another step back, but Castiel met him inch for inch. Those eyes all but solidified with realization and Dean wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

"You are experiencing sexual arousal in the presence of this vessel."

"N-No! No, I'm not." Dean stumbled back more forcefully this time. God, he needed some space. That famous personal space issue that had always been a thing with Cas was now a *very real issue*. "That's not it. I'm not."

Oh good. Very intelligent defense there, Dean. Real mature. Next he'd be telling Cas *'I know **you** are, but what am I?'*

"You are," Castiel insisted, her words clashing with Dean's inner whining so hard it took him a moment to figure out what she was insisting he was. Oh, right. Getting a hard on in front of her. How could he forget?

Cas's eyes trailed down Dean's body (and *damn it*, that was *not* helping), then glanced down at her own. "Is it an appealing physical form?" She placed her hand on the flat of her stomach experimentally and then, good god, she started moving her hand down across the flat plane of Angela's torso, smoothing the wrinkles in the black t-shirt. Holy fuck, it wasn't even sexy. It really wasn't. It was *awkward as hell*, is what it was. Still, Dean couldn't breathe.

He needed a fucking vacation, he decided, as he spun around to look *anywhere* else.

"Cas, god, will you just *stop*?" He shot over his shoulder, letting out a deep, frustrated groan as he ran his hands through his hair and refused to turn back around. "When I said comatose, I was thinking some ancient, decrepit, old bag! Not…Not…" He waved his hand awkwardly over his shoulder to gesture at her slim, soft form. "It's not my fault you chose Miss Fucking Hawaii and every man's tropical wet dream! Couldn't you have gone for something a little less *distracting*?"

And if it had to be female, could she at least be a lot less like Jimmy Novak? Damn it, it was only the eyes, really. And maybe a little bit the wind-swept, dark hair. And okay, maybe also the structure of their faces, and the way they both stood, and also- *god damn it!* It only made this situation all the more fucked up. Like wanting to bang your best friend's sister. That was just wrong – you didn't do that to your friends.

"Dean."

Oh no. Even in a new body with new vocal chords – and shit, she even sounded raspy and deep and gravely and like pure fucking sex (great, like Jimmy there, too – no, wait, he *did not just think that. Fuck!* He thought of it in a *porno* way. Like the way dudes talked in *pornos*, damnit) – Dean still knew that voice. That was the warrior of God, you-will-respect-me-or-I-will-throw-you-back-into-Hell voice. Only Cas had ever made a vessel sound quite like that. Not even Michael, or Uriel, or a pissed off Gabe had nailed it quite like his angel could.

Castiel was right behind him when he turned around and he swallowed thickly at the intensity of that hard, angry stare only inches from his face.

Oh god, that was *hot*. Scary and hot, and son of a bitch, he was so damn screwed.

"Vessels are not easy to come by, and even less so with your criteria. We are incredibly fortunate that such circumstances existed at all, and that she was willing to say yes." Dean leaned back as she leaned forward, right into his personal space, and that was going to be a whole new conversation this time around apparently. "I am sorry this form does not fit your aesthetical wishes, but you will learn to *control yourself*."

Attempting to swallow was about all he was good for now (and he was steadfastly ignoring the rest of his brain, which had taken its cue from his little head and was busy listing all the ways he'd *fit*

*in **your** aesthetical-* no, no, just shut up little Dean! The adults are talking now, *damn it*). Reduced to a blathering, speechless mess once more, Dean just nodded hastily.

Castiel straightened, giving him some much needed breathing room, which he gasped at greedily. "Good. We should resume our planning against the Apocalypse."

With that, she spun on her bare heel and left Dean, shell-shocked, breathing hard, and still very much aroused in the middle of the junkyard.

Right. Don't piss off the scary-hot nerd angel.

-o-o-o-

The third matter that came up quickly and with no preparedness on the boys' behalf, actually involved the Apocalypse and their next steps. That was that Castiel wasn't staying. Silver lining? It was a bonafide boner-killer if Dean had ever heard one. Before a fight could break out, which is exactly where it was headed the second Dean got that angry look on his face and opened his mouth, Sam cut in with the much more reasonable request of *'Why?'*

"I cannot remain absent from Heaven for long," she answered. There was a regretful look on her face (which, at least for now, was only decipherable from stoicism by Dean alone) that might have been a balm to Dean's simmering anger and immediate disapproval, if not for the fact that right alongside it was a slightly relieved look, too.

Dean tried damn hard not to get bitchy about that, but he couldn't *help* it. All the other angels up in heaven were dicks, and Cas was just going to learn the hard way how much they'd let him down.

Her, Dean. Let *her* down.

"I'm not supposed to be here, as it is," Cas continued. "Leaving Heaven is currently forbidden, and my absence will eventually be noticed."

Biting his tongue in response to that, Dean managed to let some of his angry annoyance slide away without having to voice it aloud. He knew what disobedience meant for an angel, and like he'd told Castiel at the start of this, Heaven couldn't know what they were up to. He'd prefer Cas to just risk it down here – screw Heaven – but he knew Heaven well enough to know they'd never let it fly. They'd come after him, soft at first, then hard when he refused, and either way that

ended in Heaven way too close to their business far too early in the timeline.

So if they had to play it slow and Cas had to stick it out undercover up in doucheland to avoid reeducation or heaven meddling too soon, then that's what they'd do. They'd make it work.

Still sucked, though, and Dean didn't like it one bit.

"Will you be able to come back?" Sam asked worriedly. Dean hadn't gone into a ton of detail on Heaven or their rules, but he understood well enough what they were asking Cas to do here, and he was pretty sure it was an imprisonable offense. If what she was doing on Earth was discovered while she was up there, Sam wasn't sure how they'd possibly get her back.

He knew Dean was worried enough about Cas spilling the beans out of a sense of duty; Sam could only imagine that risk tripled in the face of disciplinary action or what he suspected Dean had been hinting at: torture.

"I will try," Castiel responded, turning her gaze to the younger of the two brothers as she answered him. And yeah, Dean had been right, that look was *intense*. The change in vessel certainly hadn't changed that. "I cannot guarantee when or how often, but if it is an emergency, I will come."

"How you gonna know it's an emergency?" Bobby called out from behind the desk, looking entirely skeptical about this whole thing. Castiel regarded him with that heavy confusion again, as if trying to decide which question the human was asking: how would she know they weren't lying about the urgency, or how would she know they needed her help?

"I think he means, how do we get a hold of you?" Sam translated, as ever the referee among his often caustic family members.

"You can pray to me." Cas turned back to Sam, a slight nod of her head that he assumed meant she appreciated the translation help, which in turn made his smile a little more real.

"*Pray*?" Bobby didn't sound doubting so much as incredulous. He checked in with Dean, eyebrows raised, but the human only nodded back in confirmation.

"I will hear you," Castiel confirmed. "Though it would be wise to direct

your prayers specifically to me, otherwise the rest of the host will be able to you hear as well."

"Dear Cas, who art be in Heaven," Dean said, arms spread wide, "please get your feathery ass down here as soon as possible."

Castiel stared at the human, who eventually dropped his arms back to his sides. The angel's eyes were narrowed, as though she suspected Dean was making fun of her, but wasn't entirely sure. She didn't seem the type to call him on it, though. "Yes, that has worked several times now, however, prayers should generally be more *respectful*."

Sam snorted at the way the angel directed the last words in his and Bobby's direction, as if she'd already given up all hope of Dean ever doing that. Maybe there was something to be said about the two knowing each other.

"Wait, you heard all those?" Dean pulled them back into the first part of Cas's words, a slightly angry frown pulling at his lips. "What the hell, Cas! If you could hear me all this time, why the hell didn't you answer?"

"Dude," Sam cautioned, eyeing his brother sidelong with a look that said *'be polite'*. But Dean wasn't feeling very polite, and he sure as hell wasn't going to listen to his brother play diplomat in a conversation he only knew half of. Dean had damn near broken down and *begged* in some of those prayers. "She just told us she couldn't leave Heaven."

At the same time, Castiel responded, "I did."

That silenced the room, all eyes turning on the stoic angel, standing in the center of the room like a brick wall.

Sam was the first to put two and two together. "The Baku?"

Bobby sat upright in his chair, pulling his leg off the edge of the desk, suddenly all ears, because that had happened in *his* house, and he sure as hell didn't remember an angel showing up in the middle of that shit-show.

"What do you mean, the baku?" Dean echoed, glancing between Sam and Cas and pulling his head back in a bitchface of his own when the angel nodded a yes. "You were *there*?"

"She killed it," Sam offered, jerking his chin in Cas's direction. "Dad and I were trapped, and it was feeding on him."

The white light in the dream world. The explosion that had knocked Dad and Sam out of the dream, that they hadn't had an explanation for. *That* had been Castiel?

Sam shrugged helplessly, and Dean knew that gesture. It was the classic, hunter's what-are-you-gonna-do, close-call shrug, which left the older brother with a weight in his stomach. He'd known the Baku had been a close one, but honestly he'd been pretty occupied with Meg and the whole DeLorean slipup with Bobby. Maybe he hadn't realized how close it actually had been for his brother and dad.

"You cannot kill a Baku," Castiel corrected, watching the silent conversation happening between the brothers with a slight head tilt. "I purified it, returning it to its original state. The beast should go back to consuming only nightmares."

"That's comforting," Bobby muttered under his breath. The thing had clearly gone off the reservation once, what was to stop it from going there again, hurting future humans and causing a headache for some shit-luck hunter down the road.

"If you were there, you could have said something," Dean complained at the same time, crossing his arms over his chest from where he leaned against the corner of Bobby's desk, a petulant glare on his face that had Sam pulling Bitchface #3 again.

"I intended to." The only reason Castiel had been there at all had been in response to the man's prayers, some of them downright confusing, others particularly troubling, and more than a few *annoying*. Then there hadn't been time. "A mass of demons followed and attacked before I was able to."

"*You're* the reason that damn swarm showed up?" Bobby's eyes were wide, and he glanced back at Dean, who looked just as clueless. They never had figured out why that weird congregation of smoke demons attacked the house, or left just as suddenly.

Something triggered in Dean's memory, muddled by pain and gaps of consciousness. Azazel had said something about an angel touching down and bolting the hell out of there shortly afterward. Of course, that had been right before he'd shoved his hand straight into Dean's chest. Everything after that was a mass of pain and, oh yeah, *explosions*. A quick glance Sam's way showed the kid not exactly surprised, so Dean was fairly certain he hadn't imagined that in a pain-filled delirium. The demon bastard must have been talking about

Cas.

"I had to draw them away before they damaged the house, or any of you," Castiel confirmed in Bobby's direction, though she spared a glance Dean's way as well, as if to say *'is that a good enough reason for you, human*?'

Given that Dean was still struggling to keep his thoughts straight anytime that look turned his way (it was damn distracting and just a little too intense coming from a pretty face) it took him a minute to cross his arms over his chest and glare right back. If Dean was good at only one thing, that thing was burying just about anything under a heft mask of petulance.

"You could have come back once you shook them. That was weeks ago, Cas. Not like you to give up because a couple demons got in your way."

Sam was staring at him with that familiar warning in his wide-open gaze that said *'shut up, Dean, before you piss the super powerful angel off*.' Dean ignored him and he also ignored the fact that he was pretty sure Sam was at least a little right. He knew he was acting like a butt-hurt jerk rather than the competent Righteous Man he'd told Cas he needed to leave Heaven for.

Oh, yeah, except the angel was going *right back up there*. Again.

So fair's fair.

Castiel's expression grew stormy. And not your average summer storm with dark but somehow pretty clouds approaching on the horizon. This was hurricane level, run for the bunker out back, category five twister face. The hair on his arms actually stood up, and Dean took a half step back before he realized it, arms uncrossing in surprise because, while Castiel was often brooding or intense, he was very rarely angry. At least, not in the Righteous Man's direction.

Phantom pain flashed up Dean's cheek and he wondered if this was about to be a repeat of that alley all those years ago when he'd given up on saying 'No' any longer and sort of broke his best friend in the process.

"I lost one of my brother's in that attack," the angel rumbled and the house practically shook with it. Castiel was, indeed, angry. Balthazar had been her *friend*, one of her closest brethren, and it was her fault that he had perished on an unsanctioned mission. A mindless,

unimportant *curiosity*. A petulant, irreverent one at that. "So no, I could not simply return to answer one human's irreverent prayers."

Dean swallowed against that anger and, even more so, at his friend's sorrow. He could see it through the furious blue eyes. He knew Castiel; knew how the angel loved his brothers, even those that had turned on him, those that tried to kill him, that hated him. Still, he had loved them and mourned their deaths, each and every one. Dean could imagine the grief and the guilt he was feeling now (struggling to feel, because this was Angels-Don't-Have-Emotions-Cas and not the angel that had finally embraced the fact that *yes they did*), when his brother's death was a result of answering a human's prayers against orders.

"I'm sorry, Castiel." Sam's condolence was heartfelt, as only that mushy moose could be, and Castiel turned towards him with a slight pinch in her brow. This was a completely different person, who looked utterly different from James Novak, and yet the expression was still so friggn *Cas*.

"Yeah, me too," Dean offered as well, scratching the back of his scalp for a second for lack of anything better to do with his arms. He meant it thought. He didn't like most of Cas's family, but that didn't mean he didn't understand mourning for them.

Unfortunately for them all, he'd met so many of Cas's dick brothers (and Cas had so many dick brothers) that Dean didn't even think to ask which one it had been.

Castiel regarded both of them for a solid minute before inclining her head in a small, but accepting nod. After all, Balthazar's death was not Dean's fault. Neither angel had thought Earth was going to be dangerous, either.

The silence persisted for another moment, perhaps a pause in respect for the angel's fallen kin, before Bobby cleared his throat. "We gonna get back to the apocalypse, then?"

Cas turned awkward to him, neck and shoulders stiffening as she fell back into soldier mode. "Yes. It would be wise to discuss our next moves, and for you to….catch me up."

The storm abated, and Dean allowed himself a little quirk of a smile at the angel's first attempt at an idiom. He'd make sure there were more to come.

-o-o-o-

Bobby kept them on track through the next six attempted arguments – three settled on Castiel returning to heaven, two on their next move (find Azazel and kill him, find Lilith and kill her, at least in Dean's opinion, that was), and the final one a cumulated result of the previous five.

"You cannot do any of those things," the angel insisted, tone as close to annoyed as a pre-apocalypse, pre-sarcasm Castiel would ever get. Dean rolled his eyes – his third time in as many minutes – and Sam hit him in the bicep, wearing a patented bitchface, before he could open his mouth to start argument number seven, smack dab in the middle of argument number six. "As I have said several times, you need to stick as closely to the previous timeline as possible."

"Cuz some things just have to stay the same, huh?" Dean bit out, voice hostile and bitter with something Castiel did not understand, which only resulted in an unblinking head tilt. The man from the future bristled at it for reasons the angel also did not understand.

"Yes," she insisted tone as strong as that stance Cas always took, whether he was in an argument or standing in the middle of the bunker accepting a beer. Dean supposed that solidity hadn't really eased up until the angel had gone full human. Which brought up unpleasant memories he didn't have time to deal with now, so he shoved all of it right back down. "Time *can* be bent, but it is difficult, and the further you bend it, the harder the recoil will be. The tighter you attempt to hold on, the more cracks will appear in the timeline. Cracks that will be filled with unpredictable change."

"You wouldn't have sent me back if it couldn't be done," Dean challenged, and Sam resisted the urge to hit him again. The older Winchester was bouncing between barely being able to use his tongue and his brain at the same time and unwarranted hostility towards the angel. Sam didn't have a clue what was going on in his brother's head, but they were going to be lucky if he didn't chase Cas away permanently before they'd even gotten started.

"Calm down, ya idjit," Bobby interrupted, sending Dean a chastising look that actually did a lot more than anything coming from Sam had in the past hour. "No one's saying it can't be done. Right?"

Castiel seemed surprised to be on the receiving end of that question and Bobby's own intense stare (it was the eyebrows). The minute it

took for the angel to formulate her answer was probably as much from the unexpectedness of it as it was trying to work out which answer was correct for the hunter's Midwestern double negative. It was rather fitting that the overly formal angel ended up going with an uncertain, "…Right."

Sam's little huff and quirk of his lips meant he'd caught that too.

"Changes are possible, but you will need to tread very carefully." Castiel met each of their gazes individually, her tone both incredibly serious and that of a kindergarten teacher slow-speaking to make sure her kids actually understood English before she moved on with the lesson. Sam thought it was fitting, given Dean was among her audience, but kept that little thought to himself, since he'd already made it clear they were trying to avoid further arguments. "Any deliberate alterations to the timeline will have to be small and few, with as little impact as possible and as far apart as possible."

"How the hell do we stop the Apocalypse with *small impacts*?" Dean was being purposefully argumentative. Not outside the range of normal for Dean, really, but definitely more riled up than usual. Sam was pretty sure he knew the cause, and it was the angel standing in front of them, prepping them like a mission report because she wasn't going to be present for the rest of the mission.

"You said Lilith was the final seal to release Lucifer." Castiel focused her gaze primarily on Dean. "Then you should focus your changes solely on her. If you're going to avert the Apocalypse-"

"*We,* Cas!" Dean's unexpected explosion, which was, admittedly, not that unexpected for Sam or Bobby but still louder than they'd had been hoping for, startled Castiel enough that her jaw clacking shut was audible. "Damn it, we're in this together, it's *us* against the Apocalypse! Not me, not Sam. *Us!"*

"Dean," Sam cautioned, a mix of warning and understanding. His older brother dropped his shoulders but kept the clenched jaw that Sam knew well. Dean was well aware he owed an apology for that outburst, but Cas wasn't going to get one.

"Of course," the angel answered, eyes still wide from the abrupt scolding. There was another moment of silence as Castiel judged whether she'd chosen the right response to the volatile human she seemed to know more about than she should, and yet absolutely nothing at the same time. "If…we are going to avert the Apocalypse,

we will need to remove Lilith from the equation."

"Kill her?" Bobby asked gruffly, an eyebrow raised. "How the hell are we supposed to kill Lucifer's first born? That ain't no spring chicken we're talking about."

"No, she is certainly not a…chicken. However, she is still a demon, and can be killed like any other. She is also our best chance at ending this before it begins." Castiel cast a sidelong glance at Dean, though he was back to brooding on his side of the den. "We will need to arrange for her death in a situation completely apart from the events surrounding the Apocalypse."

Sam frowned at that, curious brow puzzled atop his intelligent brown eyes. "We need to make it look like an accident?"

Castiel tilted her head slightly, thinking. "Not necessarily, but the less it looks like a result of Hell attempting to raise Lucifer, the more likely Time will accept the new path."

"So, a death random enough that no one, including Time – like that's a *thing* – puts two and two together with us trying to stop the end of the world." Bobby's second eyebrow had joined the first up near his hairline.

"Precisely."

"Great." Bobby shared a more than doubting look with Dean, who wasn't too cranky yet to return it. "And how do we do that, exactly?"

"I am-" Castiel hesitated for a moment, eyes darting like she was listening to something else, head tilting ever so slightly to match. "… working on it."

Bobby snorted. "Wouldn't it just be easier for Dean not to make a deal that lands his ass in Hell and breaks the first seal?"

All eyes turned on him, and Dean frowned, pinching his face and pulling his head back at his family. "I already promised not to, what more do you want?"

"I do not think we should wager the fate of the planet on a promise," Castiel responded evenly, and Dean whipped quite the insulted look her way, though he knew the angel hadn't meant it that way. Still. Ouch. "Demons can be clever and terribly creative. They will find another way to fulfill the conditions of the seal, should Dean's

resilience hold."

"It will," the man from the future mumbled under his breath, though even he couldn't deny that the words held way more confidence than any other part of him, soul and conscience included.

"For now, you should stick to the original timeline as closely as you can," Castiel reiterated, straightening to her full height. "Do not do anything out of the ordinary. I will formulate a strategy to alter time as little as possible, but I will need an intimate knowledge of what is coming."

Dean looked at Bobby, who sighed and leaned over to jerkily pull open the top drawer of his desk. He drew out the legal pad, curling yellow pages covered in his scrawled hand, and plopped it down on the desk.

"Knock yourself out," he offered, to which the angel, though confused, ultimately decided against pointing out how counterproductive such an action would be.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: if you were thinking Angela was the one to suggest leaning over the table and putting the ladies in view – to the confusion of a very lost but obedient Castiel – then you would be absolutely right ;) And eventually we'll get a little more of her voice, next time we switch to Cas's narration-bleed-through.

Up Next: Cas has a lot of an Apocalypse to read up on, Bobby's calling it a night (morning), and Dean's finally talking about a future that's more than five years away while Sam eavesdrops when he should be sleeping. Oh, and Cas learns about Star Trek, of all things.

Chapter 48: Season 2: Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Pronoun Reminder: Quick reminder that Dean is still messing up pronouns. So if Cas is referred to with his/he/him in a paragraph that is primarily full of Dean thinking, then it's likely on purpose. However, I'm sure there's at least one him/he/his in there that isn't on purpose, and for that I say 'my bad.' Darn you, pronouns! (Darn you, decision-to-turn-Cas-into-a-girl!)

Chapter Warnings: Dean and Cas have a quiet moment filled with way too much pain, alcohol, and familiarity. Sam's an eavesdropper and Castiel learns how to lie like they do on television.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 15

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"I do not understand this," Castiel spoke up from her spot standing in front of the desk. She hadn't so much as moved, let alone sat down, while flipping through page after page of the notes Bobby had taken on the soon to be End Times.

"Which part?" Dean groused miserably, nursing a new glass of whiskey from where he half sat on top of the cluttered desk. He'd already gone through the crap his life had been – was going to be – twice, damnit. He really didn't want to do it a third.

What he wanted was to catch his precious four hours of (if he was lucky) dreamless sleep and call it a night. Well, morning, now. It was five fifteen am; Sam was snoring on the couch where he'd unintentionally fallen asleep and Bobby had called it quits two hours ago, telling them to wake him up if it was an emergency, otherwise it could wait until the sun had friggin' come back up. Cas had assured him that they had that long, at least, before she needed to return.

But if Cas was headed back to Heaven, then Dean didn't have time for

a full night's sleep, or any sleep. They were on a time limit the hunter hadn't seen coming and was nowhere near prepared for. So it wasn't like he'd be able to pass out with anything even resembling rest right now.

"This, here, shortly before Lilith is killed." Castiel pointed to the part on the page in question, tilting it slightly in Dean's direction. Not that he could read Bobby's scrawl from a foot and a half away. Man should have been a doctor with handwriting like that. "Sam was contained in Bobby Singer's panic room in an attempt to clear the toxins from his blood. But the next entry states he reconvened with the demon Ruby."

"Yeah, well, that's what happened," Dean grumped, downing the last of his whiskey wretchedly. "What about it?"

"How did your brother get out? I have inspected the panic room myself. It is brilliantly constructed and could easily function as a prison. Withdrawal from demon blood as severe as these notes suggest would have left Sam disoriented, likely hallucinating and fevered. He couldn't have escaped on his own."

Dean rolled his shoulders, leaning back across the desk to swipe the dwindling bottle of alchol to refill his drink. Rather than answer, he went back to wallowing into the amber liquid. It wasn't that he didn't know the answer, or suspect it, at least. Though they never had figured it out for sure, Dean had his suspicions.

Cas stared at him, waiting, and his gaze eventually slid to the drink in his hand. Now rocking a decent buzz, probably on his way to being well and drunk, Dean didn't know if that look was more judgmental coming from a woman's face than Jimmy's. Maybe he was just putting it there himself, imagining the disapproval like some sort of stupid internal-self-depricating-projecting bullshit. Whatever, Sam would know the fancy psychology term.

Castiel's eyes met his once more and that head tilted in a familiar way.

"Told you not to do that, Cas," he grumbled, annoyed at the angel currently reading his mind. Or 'surface thoughts' as she'd called them. They'd had the talk (twice now) about how very much humans liked their privacy and personal space. So far, the results of the discussion had amounted to about as much as the first time Dean and Cas had the talk. Which was to say, there were no results, at all.

"How else do you propose I get answers, if you won't tell me them?"

Dean snorted into his drink at the sass. This Cas was picking up *fast*. Maybe introducing the idea of rebellion earlier meant the angel was taking it to heart a lot quicker this time around. Or maybe a female vessel came with female bitchiness.

The man from the future frowned down at his drink. That was mean, and not entirely fair. Dean was often an asshole, but he wasn't usually a dick, too.

"You're the only one that made sense," he said instead, answering the angel's original question as some sort of mental compromise for thinking dick thoughts.

"What?" Cas blinked in surprise and it was clear she didn't understand what he was getting at.

"You're the only one who could have let Sam out of the panic room. Thought about it, almost asked you a couple times, but by then it was in the past and we had bigger things to worry about." Namely, his brother going off the deep, deep, deep end and almost taking the world with him. "And you were so damn guilty the next time I saw you. Kept looking at me like you ran over my dog and were gonna do it again."

Dean swore softly, remembering that terrible, stupid, gaudy room he'd been trapped in and the look Cas had sent his way when he insisted he could not help. When he stood behind Zachariah like some lackey and just let kickoff to the end of the world happen. Dean had been pissed, for so many reasons, not least of which was the realization that at some point over that year since an angel had pulled him out of hell, he'd started thinking of Cas as a friend.

A friend who had betrayed them for some douchebag in a suit with bad hair and worse breath who clearly didn't give a shit about him.

"I don't know how Sam got out," Dean continued, refusing to look at those wide eyes staring at him, horror growing in their stupidly blue depths. "But the only thing that fits is you let him."

Castiel was stunned. She didn't know if the man was lying, didn't bother trying to find out, because she saw no motive for him to. Dean very desperately wanted the angel on their side, that much was clear, despite his irritable behavior towards her over the last several hours. Behavior that Castiel was certainly not versed enough in human emotions to decipher. However, lying about her role in Sam's release was far more likely to push her away, which Dean knew, as that fear

was currently twisting through his mind like a parasite.

"I heralded in the Apocolypse?"

Dean snorted, muttering something along the lines of, '*like you were the only one.*'

She looked back down at the notes that, until that point, had not had a lot of her in them at all. She'd played nothing more than Heaven's messenger to Dean, as far as she could tell, until she had betrayed Heaven and escaped the holding room with the hunter in two. Before that, Castiel was a mouthpiece of heavenly intent most of the time with the solitary exception of not destroying a town unfortunate enough to fall with a doomed seal.

It seemed unlikely that she would bow to Dean's whim against Heaven's command in order to save a handful of innocent humans, only to turn around and release the one man who could unleash their deaths anyway. The first decision sounded frighteningly like her – enough so that she waited for that English lilt to pipe up from the back of her conscience, but the ghost of her dead brother had not spoken since she'd asked him to leave her be – but the latter decision certainly did not. And she had been giving quite a lot of thought in the last six hours as to what she could and could not do when it came to the survival of the human race.

"Heaven made you do it," Dean finally answered, his forced monotone at odds with his tightly clenched jaw and the fist around his liquor glass. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Cas. You *can't* go back up there. The minute they think you have doubts, they'll throw you in some re-education bible camp. They'll torture you – or *worse* – until you fit the mold again."

A mold that did not have room for Dean Winchester, or any other human.

Castiel tilted her head once more as her human charge's heart picked up, beating faster and harder than their current conversation or conditions warranted. His body language was tense with dread, and he was forcefully fighting back a persistent memory.

"Who is Naomi?"

Dean flinched, for which the angel almost apologized. "Stop reading my head, Cas."

"Then talk to me, Dean."

The hunter swore it had to be the new vessel. Maybe women were just naturally more expressive.

(They were, in fact, not, and it was Angela, awake as Jimmy had rarely been, telling Cas to add a little eyebrow lift to that one. "*No, wait, too much, you don't want to look crazy. Huh? Oh, yeah, raising both of them too much is usually a sign of surprise. But just one- see, see what he's doing there? That's surprise. And maybe a smidge desperate. Don't do that. Maybe we should have practiced with a mirror first…"*)

"You don't know her?" Dean finally relented, ignorant to the conversation going on within Castiel's new body. "She's an angel."

"I am not familiar with her, but there are many angels. Some I know only by name."

Naomi was, indeed, one of those names, but Castiel had heard nothing more of her. They had not met before, nor had she heard anything pertaining to the other angel's duties.

"She's Heaven's enforcer," Dean bit out, expression dark and dangerous. "She's the one they send angels to when they step out of line. When Zachariah's asshole methods aren't enough." The human rounded fully on her, setting his drink angrily down on the surface of the desk and splashing several drops onto old books and scraps of paper Bobby would surely bitch about later. "She wipes angel's minds, Cas. Resets them. Brainwashes them. She brainwashed you."

Castiel frowned. "That's not possible."

"Oh, trust me." Dean's responding smile was not a smile. His lip pulled back and his teeth gleamed and his eyes were dark. The expression was as deadly as it was bitter, and Castiel grieved for the blatant weight this man bore across his soul. "I'm pretty damn sure it is."

That same memory played over and over in the hunter's mind, like he could not successfully put it to rest. Castiel stared hard at this newly assigned charge, whose body was filled with phantom pain as he saw, again and again, James Novak's vessel standing above him, fists clenched tight, face blank. Castiel knew it was not Jimmy that Dean saw in his memories, but his angelic friend. The 'Cas' Dean was so familiar with.

The angel wondered what could possibly put a human at ease when

they'd clearly suffered through a trauma. The soul resting within her borrowed body, her third charge in this brand new world, had many possible answers but none of them sounded like the right one. And Castiel was fairly certain she would only get the one chance with this particular human.

"What did she do?"

Dean spared the angel a side glance, jabbing his finger at the rim of his whiskey glass and contemplating just how badly he did – and didn't – want to finish its contents. He didn't think Cas was reading his mind this time, otherwise she'd have her answer, but he didn't like the question any more knowing it was a genuine one. In fact, it might have made Cas asking it even worse.

"She tried to make you kill me."

Castiel's head tilted to the side and her full hair fell in a curtain of dark waves. Dean focused on that, on the shape and feel and the distraction of it all. The hunter let his mind wander wherever it damn well wanted to go, so long as it stayed out of that crypt and the memory of his best friend beating him to death.

"But I did not?" The angel was fairly certain of the answer, although she was beginning to realize that death was not an uncommon occurrence among the Winchesters. Three years into Bobby's notes, both brothers had faced and conquered it once, and Castiel could tell just from the frayed and thinning edges of Dean's soul that those were hardly the last times.

'*Fuck it*,' Dean thought, grabbing the whiskey with a full fist and downing the last of it. "No, for reasons we sure as hell aren't getting into now."

He managed not to slam the glass back down only for the reason that Sam was sleeping a few feet away and Bobby just upstairs. Instead, he let the thing slide across the wood with a satisfying, grated noise and rounded on Cas with his best I-Am-The-Righteous-Man-And-You-Will-Listen-To-Me face. "You *can't* go back to Heaven, Cas."

Castiel's head tilt only got stronger and it was like poking a needle into an inflated balloon, with the balloon being Dean's ego and optimism all in one. "I must."

"Why? Why can't you just stay here, where you're *safe!*"

It was a good thing the glass was out of reach, because Dean definitely would have slammed it down were it still in his tightly fisted hands. He needed to slam something. Castiel's eyes were wide again, surprise painted across her features. Dean had tried to make it clear that going back up there would put Cas in danger, but clearly the angel hadn't realized *why* that might be a bad thing. Stupid, oblivious, martyring idiot.

"I must, Dean," she repeated, though her tone was far softer and there was something in it that suggested she'd just realized the man before her actually *cared* about her wellbeing. The surprise there might have been painful, if Dean hadn't seen it a dozen times before. She set the notepad down on the desk, next to the empty glass. "If I play as big a role in future events as you suggest, than altering my own timeline will have the same devastating effects."

The hunter clenched his jaw in the face of possibly the only argument he couldn't actually argue against. Not that that had ever stopped Dean Winchester before. "Yeah? How's that timeline gonna do when you go and get yourself thrown in Heaven's prison, huh?"

Castiel didn't deign to respond to his childish anger. Instead she stayed annoying calm and infuriatingly rational. "Having a set of eyes and ears in Heaven can only help our cause. Your knowledge on their actions are limited to only what my future self relayed, which was minimal at best."

"*You* wanna play *spy*?"

The angel once more disregarded the hunter's attempts to goad her into a fight rather than face the logic of her argument. "There is another reason to return. I do not believe the entirety of the Host has corrupted. Some of my brothers will not stand for this. Perhaps they can be persuaded to turn against our superiors, should the time come that they must make that choice."

That shut Dean right up. Or, at least, it did for the thirty seconds it took his brain to reboot and the earlier panic – lingering in the back of his mind, just waiting for the incentive – to return. That irrational anxiety he'd been feeling ever since Cas declared she was going right back upstairs. A fear that had nowhere to go for a hunter like Dean except to boil over into anger.

"Damn it, Cas, you're going to get yourself killed!"

"I will be…covert," Castiel offered, trying her hand at appeasement

and missing by a mile.

"You don't *do* covert! You can't even fake being an FBI agent!"

That got a slightly annoyed look from her, clueing Dean in that his continued questioning of her capabilities or reasoning would not be tolerated much longer. No matter how much he believed to know about her from another lifetime. Dean gritted his teeth and tried to shove that anger down enough to find some logic of his own, because, damnit, he wasn't wrong here.

"Even if you can get some of the angels on your side, you'll never sway the big guns. And numbers aren't gonna matter against Michael or Raphael, are they? They'll throw all of you in prison and we'll be right back to square one. Worse than square one; we'll be *screwed*."

"The risk does not make it wrong, Dean. You offered me a choice. My brothers deserve the same."

"She's got a point."

Human and angel turned to Sam, still lying on the couch but head turned towards them and eyes open and clear, suggesting he'd been awake and listening for some time. Dean swore under his breath, sending a glare in his brother's direction as he crossed his arms defensively over his chest.

"Foot soldiers can change the tide of a war," the younger Winchester offered, sitting upright. "If Cas can amass support – *discreetly* – Heaven may have a harder time letting the Apocalypse just happen."

"It could be a suicide mission, Sam."

The brunette glanced at Castiel, who returned a curt nod in his direction. "It's her family, Dean. Her choice."

"He's going to get caught, and we won't be able to do a damn thing about it from down here!"

"I appreciate the concern for my wellbeing," Castiel responded, not unkindly, "but this is not up for discussion. I will not abandon my home. My brothers. Especially if what you say about Zachariah and Naomi is true."

Dean sent Sam a desperate, pleading look and the younger Winchester was still kind of floored to see Dean so worried. He really didn't want

Cas going back up there. Part of Sam's incredibly intelligent brain suggested they heed that fear. Dean knew more about all of this and everything that came next than either he or Castiel. It was still the angel's choice, however. Perhaps even the right one, given that keeping her from Heaven might alter the timeline too much anyway.

"She can act as a double agent up there. Our eyes and ears, maybe even some influence. That could be a huge advantage."

His brother threw up his arms, frustration clear on his face but fueled more by concern that bordered on panicked. He knew he was losing this fight. "He can't even lie believably!"

"She."

"Whatever," Dean growled. "Point's still the same. *She's* total crap at undercover."

"Then we'll teach her." Sam turned to Castiel with a questioning look and the angel, though less sure of this particular topic, gave a nod once more. He turned back to his brother. "If she's made up her mind, we need to arm her the best we can. We'll teach her how to lie."

Dean snorted, dropping his arms and grabbing the whiskey bottle. "Good luck with that."

-o-o-o-

Teaching an angel to lie was like mixing oil and water. At least, teaching *this* angel to lie, as Dean had mentioned more than once how easily it came to the rest of Castiel's brothers. It certainly did not help that Dean sat in Bobby's chair, feet on the desk, glass in hand, and made snide quips at every turn. It got to the point where Sam grabbed the liquor bottle, put it on the other side of the room, and in no uncertain terms told his brooding brother to help or get out. To which Dean glared deeply and more than a little sullenly, before he eventually started offering pointers.

Castiel really was terrible at deception, just as Dean had said. Her eyes would widen almost comically any time they asked her a question she did not know the answer to and thus was expected to make one up. Then she'd stumble and stutter her way through something jumbled and largely incoherent. It wasn't the basic concept that was giving her trouble. The angel understood the idea behind fabricating a story rather than confessing the truth along with the purpose of it, if not the necessity. She was just total crap at it.

"This is never gonna work," Dean finally growled, annoyance making the words come out low in his throat and Sam winced sympathetically as Castiel both ducked her head and clenched her fists.

"Have some patience, Dean," Sam argued back, feeling a tad defensive on the angel's behalf. It was obvious to him that Castiel was trying. Not just trying to do something completely unnatural to her values and base personality, but trying to follow Dean's every demand when she clearly didn't want to. From agreeing to help them against Heaven's orders to changing her vessel, returning to her home and siblings seemed like the only thing she *wasn't* willing to compromise, and Sam could respect that. Not to mention, Dean was being an ass.

"Just because lying comes easy to you-" Sam continued, knowing that was a low blow, with Dean flinching almost violently at it, "-doesn't make it easy for her."

His brother blanched, fidgeting as he first sat upright in Bobby's chair, then gave up entirely and got to his feet with the need to move, half from guilt and half in frustration. He didn't want lying to come easy to the angel. He knew the path that led there and it wasn't one he ever wanted Cas to walk again. But, damn it, this was kinda life or death stuff they had to teach hi- *her* and they had all of one night on no sleep to do it.

Logically, Dean knew what this was that had him so tense and angry. He knew that crawling feeling just under his skin that showed itself as rage and frustration and impatience was actually fear. Fear he wasn't even ashamed to admit (to himself, of course; no way he was saying it aloud) because they were talking about sending Cas into the lion's den. Outnumbered, barely armed, with no rescue option should it all go to hell in a handbasket.

And Dean was just so damn sure it was going to.

He was still trying how to put all of that into words without sounding like he was scared shitless, when Sam straightened on the couch, a sudden in his eye that usually meant he'd had a revelation.

"We're going about this the wrong way." Yup, that was Sam's breakthrough voice, and the hint of a smile on the corner of his lips meant it was probably a good one, too. "We're trying to teach her to lie. We need to teach her how to not answer instead. Without lying."

Dean blinked, then furrowed his brow as he thought through his brother's words and what he was talking about. "You want him to pull

a Spock?"

"What's a spock?"

"I was thinking politician – several come to mind – but, yeah, Spock works too," Sam reasoned with a shrug, that smile growing even as he turned to answer the angel's question. "Spock is a character in a well-known science fiction show. He's from an alien race called Vulcans, who don't lie."

"They're all about logic and 'controlling one's emotions,'" Dean continued, raising his hands in air quotes that blue eyes followed with a curious frown. "You'd like 'em, Cas."

"Yes, they do sound more sensible than humans."

Sam snorted something unlady-like over on the couch and Dean narrowed his eyes at the sassy angel.

"Watch it, Bucko. Almost all my friends are human."

"You don't have any friends, Dean," Sam interrupted, that little smug smirk pulling at his face as he took the angel's side *again*. He sent Cas a little conspiratorial grin that she didn't seem to get, and added, "Present company excluded."

"Bitch." Dean pulled quite the bitchface of his own, crossing his arms over his chest, but he couldn't ignore the way his lips tried to stretch into a smile. This was almost *home*. This was almost family. Almost what he'd had and had to leave behind. What he so badly missed and was, admittedly, a good chunk of his motivation in retrieving the angel. "All my friends *will* be human. Except Benny. And Benny's awesome."

And one hell of a mood-killer, turned out. That damn Cajun vampire who'd been as much a brother to Dean in Purgatory as Sam or even Cas. More so, actually, because he'd stuck by Dean's side and hadn't pulled some dumb suicidal penance of *not leaving*. But Dean shoved all that away and, along with it, the painful thought that he'd probably not meet Benny in this timeline. Not if he successfully changed the future. And didn't that just suck, right alongside every other side effect of time travel. There was just no way he could let anyone, including himself, open Purgatory, no matter what awesome bro-vamps were waiting on the other side for an escape. (And, oh god, he did not just use the word *bro-vamps*.)

"Who's Benny, Jerk?"

Dean shook off Sam's question, a pained look that quickly schooled itself into '*later',* which his brother thankfully heeded. They had more important things to discuss right now. After that, Dean was going to sleep for a friggin' week and not think about anything past two thousand and six.

"Right," the man from the future clapped his hands together, leveling Cas with a look that made her decidedly nervous. "Time to teach an angel a thing or two about lying like a Vulcan."

Castiel's brow pinched and she glanced between the two brothers, clear confusion in her eyes. "I thought you said Vulcan's do not lie."

-o-o-o-

It took another three hours, the sun climbing well into the sky by that point. Bobby eventually rejoined them, all puffy-eyed and grumpy-browed, until Sam put a cup of freshly brewed coffee in front of him and he showed his appreciation by silently sipping the life-giving drink as he watched the two idjits Vulcanize an angel.

Castiel was pretty damn close to a natural at evasion, it turned out. Once she got the idea of avoiding an answer with another truth, or a half truth, or returning their question with a question of her own, she'd picked it up with a wicked aptitude that Dean sometimes forgot was buried beneath all that stoicism and pop culture cluelessness. But Cas had always been a brilliant strategist, despite lacking creativity. That had been their problem with lying; Castiel wasn't good at making things up, but she was an expert at employing what she already had.

"Where were you, Castiel?" Sam asked, voice stern and even as he mimicked what he envisioned was an angelic superior.

Given that Cas stood at attention, somehow even more motionless than she'd been previously, Dean figured Sam wasn't that far off. Or Castiel was better at role playing than he'd ever suspected.

Mind out of the gutter, Dean. You don't even like *roleplay. Except hot nurse outfits. Hot nurse outfits are okay. She'd look amazing in a hot nurse out-*

Dean made a disgruntled noise in the back of his throat and crossed from the kitchen counter to the doorway, desperately needing movement for his suddenly restless energy. Sam watched him pass

with a look that said he knew exactly where Dean's head was at and was both disapproving and also entirely prepared to never let him live it down. Dean just glared at him.

"I was on Earth," the angel replied succinctly and confidently, unaware of the silent conversation happening between the brothers.

"What were you doing there?" The older of the two asked, voice staying even despite the fact that he needed a good head cleansing and maybe a quick adjustment to his pants.

(He was *fine*, damnit.)

This wasn't their first time running through this kind of drill, and Cas was getting good at it. It was almost fun, and Dean had found himself actually enjoying the banter over the last couple hours, forgetting his fear several times (at least until he abruptly remembered it again, always with a lurch deep in his stomach). Previous moment aside, he'd also mostly gotten his body and mind to behave around Angela. Mostly.

"I was speaking with a human."

It was Sam's turn to fire off, "Who?"

Castiel turned her head to meet her second interrogator with a pause. It didn't come across as hesitant as it had in earlier run-throughs, and the boys both took it as improvement. They'd been asking tougher questions with each round, too. "I believe the name he gave me was a joke."

'I'm Dean Friggin' Winchester.'

Dean snorted. That was pushing it, but it wasn't a lie. The line certainly hadn't been completely serious, that's for sure. A little inside joke all for himself and an audience ten years in the future. Scratch what he'd said earlier. The angel *was* getting creative.

"Nice one, Cas."

"Why were you on Earth?" Sam continued before the angel could get too comfortable with the hunter's praise. Not that it wasn't earned, but they weren't finished yet. Over the last three hours, the brothers had taken turns playing good cop/bad cop, sometimes bad cop/bad cop, as they took turns firing off questions. Sometimes they gave the angel time to think, others were speed rounds. The angel adapted pretty

spectacularly, given how new she was to this.

"The human prayed to me for guidance."

"Why did you leave Heaven when you knew it wasn't allowed?" The angel cast a look Dean's way, a little more uncertain this time as she didn't have an immediate response readied. It was a harder question, the hunter knew, because it admitted disobedience. The key would be to downplay just how noncompliant she was considering being. Had considered. Hell, fully committed to at this point, Dean was pretty sure.

"Because," Cas started slowly, turning her upper body to face Dean entirely, shoulders squared. Those blue eyes were as intense as Dean had ever seen them, and he swallowed heavily at the memory of an angel in a barn so many years ago. It came to him instinctually, a super-charged exchange he had never forgotten, and Dean knew what Cas was going to say before she said it, "God commanded it."

Sam's brows went damn near his hairline (and over his shoulder at the kitchen table, Bobby choked on a mouthful of lukewarm coffee.) The room feel silent and he glanced at his brother. "Is that going to work?"

Dean shrugged, clearing his throat past the weird ache there. "It isn't a lie."

Castiel straightened at the approval, turning to Sam. "God once commanded the angels to shepherd humans and be their guide in all things. Even with Heaven's gates shut, his command has not changed."

"It's risky," Dean piped in, a little flicker of worry in his gut telling him not to let Cas's ego get ahead of itself. The angel had never been one to get caught up on pride or arrogance, but it would be a stupid thing to blow her cover on upstairs.

"Indeed." The angel tilted her head conciliatorily, but lost none of that sureness from her eyes. "However, I am confident I can argue my point with success. As you said, it is not a lie, and Zachariah cannot accuse me of disobedience for it alone."

Especially not if others of the Host were present at the time. Castiel was still certain that not all her siblings would abandon humanity – or their Father's initial will – so glibly. She had to believe that some of her brothers would realize God's original commandment still stood.

Sam shrugged, happy with trusting the angel to know more about

Heaven then they did. Dean was still frowning lightly, but he couldn't really argue. Zachariah might give her a slap on the wrist, but it was nothing the angel couldn't handle.

"Damn," he finally said, a smile breaking out. "Nicely done, Cas. I'd say you're ready."

As ready as she could be for just one night of practice. That was going to have to be good enough. His smile turned more smirk as he lifted his hand, splitting his fingers down the middle in a Vulcan salute. Across the room, Sam groaned.

"Live long and prosper, young Padawan."

Sam groaned even louder and Castiel's blank face tilted quizzically to the side.

"I do not understand."

Bobby snorted into his mug, Sam just rolled his eyes, and Dean clapped the angel on the shoulder hard enough to jolt her body forward all of a half inch.

"You don't have to, Cas. But when you get back, we're watching Star Trek. I'm educating you properly this time around."

Castiel didn't understand that, either, but the smile on Dean's face and the way his soul flickered happily in response was enough for her to know that she didn't need to.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Mostly chatter this time around, but I particularly like the quiet moment between the two of them while Dean thinks Sam is asleep :)

Approaching Milestone: So over on ff.net we are approaching that awe-inspiring 1000 review milestone! I'm ecstatic. I've never written anything that got even halfway there (I've never written anything this long, either). In celebration, when we hit that magical 1000th review, there will be **back-to-back chapters** that weekend (one on Sat, one on Sunday).

I know here on AO3 we're not there yet since I posted the entire story almost in one go much later on, but I'd obviously post back-to-back here too. I was originally going to keep it a surprise,

however.... Look, I'm not saying Chapter 16 has a nasty cliffhanger, or anything… I'm just saying that if I were you, and I was going to get back-to-back chapters… I'd probably want those chapters to be 16 and 17, as some sort of meager consolation for the mother-of-all-mean-cliffhangers-that-won't-be-resolved-right-away-because-this-story-has-a-no-good-dirty-rotten-author-behind-it.

But it's going to be quite the challenge for those ff.net-ers and they may need your help. We're fifty reviews away, and that's *a lot* for one chapter. So if any of you want to save your review and pop over there to post it to try and bolster that number to get your chapters sooner.... well, let's just say here's the link: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12430391/47/The-Road-So-Far-this-Time-Around

Oh, and this isn't bribery to get more reviews! (Okay, it's not completely bribery to get more reviews ;P). You all will get those back-to-back chapters whenever we cross that milestone on ff.net, be it next chapter or four chapters from now. I'm just saying…. If it were me…. I'd want Chapter 17 immediately after the not-niceness that is the end of 16.

Just saying ;D

Reviews: Speaking of! Thank you all so much for your continued support and pure awesomeness! I hope you drop a line and let me know how we're doing, especially now that we have a couple chapters of Cas-with-a-feminine-pronoun under our belt. It hasn't been the easiest to write, and I'd love a check-in with how you guys are getting along with it.

Up Next: With Cas's evasion tactic down almost-pat, it's time to head back up to Heaven before the boys upstairs start wondering where their littlest angel has gotten off to. But first, there's a little problem Castiel forgot to mention, and her name is Angela Garrett. Bobby's not gonna be happy, especially when the boys rush off after a surprise phone call from an old friend of the family.

Chapter 49: Season 2: Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

-Reviews: The folks over at ff.net (and anyone here who contributed over there) did it! We passed the 1000th review milestone, which means we get back-to-back chapters this weekend! Hence the early Saturday post ;) Thanks so much to everyone who revived, over there or here!! I love hearing from you guys, and you really do keep this story going.

-Chapter Warnings: It's time to venture back up to Heaven. Armed with the lying capabilities of a Vulcan, there's only one more thing to settle up. What the heck they're gonna do with poor Angela Garrett's braindead body. Bobby's really gotta learn to say no to house guests. Plus, surprise cameos are making phone calls, Azazel's kidnapping language professors, and I'm a no-good-dirty-rotten-author writing cliffhangers with delight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 16

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean was trying to psyche himself up for sending the angel back upstairs – Castiel having insisted she'd been gone too long already – when she turned to both of them and dropped one last bombshell.

"This body will need to be connected to a life support system while I am gone."

Both Winchesters and Bobby blinked at her.

"Wait, what?" Dean asked, the first one to form words, but probably not the best words.

Castiel merely stared at him. "This vessel was braindead when I approached her. She will return to that state once I have left for Heaven."

Bobby snorted from his spot leaning against his desk. They'd had breakfast at around nine am, once Castiel had been declared ready and the boys were too tired to do much else than shovel down what the older hunter had put in front of them. After that, Cas had started on about the invisible timer ever ticking down, insisting that her absence really would be noticed and cause far more trouble for them than her return would. The humans had moved into the living room, fully expecting Castiel to just blink out once goodbyes were said.

Now Bobby was wondering if the nearest hospital was the next on their list. Long term hospice care, maybe? That was gonna take some paperwork they didn't have, though.

Sam, probably thinking along the same lines, exchanged a look with his brother.

"What the hell, Cas!" Dean fired off, surprise coloring his words more than anger, but with him the two weren't always easy to tell apart. "That lady's letting you roam around in her body; least you could do is friggin' heal her!"

The angel leveled a look his way that so clearly reminded him that they'd just spent the last twelve hours discussing how they should not be making changes to the timeline. It was such a descriptive look, that when Castiel said as much, dryly, Dean already knew what was coming word for word.

Female vessels. Way more emotionally expressive. That was what this was. Absolutely.

"Who's gonna notice one woman waking up from a coma," he groused instead, with an expression that Castiel was quickly identifying as *I-understand-your-logic-but-I-am-going-to-ignore-it-because-I-don't-like-it.* It turned out, upon spending extended time with humans, they made even less sense than she had previously known.

"Very few humans, I imagine," the angel answered, expression unimpressed. "The reaper assigned to her, however, most certainly will."

"Reaper?" Sam asked, color draining somewhat from his face. He glanced at Dean, who looked equally perplexed and cast a quick glance around the seemingly empty room, looking for something he knew they couldn't see.

"Angela Garrett was never intended to wake up." Castiel was back to

being an impenetrable and imposing wall of rightness and perseverance, with only a *hint* of exasperation. "The reaper assigned to her soul will notice if she is suddenly healed and removed from Death's list."

"And the reaper would report it to Heaven," Sam finished easily enough, casting yet another look his brother's way, this one wary. They all knew what level of royally-screwed that meant for them.

"No," Castiel corrected, causing all both humans to look at her with surprise. "Reapers have no obligation to report to Heaven, or any of the afterlives. They report only to Death. However, it is likely that an… inquiry would be made as to why they were not informed of Heaven's intentions to revive Angela Garrett."

"Professional courtesy between departments?" Bobby snorted sarcastically, though he figured he wasn't actually that far off.

Dean let out a laugh that wasn't very mirthful even as Castiel nodded. "Bureaucracy in Heaven. Why am I not surprised?"

"So, the reaper won't say anything if you leave her in a coma?" Sam asked cautiously, working through the information internally and ignoring his family, who were being less than helpful. "Won't he care that she's being used as a vessel?"

"Her fate is unchanged, whether as my vessel or on life support." The angel seemed entirely unremorseful about that fact, and the humans in the room were trying not to take that awfully personally. Well, Sam and Dean were trying. Bobby still wasn't entirely on board with all this. "The natural order remains. Her body will eventually fail, leaving her soul to be reaped. That is all the reaper cares about."

"Damn," Dean said with a facsimile of a smile – too much teeth, too little smile – stretched across his lips. "Death is cold."

Castiel stared at him for a moment, that intensity turning contemplative. "Perhaps. But the destination awaiting her is not. The reaper will abide so long as we do not change that."

The humans exchanged looks, and Dean finally sighed, scrubbing a hand through his hair tiredly. "Alright. Looks like we're shopping for life support."

-o-o-o-

Castiel zapped them into a medical equipment warehouse belonging to Avera Health, an hour away in Madison. Their first idea – leaving Angela at a hospital – was nixed by Dean immediately. Without ID and the ability to contact next of kin, the hospital wouldn't keep her on life support long once they declared her officially braindead. Then Cas would be back to the vessel search, something she assured them was unlikely to work out well a second time. Their next idea – robbing a local hospital for the equipment to do home hospice – was nixed by Sam, who decided that life-saving machinery should probably remain where it could save lives. So Bobby's idea, complete with an *idjits* tacked on at the end, had been one of the supply companies that provided hospitals with those machines in the first place.

The warehouse they arrived in was massive, total *Raiders of the Lost Ark* huge, filled with crates and boxes upon boxes of plastic-wrapped medical equipment that neither Sam nor Dean had any clue the purpose of, let alone how to use. Dean, having traveled Angel Air more regularly than Sam (who, at this point, had a grand tally of *none*), recovered from the jolting trip faster. He was used to the clenched, cramped up feeling of his internal organs rattling around inside the cage that was his body, and the way his muscles buzzed from the abrupt change of standing to moving to standing again, all faster than he could even blink.

Sam, on the other hand, looked like he might throw up, but he was holding it down like a champ.

"Alright," Dean said as his kid brother managed to stand up straight, legs holding up beneath his impressive height. "What do we need?"

Castiel blinked owlishly at both Winchester men when she realized they were looking directly at her and expecting an answer. She glanced around the endless expanse of boxes with a blank expression, then back to Dean. "I am not familiar with the medical equipment needed to keep a human body alive."

He pulled a bitchface worthy of his younger brother and threw his arms up. "Great! What are we supposed to do, play Life Support Bingo?"

Beside him, Sam rolled his eyes and pulled out his phone. "Keep watch," he ordered with some exasperation, already pulling up the necessary medical information for homecare off the internet. As the page loaded, he started strolling through the various machines, looking for their names and any information they would need.

"You heard him." Dean made a shooing motion towards Castiel, which the angel regarded with a severe lack of amusement, but moved towards another aisle nonetheless to watch for any service workers that might stumble upon them. Behind her, Sam muttered something about always having to be the mother, to which Dean called him something less than flattering and Sam answered back with a profanity of his own in a manner that completely contrasted their harsh words. Castiel watched them over her shoulder now and then, completely remiss in her guard duties (though to be honest her senses were hardly limited to sight alone) as she tried to better understand her new charges.

Then Sam started pointing out crates for Castiel to transport back to the Singer household and the angel focused on the task at hand.

-o-o-o-

"This is a pain in the ass," Dean grumbled from his spot against the wall, behind the bed, half crouched, half precariously balanced, trying to plug in the last of the three different machines into the already overloaded sockets of Bobby's spare room that had been converted into a storage of sorts (and then mostly forgotten about). The previous contents of the room – numerous boxes, a broken down bed, and what could probably qualify as a dresser but had long seen better days – were now out in the hall, crowding the narrow corridor. Bobby was going to be positively thrilled, soon as he got back from his supply run and whatever errand he said he needed to run in town (to which he'd grumpily snapped it was none of the boys' business after Dean pestered him for details. Dean turned to his brother once the older hunter left and said "twenty on prostate exam." Sam hit him in the arm and told him to grow up, then mumbled just under his breath, "e-harmony date" and pretended to ignore the grin Dean sent his way.)

The older Winchester finally got the plug into the outlet and straightened with a triumphant noise that was somewhat undercut by a groan as he righted from the awful position. He might be ten years younger, but he was still pushing thirty.

"You are the one who set these conditions," Castiel reminded him from her own duties of removing the last of the heaviest boxes (filled with books, no doubt). They'd have to ask Bobby what he wanted done with them. There'd be some space left in the room once they finished setting all this crap up, but the broken down bed and larger furniture would need a new home. Dean suspected the barn in the back would be it, but some of those boxes didn't have any names written on them.

The man from the future suspected what their contents were, given they looked like they hadn't been touched in at least fifteen years, and figured they'd be lucky enough not to piss off Bobby just by moving 'em around, let alone sending them to the barn via Angel Airs.

Dean pulled a face at Cas's back anyway, but the celestial being continued, regardless, "Did you not think there would be consequences to your demands?"

The look Sam sent his way – the smug-as-shit one that said '*well, that was a long time coming*' – made Dean narrow his eyes. He was not liking this new dynamic of kid brother and angel tag-teaming him all the damn time. Before he could open his mouth to respond appropriately, they were alerted to Bobby's return by the disgruntled exclamation coming from the hall as the old hunter made it up the stairs to see the mess they'd made of his home.

"What the hell is all this?" His bearded face popped up from the other side of the furniture-and-box blockade, something halfway between enraged and bewildered spread across his face.

"Heya, Bobby," Sam answered with a reassuring (translation: weak) smile. "We figured this was the best room to set Angela up in."

The hunter's eyes bulged, his eyebrows reaching for his cap.

"We can't take her on the road with us." Dean shrugged, gesturing to all the heavy equipment – the ventilator, heart monitor, and IV feeds for nutrients.

"So yer leaving her *here*?" he balked, loudly, and the brothers exchanged glances. Apparently, they had not all been on the same page that morning.

"Uh…" Sam glanced between father figure and brother.

"You're kinda the only permanent home we got," Dean reasoned, and Bobby's eyes narrowed at the obvious attempt on his heartstrings, even as those strings definitely twanged. He growled low in his throat at the warmth blossoming in his chest. Damn manipulative kids.

"What the hell am I supposed to tell people?" he groused instead, refusing to admit or acknowledge that, darn it, he'd caved in all of two seconds flat. Not like fighting a Winchester on anything ever worked out well for anyone who wasn't a Winchester.

"What," Dean pulled his head back and Bobby was gonna start making a bitchface list of his own pretty shortly, "you get a lot of guests up here, do ya, Bobby?"

Blue-green eyes narrowed and Dean was pretty sure that if there hadn't been a pile of boxes separating them, the back of his head would be getting smacked. "I do have a life outside of you boys, ya know."

"Knitting nights and demonic book club?"

Both head's turned to Sam, blinking in surprise. Such sass was usually reserved for Dean. But there was a good-natured smile on his face where he was crouched at the foot of the hospital bed they had totally stolen an hour and a half ago.

"There's a market for crocheted devils traps, didn't you know?" the old hunter growled back, though it looked like Sam, as always, had managed to defuse the situation as only he ever could. "Little old witch-ladies love 'em."

The younger Winchester laughed, standing up as he finished tucking the last sheet corner and locked down the wheels. "Just tell anyone who asks that she's a niece. Home care is cheaper than hospice in a lot of ways."

Bobby's expression was hardly believing. He gestured over the blockade to the room chalk full of expensive looking equipment. "That's *cheap*?"

Over by the bed, shimmying his way out from said machinery, Dean shrugged. "You know a guy."

Bobby heaved a sigh, rubbing the back of his head through his cap and knowing he was already done for.

"I'm getting too old for this," he muttered before leveling his most deadly look at the two boys, who straightened to attention beneath it, and damn their daddy for that. "She croaks and you two are hauling ass back here. I ain't burying her."

From the corner of the room where Castiel was re-stacking some of the unnamed boxes that Dean suspected would stay in the safety and comfort of the home, the angel piped in, "If Angela's body should pass and I am not present to revive her, I believe we will have more pressing concerns than disposing of her remains."

Bobby harrumphed from the hallway, crossing his arms over his chest. "You've clearly never smelled a dead body before."

To which Castiel tilted her head tellingly and Sam quickly changed the conversation to something far less morbid before the angel could respond with unintentional arrogance that might just make Bobby change his mind about being so generous with his guest bedroom.

-o-o-o-

By the time the room was finally set up, Castiel was beginning to show signs of agitation with her continued time on earth, and there was nothing left to do but say their farewells, Dean reasoned. He wasn't happy about it, but didn't see much more use in putting it off any longer. Sam gave the angel an encouraging, though somewhat awkward shoulder pat rather than a hug, which Castiel would not have reciprocated nor entirely understood, he figured. Bobby just nodded with a grunt that probably meant something like 'be safe up there' or 'see you when I see you.' Both were equally likely.

Dean, on the other hand, latched onto that slim wrist as she made to climb onto the hospital bed. Blue eyes turned and locked on his own, and despite everything they'd done in the last twenty four hours to fight it off, fear curled in his gut once more. Dean was a man of action and, admittedly, at least some level of control. This felt like neither of those things.

"Just…be careful up there," he started, clearing his throat when his voice came out a little rougher than he'd intended. "Don't trust anyone."

Castiel only stared at him. "They're my family."

A flare of annoyance rushed through him at that, but Dean fought it back down. He had to remind himself that even after years of abuse from Heaven and those winged dicks, Cas had never stopped thinking of them as family. Never stopped longing for them to be what Sam and Dean were to each other: brothers. That never-ending well of hope was part of what made Cas such a damn good friend. He never gave up on you, no matter what, and Dean knew that it was probably the only reason the angel had stuck with him through all of it. God knew he didn't deserve to be believed in.

"Just…keep your head down," he amended, trying to ignore the curling dread in his stomach. Cas could handle himself. Herself. He just had to trust that. "We may not be your family yet, but you are

ours. If you go dark up there, we can't come get you. So, please, just… stay safe."

Castiel stared at him for another moment, those bluest of blue eyes softening ever so slightly as she gave one, curt nod. "I will, Dean."

She finished climbing onto the bed and Sam helped her get settled beneath the light hospital sheets they'd also stolen. He clipped the heart monitor onto the tip of her left index finger, hooked up her IV for fluids, did something Dean refused to watch for nutrients and bi-product (Bobby flat out left the room at that point, muttering about house guests as he went), and then the younger Winchester handed her the ventilation tube.

Both Sam and Dean had to turn away from that part. Thank god the angel could control her gag reflex, sliding the thing down her throat with what sounded like ease, given the complete silence of it all. She settled back on the bed and the two brothers chanced a glance over their shoulders to make sure she was done. Castiel nodded to them and Sam reached over and flipped the machine, which started up with a light hum and began breathing for the angel with quiet, deep vibrations.

The angel closed her eyes and, a moment later, an undercurrent of light lit just beneath the surface of her skin. It traveled up her arms, under the Zepplin t-shirt and up her neck to gather in her face. It pooled around the tube which Sam was taping in place, and beneath her closed eyelids. The younger Winchester took a step back as the light grew to be almost blinding to look at, even in such small amounts as what leaked through.

Then it was gone. Angela fell unnaturally still, the room seemed unnaturally dim, and the ventilator kept right on humming. All quiet on the western front.

Sam checked a couple of the readouts on the machines. "I think we're good…"

He took a cautious step back and both brothers just stared, waiting with half-bated breaths, as Angela Garrett kept right on breathing.

"Yeah, we should be good," Sam repeated with a nod. The two stood in silence for another moment more, watching the woman's chest rise and fall beneath the perfectly folded over hospital sheet. Sam shifted on his feet. "You think this is gonna work?"

Maybe a little too late to ask, but ask he did.

"Cas may be a total nerd angel but…" Dean took in a deep breath, reminding himself that his friend was a badass angel of the Lord. He didn't need protection. "He's quick on his feet, and loyal as hell. If he says he's with us, he's with us."

His voice dropped to a lower volume as he added on, almost to himself, "He can take care of himself until then."

Sam didn't disagree, nor did he think Dean was necessarily lying or fooling himself. Still, he didn't fail to notice the concern in his brother's eyes, despite the bolstered words.

Though it didn't stop him from correcting, "*Her*, Dean."

"Whatever," his brother grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest defensively, eyes never leaving the rising and falling of that chest. Sam watched for another moment as well before he nodded, mostly to himself. He gave his brother a congratulatory (and encouraging) nudge to the bicep before he headed out of the room. Dean decided he'd watch for just a little while longer.

Just to be sure.

-o-o-o-

Over the next several days Sam had to drag his brother away from the unconscious vessel multiple times. Dean had a terrible habit of checking in on her every fifteen minutes, just to make sure she was still breathing. Sam got it; this was a human being they were suddenly responsible for keeping alive. But he'd read a dozen manuals, half a dozen home-care books, and spent way too many hours researching the subject online all so that he could confidently say they knew what they were doing.

Which he repeatedly told Dean, insisting that Angela would be *fine*, Castiel would be *fine*, and that he needed to relax before he drove them all crazy with his anxious fiddling and obsessive checking.

In the meantime, Sam and Bobby dug into ancient languages and lore on sacked civilizations in search of their mystery green-eyed woman. It was on the evening of the second day after Castiel left them that Bobby plopped a book down in front of him, interrupting his own research, which, admittedly, he'd been taking a break from to fiddle with dad's phone. There was a voicemail on it and he was trying to

crack the pin code so he could make sure no one needed their help. Now, though, Sam set the device aside to pick up the book and scan through the page Bobby had left open. His posture straightened immediately, mind suddenly alert and more awake than it had been in hours, at the sight of the familiar symbols he'd seen etched onto the tombs from his vision.

"That's it," he said, awe in his voice and eyes as he glanced up at Bobby.

"It's Proto-Canaanite," the old hunter said with a touch of pride but also that classic huff that was Bobby Singer. "It's *old*, Sam. Not as old as cuneiform, but damn close. This stuff came before the first recognized alphabet. Hell, it's what turned into the first alphabet."

Sam glanced back down at the symbols again, immediately scanning the several paragraphs of information beside the pictures of stone tablets and crumbled bits of ancient architecture. "This is it, Bobby."

The gruff man nodded, like he'd known it would be and still sort of wished it wasn't. "Dates back as far as third millennium BC. Jordan River valley area, bit north of Mesopotamia." He let out a tired sigh and rolled his shoulders. "I'll start looking for sacked cities in the area. See if there's any lore or history out there."

"Ziggurats," Sam muttered suddenly, staring at the page but his mind was far away.

Bobby stilled, brow raised. "What?"

"The Mesopotamians were famous for their raised temples, called Ziggurats," Sam offered in explanation, though Bobby knew what a ziggurat was. Bobby knew everything. "The tomb I was in, it was raised above the city. I thought maybe it was just up on a hill, but there was a manmade ramp leading down, and if it was a ziggurat…"

"I'll start looking for cities with temples," the hunter agreed. "Sumer was more famous for 'em, but Canaanite architecture wasn't far off, much as I can tell."

Sam couldn't help the smile that pulled at his lips as he thought, *'I wanna be like Bobby when I grow up.'*

"You're awesome, Bobby."

The hunter just grunted and took his book back.

-o-o-o-

Dean came down a couple hours later to find Sam caught between a book on Canaanite culture in twelfth century BC and a phone that wasn't his Crackberry (a joke Dean hadn't gotten to use in *so long* that he was now certainly making up for time lost). He plopped down at the kitchen table across from him and nudged the Sasquatch with his foot.

"What's that?"

Sam glanced up at him with the perfect kid brother face, but answered nonetheless, "Bobby figured out the language I saw in that tomb. It's Proto-Canaanite."

"Fascinating," Dean responded, sounding anything but. "I meant the phone."

"Oh," Sam blinked down at the device, then up at his brother. "It's Dad's. There's a voicemail on it, but I don't know the code, so I figured I'd try and crack it."

Dean sat upright, a little furrow in his brow that Sam was starting to identify as his brother remembering something from another lifetime. Sure enough, the man started nodding a second later, reaching out to take the phone from him.

"That sounds familiar," he said even as he turned the device over in his hands before tossing it back. "It might be Ellen, actually."

Sam perked up at that.

"I can't remember when she called, but a voicemail sounds right." Dean shrugged, getting up to open the fridge for a drink and maybe a snack. It was a bit late for dinner, but Bobby had told them to cook for themselves (which Dean hadn't exactly done) and it wasn't like he was unused to his sleep and food schedules being skewed. Given the washed bowl drying beside the sink, Sam had probably made himself a *salad* a couple hours ago, the freak, leaving Dean to fend for himself. "Don't know how early on it was before Dad's death, but if she's already left a message, we don't have to wait around anymore."

Liking the prospect of getting back on the road for more than one reason, and the slight excitement at meeting one of the people Dean swore would be like family to them, Sam took the phone back up with renewed vigor. "I'll keep at it, then."

Dean was pulling leftover burger fixings out of the fridge, sending a noise of approval his brother's way, when his own phone started ringing from his pocket. He dug it out with his left hand, balancing dinner in his right, and flipped it open.

"Hello."

"Dean?" The voice wasn't immediately familiar to him. It was male, older, but that could be half a dozen people. "Winchester?"

The hunter set the food down on the counter and switched the phone to his other ear, pressing his shoulder up to go hands free so he could grab and open his beer. "Yeah, who's this?"

"Daniel Elkins." Nine hundred miles away, a grizzled old hunter sitting at a bar in Manning, Colorado glanced over his shoulder as surreptitiously as possible to watch four newcomers settle at a table by the billiards and order a bottle of Jack. "You were right. Those vampires you mentioned? They just walked in."

-o-o-o-

Somewhere between Manning, Colorado and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Dr. Charles Mann was sure he was about to die.

It had started with an older gentleman coming into his office during his free period with a smile that raised the hairs on his arm and straightened his spine like only evil could. Not that Charles had known what evil was or believed in it – he'd thought perhaps the man was a parent or an older student – until his eyes had turned a pale, terrible, unnatural yellow.

Now the professor was being dragged – *mandhandled* – into a motel room in a location he didn't recognize, but which most assuredly was not on campus, or anywhere near it if the starry night sky or expanse of low lying crop across the road from them was any indication. It had been raining in Princeton, and now there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Not to mention there weren't farmlands anywhere near the school. Unless you counted the West Windsor Fields, and these didn't look like those.

The man, or not-man, shoved Charles bodily into the room, a punishing grip on his elbow just about the only thing that was keeping the professor upright as he stumbled into the dingy space. He had to blink repeatedly against the dim light, as only the blue flicker of a TV screen illuminated the room.

There was an annoyed noise beside and above him, and the professor flinched at the low growl coming from the man holding his elbow. “What did you do to your clothes?"

The professor canted his head up at the thing currently kidnapping him. His eyes went wide as his brain processed the sounds around its current panicking. He recognized the words, but it was a slow, distant thing. Like wading through fog. The man wasn’t speaking English. He wasn’t speaking any language that anyone had spoken in thousands of years.

And, honestly, as if having one's life work suddenly presented in speaking form wasn't enough, Charles also was completely unsure what he was talking about (Charles was pretty unsure of just about everything right now, considering he was fairly certain he had just been teleported, which *wasn't possible*). But the man with the yellow eyes – which were back to their steely grey now and looking quite normal if not for the annoyance in them – wasn't talking to him.

There was a third person in the room; a woman sat on the edge of the further of two mattresses, television remote in hand and eyes glued to the screen. She was wearing jean cutoffs, frayed along the edges and- Oh. Charles noticed the two lengths of material haphazardly left on the carpet by her bare feet. Well, they had apparently been pants not too long ago.

"It was itchy."

Charles stared, eyes as boggled as his mind, as the woman also answered in perfect Proto-Canaanite. Well, he could only assume it was perfect. He'd never heard it spoken aloud outside of a handful of colleagues, and they all disagreed on a lot of the *how*. Yet, these two spoke it without hesitation or question. Charles was a professor of language. He had multiple PhD's in several different fields, both modern and ancient. He was an *expert*. Which meant he knew what someone speaking a native tongue sounded like. And my God, both of these crazy people was speaking a six thousand year old language like a *native*.

Maybe he was the one who'd finally gone crazy.

He glanced between her and the man gripping his arm. His kidnapper growled a second time, once again causing the professor to flinch, but his attention and ire was solely on the woman. "Yes, because they're *jeans* and your wardrobe palate goes about as far as dried

animal hide."

The girl just shrugged a shoulder, either uncaring or unaffected by the clear insult in those words, even if the professor was not currently operating at a mental level high enough to comprehend what was being insulted. Tangles of black hair moved up and down with the gesture, but her eyes stayed on the TV and Charles was oddly reminded of a teenager purposefully ignoring and angering her father. Of course, she was too old to be the man's daughter, or at least Charles thought she was (she looked to be about the age of his students), and besides, the two looked nothing alike.

He glanced between them again, something like hysteria building up in him as his rational brain tried to be reasonable and utterly failed. He'd been kidnapped and *teleported* into a family feud? This had to be a dream. A terrible, awful dream that he would very much like to wake up from now.

"They were tight," the woman complained again, clicking a button on the remote. The TV switched channels.

"That's because they were *skinny* jeans," Yellow Eyes offered with a grin that was anything but friendly.

Definitely a dream. Most certainly. Perhaps he'd accidentally ingested something bad with his dinner that evening. Or been slipped some of those drugs the kids did these days. Something about bath salts, was it?

Charles was getting an even worse feeling than he'd had when this man grabbed him in his office and whisked him away to… um… a motel room. Somewhere. Somewhere that was not Princeton. God, it was like a terrible joke, if it wasn't a dream. He was really starting to dread the punchline, still quite sure he was about to die.

"I brought you a present, Princess," his captor continued instead, forced cheer in his voice as he dropped the case of her ruined pants. Not that Charles' brain could wrap his head around how that, of all things, was really a concern here. He didn't get to think on it further, either, which may have been a godsend except that the man holding his arm started shaking him through the grip. Charles winced as his elbow and shoulder joint both protested; he wasn't exactly young anymore.

"I told you not to call me that, demon." The woman turned his way, and Charles found it ridiculously hard to breath for the second time

that night staring into a stranger's eyes. Hers were *glowing*. They weren't yellow, like her counterpart's (and Charles was *not* thinking about what she had called him. He wasn't. It was just a nickname. Like profanity. Yes. Just like that). Instead, hers were a deep and mesmerizing green. Like emeralds, or an ancient forest, or something poetic and mystical that Charles' brain simply couldn't fathom right then and there. The professor couldn't have looked away if he wanted to. Terrifyingly enough, he wasn't sure he did.

She stared at him for a moment, brow pinching in what he could only assume was confusion. Then she blinked and her eyes stopped glowing and Charles stopped reciting Shakespeare in his head with dazed relief. The woman stood from the bed, aiming the remote towards the television once more and shutting it off.

The abrupt silence in the room was overwhelming, and Charles immediately remembered he had every reason to be terrified. While the silence stretched, the professor gaping as his brain rebooted, the woman turned an annoyed gaze to the demon. "Is he a mute present, then?"

Charles, certain the conversation was about him but having a terrible time processing it all the same, managed to blurt out, in an awed and terribly shaky voice, "You're speaking Proto-Canaanite."

The woman's head tilted and the man gripping his elbow hard enough to bruise rolled his eyes so obviously that his head went with him. Then Charles was being shaken once more.

"Wrong tongue, Professor. Try again, and get it right this time, or you won't have one left after tonight," the yellow-eyed man bit out and Charles found himself shaking all on his own now, quite suddenly sure this thing, whatever he was, would follow through on that threat if he continued to do things incorrectly. Not that the professor knew what was correct here.

"H-Hello," he stuttered out weakly, this time making sure to speak the same language as them. He probably should have figured out she didn't know English, based on the fact that the two occupants of the room were speaking a language that had been dead several millennia.

"Hello," she responded evenly.

"Congratulations, now you know why you're here!" his kidnapper announced with another fake smile. He shoved his captive forward and Charles stumbled, catching himself on the edge of the first bed.

The woman didn't move. "You have a week to teach her English, Doc."

Charles barely had time to turn around before the motel door was slammed shut and he was suddenly left, alone and confused and terrified, with a woman with glowing green eyes who spoke a language she couldn't possible know how to speak.

But then again, teleportation wasn't a thing, either, and Charles was fairly certain that had happened only a few short minutes ago.

He turned back, slowly – oh, so slowly and he would never make fun of those terrible actors and actresses in those awful horror flicks ever again – to face the woman. She hadn't moved, just remained standing beside the second bed with narrowed eyes and thinned lips that looked so terrifyingly like disapproval that Charles couldn't really move.

He swallowed nervously, looking around the room for lack of any other sensible thing to do. There were books everywhere, the professor noted with some surprise. His mind greedily latched onto the distraction, and he crossed to the little kitchenette table the largest stack was He ran over the titles in his mind, picking up the top book, a thick paperback with a white cover and large red words across the front that lay over a picture of a decaying temple.

"Ancient Greek?" he said aloud without realizing he had. A curious sound – the soft jangle of thin metal – and movement from his peripheral immediately drew Charles' attention. He looked up, wary of the woman now walking towards him. The professor fell back a step, drawing the book to his chest as though that would somehow protect him. Or maybe he was protecting the book, he thought with an edge of hysteria.

She drew up short as that weird metal jingle sounded again (almost like those ridiculously tiny wind chimes that were terribly annoying and high pitch, especially when one was grading papers on an otherwise calm and quiet evening on one's front porch with a bottle of particularly delectable Malbec). Something hooked her lower right leg and halted her a foot and a half from where he stood, almost pressed back up to the wall now. The woman cast an annoyed look down at her ankle, and Charles couldn't help himself. He followed her gaze down to a thin, gold chain looped around her ankle. It ran the width of the closest bed and disappeared around the corner of the mattress, presumably attached to the nightstand, though Charles couldn't see that far. It was a delicate looking thing, like a fine necklace, only it

was glowing unnaturally. Given the line of irritated red around her skin there, Charles imagined the chain was not nearly as fragile as it looked.

She huffed something Charles didn't hear properly, but he imagined it wasn't very nice. When the woman raised her eyes to his again, the annoyance remained but he was surprised to see it didn't appear to be with him. She righted herself and held her hand out, obviously for the book he was clutching to his chest.

Charles glanced down at it, then her, then the book again before his brain signals finally got through the miasma of panic and, in no uncertain terms, told him to hand it over and hand it over *now*. She accepted the book and dropped her gaze to its cover. Her hand traced down the cover, following the English letters. Charles noticed her nails were badly chipped and caked with dirt.

"I also speak Greek, if that would be easier for you," she said, now in perfectly enunciated Ancient Greek. Charles knew what that language sounded like; having the modernized descendant still around meant deciphering its secrets was infinitely easier than something like Canaanite or Sumerian. Charles' mind was back to its rebooting stage. She was speaking multiple dead languages with perfect ease, and those two had been centuries – and thousands of miles – apart.

She handed the tomb back to him, and he could only accept it with an owlish stare. "I suppose it would be Old Greek, now."

"Ancient," Charles muttered back without thinking, though at least this time he managed to do it in the right language. At her quirked brow – and there was definitely judgement there that made his legs shake – he managed a strained, "We call it Ancient, not Old."

She canted her head for a moment in thought, before nodding in what Charles assumed was acceptance, and then went right back to staring and waiting.

Brain still stuttering, Charles gripped the paperback loosely back to his chest and glanced around the room covered in books. There were others on language – Ancient Egyptian and a *Dummy's Guide* to English – along with several World and North American history books, and a few culture and modern technology guides. One of which was carelessly half open atop an upside down MacBook that clearly hadn't been used by this woman.

He looked down at the book on Ancient Greek in his hands, barely

even seeing its cover, before he met the woman's eyes once more. Although his brain was having great difficulty connecting even the most simplest of dots, he managed a stuttered, disbelieving, "Who-Who *are* you?"

-o-o-o-

Many thousands of units of unknown measurement above Manning, Colorado, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and the dingy motel room somewhere in between, Castiel was back in Heaven, where time moved very differently.

The angel had spent a long while in silent contemplation, sitting through several of Arthur Staten's cycling memories. None of Castiel's siblings or superiors had noticed his initial absence from Heaven – at least not as anything suspect. Several of his brothers asked where he had been, but it was mild interest and not suspicion that colored their tones. Cas easily evaded their curiosity with what he had learned from the Winchester's teachings.

After much time in deep thought, both in the paradises of his Father's creations and while performing his heavenly duties, Castiel finally settled on the first angel he would approach in his side mission: reaching out to those in the Host who might risk disobedience against their superiors in order to do what was right. As per Dean's request, Castiel would only do so under the most covert of approaches. While he had his own doubts about Dean's distrust of all his siblings, the angel would still heed his warning and his request to remain safe.

Which was why Castiel decided to start with his oldest compatriot and an angel he knew and trusted more than any other still in his garrison.

"Uriel," Castiel greeted, grace swirling across his features as he approached his far more stalwart brother. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

Chapter End Notes

-A/Ns: Say it with me: no good, dirty, rotten, author ;P (Come on, you all love me and you know it!)

-Seriously? You left us with THAT? Hell yes, I did, cuz I'm a jerk. Uriel's on scene, Cas is already getting into trouble, and Daniel-friggin-Elkins is back! You mighta thought we were done with Season 1 because of that whole…you know…labeling every chapter 'Season 2' bit… but nope, we're 16 chapters into Season

Friggin' Two and we haven't even finished the events of Season 1 yet. Oi vey. My estimated 30-chapter-per-season-count is noooooot holding up with this one, guys.

-Cas in Heaven: I debated for a bit about whether to keep the female pronouns while Cas was up in Heaven but ultimately decided not to. Most of us think of him as a man, so if he's not currently in his female vessel, he would revert back to being a man. I know that's not how it actually works, but it's how us gender-binary fellows tend to think, I figure ;)

-Up Next: The boys are gonna rescue Daniel Elkins from a nest of vampires without that gun Dean might have borrowed with the promise he'd be bringing it back for just such a situation. What could possibly go wrong?

Next chapter will be up tomorrow! CONGRATS!

Chapter 50: Season 2: Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Happy back-to-back Sunday!! I'm actually really excited for this chapter. It's a fun one :)

Chapter Warnings: So I'm a terrible, no good, dirty rotten author who's *not* going to give you a conclusion to that cliffhanger, just like I *didn't* give you a conclusion to that missing bunker key. Well...yet. But in the meantime, I give you other goodies! Namely a vampire nest, an overly confident Dean Winchester, and underly confident Daniel Elkins, a missing Magical Kill-Anything Gun, and our favorite King of the Crossroads battling ants, spiders, and jellyfish! (it'll make more sense by the time you get to it...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 17

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Elkins?" Dean straightened in the kitchen, surprise crossing his face and voice enough for Sam to stop fiddling with the phone in his hands and look over with a questioning expression. Dean acknowledged the look but didn't respond.

"Yeah, you idiot," the older voice echoed down the line and Dean wondered if old age just turned all hunters grumpy of it was the presence of the vampires Dean had told him six months ago would kill him. "Now tell me what to do."

"They're there?" Dean gestured with his hand for Sam to find a map, crossing the kitchen to the table.

"That's what I said. They just walked in."

Sam checked the various papers on the table for all of five seconds before he grabbed his laptop from the corner and pushed it open. He pulled up Google Maps, a stretch of the United States spread across the screen, and turned towards his brother.

"Where are you?" Dean asked, even as he mouthed *'Manning, Colorado'* to Sam, who quickly pulled up the area.

"I'm in a bar in town. I don't think they spotted me yet," the man said, though the tone in his voice suggested he was less than sure of that.

"Yeah," Dean muttered, thinking back to the bloodbath they'd once walked into at the man's cabin, "they spotted you."

"Great," Daniel grumbled, voice terse. "You gonna tell me some good news sometime soon? Like how you're gonna get me out of this?"

"How many are there?" Dean gestured for Sam to zoom out and away from the town. Picking up on what his brother was looking for, the brunette quickly typed in Bobby's address and let the directions do the rest for them.

"Four of 'em." He could hear fabric shift and the creak of a bar stool come over the line: Daniel probably looking over his shoulder for where the vampires were.

"Alright." Dean ran a hand down his mouth, licking his lips as he stared at the screen. He'd told Daniel the day he talked the Colt off his hands that this would happen. Told him to call when it did and that he'd be there to sort it out. Stupidly, he hadn't actually come up with a plan for when that day inevitably came. "What would be your first move if you hadn't called me?"

Down the line, the old man grunted like he found something funny about that. "Try and make it home. I'm not armed for vamps; machete isn't exactly inconspicuous."

"Yeah, I hear ya." Dean pointed to a spot just past midpoint on the map between the two destinations. Sam zoomed in, did some quick computing and clicking, and then nodded a positive back. "Okay, well, they got you at your cabin last time. They probably followed you from the bar, so you should be able to make it to your truck."

"Yeah?" Daniel sounded less than sure. But at least he wasn't arguing. "Then what?"

"Drive. Don't go home, don't stop, just floor it."

There was a snort down the line, followed by incredulous silence as he waited for more and eventually realized it wasn't coming. "That's it? That's your big plan? What the hell's to stop them from following me?"

"How much gas you got?" Dean was already moving. He shoved the food back into the fridge (no reason to leave Bobby with even more of a mess than the unconscious woman upstairs). Sam closed his laptop, sliding it and several of the books he'd been reading into his bag.

"'Bout three-quarter tank," the hunter said and Dean could hear the jingle of keys in the background. "It ain't gonna last forever, though."

The sasquatch headed for the stairs, bag in hand, with a nod to his brother that said he'd get what they needed. Bobby came in just as Sam bolted up the stairs, eyebrows raised and Dean gestured that there wasn't time to talk but he and Sam were obviously taking off for an urgent hunt.

"Doesn't have to," Dean answered Elkins as he grabbed his jacket from the den and threw it on, then snatched up Sam's go-bag. He headed out the front door for his Baby. Lucky for them it was summer and the days were growing longer, which meant more sunlight and less vamp activity. "That's enough to get you to sunrise. Just head east. They'll follow you until they realize you're not stopping. Trust me, they won't leave their nest, and even if they do, they'll have to stop before the sun comes up."

Daniel grumbled something down the line but it sounded close enough to an annoyed *'fine'* (and was accompanied by the sound of a door opening and wind and the outdoors) that Dean knew he was already headed for his truck. Sam came out of the house and down the steps, throwing both their bags and a duffle full of weapons and supplies into the trunk Dean had left open. He shouted an apology back to Bobby, along with the sort of facial expression that said he didn't know what was up either but they'd call, and then he climbed into the car alongside his brother.

"We're in South Dakota now," Dean was saying into the phone, shutting his door and starting up the familiar rumble of Baby's engine. "Sam and I'll meet you in Julesburg, the Nebraska side. Call us when you lose 'em."

"Yeah, yeah," Daniel muttered, though his tone had a modicum of appreciation, if not still incredulity. The sound of his own engine turning over rumbled through the line, as did the sound of a gear shift and the hunter flooring it out of the dirt parking lot. "Just bring my gun."

Dean pulled away from the salvage yard, dropping the phone from his

ear and flipping it shut, call already ended from the other end. Sam was looking at him expectantly as they pulled out onto the main road. "That was Daniel Elkins. He needs our help."

-o-o-o-

"Vampires?"

Dean looked over at his brother's incredulous tone and spared him a weird look in return.

"Yeah, vampires."

"*Vampires*?" Sam's eyes were wide, staring at him like he was crazy. "You're kidding, right? They don't… Dean, they don't exist."

"What?" Dean's knee-jerk reaction was quickly offset by an internal '*oh, shit*.' That's right, Dean realized with a jolt. They hadn't known vampires existed before Elkins. Dad never told them, because he'd honestly thought Daniel and others had killed them all.

"Uh, yeah, shit, sorry, I- they- yeah, they're real. Real sons of bitches. Dad thought they were extinct. Wiped out by hunters like Elkins." Dean almost laughed at that now, knowing how many friggin' vampires they would run into in the ten years to come. Not to mention the Alpha.

Yeah, *extinct* had been off by about a mile and then another hundred.

"Skip the garlic and the crosses. Most of the legends are total crap," he added with a half smirk in Sam's direction, who was still staring at him incredulously, a multitude of questions building in his eyes. "I think we have machetes in the trunk."

Dean practically cackled as his brother's eyes doubled in size and he stumbled out a disbelieving, "Machetes?!"

Man, how the hell had they ever made it to the end of the world the first time around?

-o-o-o-

"So this is really the guy you got the Colt from?"

It was hours later, the boys having crossed into Nebraska some time ago, with only a hundred and twenty miles left to the Colorado border. Elkins had called about twenty minutes earlier to report that

the vamps had finally given up tailing him. He was gonna keep going for another thirty minutes or so to be sure, then hit up a gas station. By that point, he'd be riding on fumes. Then, with any luck, he'd cross over to I-76 with a full tank of gas and no surprises, and eventually meet up with the Winchesters just north of the state line.

Dean had given Sam the complete low-down on vamps, from their second set of teeth to the necessary decapitation to get the job done. Even told him a logging saw or barbed wire could do in a pinch, and the face his brother pulled at those little details served as a reminder to Dean that ten years was a long time, and this wasn't his apocalypse-grizzled brother he was talking to.

"Yeah," Dean answered his brother's question concerning the Colt. He stifled a yawn. He probably should have let Sam share some of the drive (he hadn't been sleeping great the past couple nights since Cas left) but it might as well be too late now. They were pretty much there already (they really weren't, they still had at least another hour and a half to go, but Dean was stubborn). "I told you that."

Sam made a noise and Dean glanced over with an expectant expression. The younger Winchester shifted awkwardly. "Honestly…I thought you were lying." As his brother's face shifted, clearly taking offense, the younger Winchester shrugged. "What? You showed up with a magical kill-anything gun and expected me to believe you got it from some hunting buddy of Dad's? I thought Cas gave it to you."

Actually, Sam had thought he'd made a deal for it back when he believed Cas was a demon. He hadn't had much time afterward to think about where it might have come from once he'd learned Cas was an angel. Even less when he learned Cas was an angel who had never met his brother before because Dean came from the future.

"Okay, first of all, I do still do stuff on my own, you know. I'm *capable*. I don't need Cas for everything." Beside him, Sam managed to bite his tongue and not hit that perfectly teed up opportunity. "Oh, and for the record, this is how we got the gun the first time."

Dean's face was smug, a total *told ya so* that didn't exactly fit the situation, but Sam was wise. Sam didn't bother arguing. He just let that look slide right off his brother's face all on its own, turning into a grimace. "Well, mostly. Elkins was already vamp food by that point."

"So you told him you were from the future and vampires were coming after him." If Sam's tone was anything to go by, his brother was still

thinking he stole the gun from Elkins. "And he believed you."

Dean shot him a pissy look that was somehow still proud *and* charming. "I can be very persuasive when I want to be."

"Uh-huh."

"Shaddup. He gave it to me, didn't he?" Dean refocused on the road and Sam went quiet for another half mile.

"How's he going to feel about you losing it?"

Dean pulled another face, clearing his throat rather than answering the question. He sent his brother a side-long grimace that had Sam once more saying, "Uh-huh."

-o-o-o-

The sun was just barely climbing over the horizon, jagged mountain peaks silhouetted far off in the distance, when they pulled into a Biggerson's parking lot – empty this time of the morning – right along state lines. Daniel Elkins was already there, leaning against his old beat up truck, watching their approach. He pushed off the back gate as the Winchesters climbed out of the Impala, crossing the distance between their vehicles to greet them. Elkins stretched out his arm and shook Dean's hand as Sam rounded the car.

"Any problems?" Dean asked with a grin. Daniel returned the smile with one of his own.

"They followed me for a couple hours. Turned around just before Denver." The hunter greeted Sam with a nod, holding out his hand which the younger Winchester shook. Daniel jerked his head towards Dean. "So, he tell you he's from the future?"

Sam chuckled lightly. "Yeah."

"And you believed him too, huh?" Daniel glanced between the two brothers, the younger of which gave a goofy shrug. "Well, shit. I was hoping it had been a senile moment or something."

Sam laughed again, even as Elkins addressed Dean, asking what the plan was.

"We're heading right back to Manning." The quick response baffled Daniel momentarily, and he glanced to Sam who didn't bother adding

his two cents. Dean knew what he was doing and they'd already discussed it on the way over.

"Just the three of us?"

"We'll be fine," the older Winchester waved off the Elkins' concern. "The nest only had five, six vampires, tops."

If he was remembering correctly. Which he was pretty sure he was. Yeah.

"Right," Daniel sounded less than confident as he dragged the word out, following it up with a noise in the back of his throat as he held out his hand. Seven super-powered monsters versus three humans didn't exactly sound like odds he'd gamble on. "Well I think I'll have that gun back, kid."

Sam looked expectantly at his brother, who cleared his throat awkwardly and ducked his head.

"Yeah, about that…"

Daniel's expression flipped rapidly between shock, outrage, and then flat out vexation. "Like father like son, huh?"

"Hey," Dean argued, but even his usual hard ass, I'm-right-you're-wrong-and-screw-you-while-I'm-at-it demeanor was coming out pretty weak here. "I came, didn't I?"

"Without my gun," Daniel emphasized, though it was clear he was still grateful for the partial save. He'd be less grateful going into a nest of vampires without a magic gun capable of, oh, *killing vampires*. He was pretty damn sure the deal had been to give Dean Winchester the Colt and Dean Winchester would come back, with the Colt, when vampires showed up to apparently kill him.

"We gave it to our dad," Dean growled out, starting to get a little defensive in front of the hunter who had never been willing to give it to John in the first place.

Beside him, Sam chanced a glance his way at the blatant omission concerning just where John was now, but he didn't bring it up.

Dean made a noise in the back of his throat and slapped on a cocky grin. "Besides, we don't need the Colt. We're three damn good hunters! We can take on a vamp nest easy."

-o-o-o-

Dean strained against the ropes wrapped around his torso, keeping him pinned to the old wooden support beam that looked about as ready to come tumbling down as the rest of the vampires' chosen hangout. Not that it was giving under any amount of pressure from the hunter.

"You know what would have been real handy to have right about now?"

Dean ignored the question, grunting as he pulled with everything he had one more time against the ropes. Finally, he sagged in defeat with an annoyed huff and glanced over at his fellow captive.

Elkins was strung up just as tightly, though his wrists had been tied together and hauled above his head to hang off an old hook driven into his support pillar. Daniel wasn't fighting against the ropes, letting Dean do all the useless struggling on his behalf. Which was fair, given the fresh bite still shining wet and lazily dribbling blood down his neck to soak his shirt. It wasn't fatal and luckily the vamps hadn't fed forced him to drink, but Dean knew it had to hurt like a bitch. Plus, the blood loss sure wasn't going to help things from here on out.

"Don't say it," the man from the future groaned.

"A magical gun that can kill vampires."

"I'm starting to see why my dad and you got along so well." Dean looked around the nest, the vampires all having conked out for a day of rest after finishing off one of their victims – a young woman now hanging limp, nothing more than a corpse – before finishing off with Daniel as dessert. There wasn't anything he could see within reach to cut the ropes. Dean had a pen knife tucked away in the ankle of his boot – dumb vamps had been too arrogant to search him properly – but getting to it would require an act of contortionism he wasn't looking forward to.

"Yeah, John," Elkins huffed beside him, voice a little rough but he otherwise seemed to be holding up pretty well. "He's a stubborn son of a gun. Good hunter though."

Dean just grunted and started trying to slide his leg up the pillar while the rest of him was serving center stage to a one-man bondage show. Damn vamps must have had a rope fetish of something. There was literally no reason to tie someone up with *this much* fucking rope.

"Don't suppose he could drop in on this party any time soon?"

Dean stilled at Elkins' hopeful, if not dry, question. A flash of pain and grief – and that endless pit of guilt he would never be free of – spiked through his chest. It stole the words from his mouth and his brain, and it took several long moments to find them again.

"John's dead," he finally managed, instantly annoyed with how it came out. All soft and quiet and mourning.

"…Shit." Elkins was silent as he processed the kid's words, staring at the Winchester boy. He'd never met Sam or Dean before, but there had been real pride in John's eyes anytime he talked about them. Of course, they'd just been kids at the time, but Daniel doubted that pride had gone away with age. "Guess that yellow-eyed son of a bitch finally got him. I was really rooting on him putting one between the bastard's eyes."

Dean was quiet, though he'd resumed his attempts to get to his ankle knife. "Yeah. Me too."

"Damn," Daniel swore again, resting his head back against the pillar and staring up at the dilapidated ceiling. "I'm sorry, kid."

Beside him, the young man nodded but said nothing more. Silence stretched between them, broken only by the snores of the vampires scattered throughout the barn and the shuffling and muttering of the hunter as he tried to contort his body into a position that allowed him access to his boot. It wasn't going all that well, to be honest.

"So, when you say you gave John the Colt…"

Dean winced and finally giving up and dropping his leg back to the ground. He spared Daniel a look that told him everything he needed to know.

"Now a demon has the magic gun that can kill anything?"

The hunter growled low in his throat, but didn't deny it. He didn't bother trying to get to the knife again, either. "We get it back."

"Yeah?" Daniel rolled his neck, immediately regretting the motion as the bite mark flared and he flinched. "Don't mind my skepticism. I'm just not feeling a lot of faith in your future knowledge at the moment."

Dean thunked his head against the pillar, and then closed his eyes and

did it again just for good measure. Daniel let him have it and when he was done, the man from the future picked his head up off the wood and leveled Elkins with a look that dared him to say anything otherwise.

"Azazel uses it to open a Hell Gate a year from now. We get it back and I shoot him in the face with it."

Daniel stared at the kid for a prolonged moment before he pursed his lips together and nodded. Just like six months ago, he believed him.

"Good to know."

Silence fell between them again, the boy fidgeting in his ropes again. He didn't really seem to be the type of person good with standing still.

"And it doesn't work on everything," he added, irritation in his voice that had everything to do with the vampire nest they were currently strung up in, the bite on Daniel's neck, and the ropes around his torso. "It won't kill the devil. Learned that the hard way."

"The…what now?"

-o-o-o-

Sam burst into the vampires lair – literally, *burst* into the barn, using the Impala as a battering ram (and oh, Dean was gonna have words with his brother if he so much as scratched her paint job. They'd *just* finished putting her back together, damnit!) – before Dean had to explain all that much about that devil comment. Not that Elkins looked all that eager to know. He'd kind of taken Dean being from the future with a slanted look, a shrug, and a grain of salt. Not becoming vampire takeout was about as far as his interest in the known future went.

"You're late," Dean groused as Sam managed to decapitate a charging vampire. He got halfway through his brother's bonds with a bowie knife before another monster hauled him back. At least Sam managed to bury the blade into the wooden beam just before he was yanked away. Dean finished slicing the ropes himself off the embedded knife, yanking it out of the wood with his now free hands and jabbing it into the throat of an approaching vamp. It wouldn't kill him, but it sure did make him howl and back off, clutching at his neck.

"You're welcome," Sam huffed at him, swinging his machete hard as he could and sending another head rolling. Dean cut Elkins free just as

Sam tossed a second short sword their way. Daniel caught it before Dean could and promptly annihilated two vampires without breaking a sweat.

Man might be old, but he certainly hadn't lost his edge.

Sam tossed Dean his own blood-soaked blade so the older Winchester could finish off the vampire still gurgling past his shredded windpipe. The last body hit the ground with brutal efficiency and Dean turned to the others, surveying a job well done.

"What took you so long?" The older of the two snarked, though there was no heat in it as he handed his brother the dripping machete back, handle first.

Sam had to sweep blood-matted bangs out of his face with a grimace that he turned into a bitchface (#7). "I stopped to check my e-mail first. I'm not the one who got himself a star role in *'Twilight: an abandoned barn production.'*"

"If you ladies are finished?" The brothers stopped making faces at each other long enough to turn to Daniel, who was watching them with exasperation and a hand clamped around his neck. "I'd like to get the hell out of here sometime today."

He held his borrowed machete out to Sam, who took it and moved around the chaos and debris to the Impala's trunk. Dean used the opportunity to make a round around his lady, grumbling the entire time about abusive brothers. Sam just rolled his eyes, stowed the weapons, grabbed a med kit to toss to Daniel, and closed the trunk a little harder than necessary.

-o-o-o-

A few hours later, patched up, showered, and in a fresh change of clothes, the boys were once more in parking lot. A more populated one, now, given it was late evening and the world was still out and about. Daniel offered his hand once more, shaking each of the Winchester's in turn, thanking them for the help and, well, probably saving his life.

"I owe you one," he started with a head cant that he pointedly aimed Dean's direction, "or I would, if you hadn't lost my gun."

Dean just rolled his eyes. Daniel was mostly talk, anyhow, but he'd once been good as family to John Winchester, and that made him

family to the boys too.

"Hey," the older Winchester called, not able to help himself. He nodded in Daniel's direction as he asked, "Why didn't you give dad the Colt all those years ago?"

Elkins lifted an eyebrow towards the kid. "You mean other than the fact I'd never get it back?"

Sam snorted, an understanding look in his eye. But Elkin's dropped his gaze after the potshot, a wry and bitter grin stretching tight across his lips as he thought over the question he'd asked himself a hundred times over the years.

"A lot of us get into this life through revenge. Most of us, I reckon. But we get to take that anger out on the same things that got us into this. Vamps, werewolves, ghosts. It might not be the one that killed something in us, but it feels close enough most days."

Yeah. Yeah, Dean could understand that. He still felt like that with every demon he sank Ruby's knife into.

"Problem with your father was, he didn't care about those other hunts. Oh, he got 'em done, alright. He saved more people than I could ever count, but it wasn't doing a thing for what drove him." Daniel sighed. "I never thought he'd find it; we didn't even know what that yellow-eyed bastard was. I thought… Heck, I don't know. Maybe if killing it was out of reach, he'd give up. Take you boys and live a normal life."

Silence filled the parking lot between them, the sounds of the world fading away, if only for a moment. Sam glanced at Dean, that hurt furl in his brow and his puppy dog eyes on full. Both Winchester boys understood, they really did. And they, too, knew just how futile a thought it had been, on any of their parts.

"Guess I was hoping to save him," Elkins finished with a bitter snort.

Sam let the silence linger – a moment of mourning – before he offered a good-natured smile. "You need anything, call us."

"Same," Daniel countered, though he glanced at Dean for a moment and the man from the future could tell he was thinking about taking that back, what with that devil comment and all. He didn't, though, and Dean just nodded, understanding completely.

He didn't doubt this would be the last time they saw each other.

"Keep an eye out and be careful, old man. The leader of that nest was old, he could have friends."

Daniel huffed, muttering something about whippersnappers under his breath, but he gave the kid a solid pat on the shoulder and thanked the boys again before climbing into his truck. The Winchesters watched him drive off before sliding into the Impala and pulling onto the road home as well.

-o-o-o-

Sam was fiddling with their dad's phone again on the drive back when Dean drummed his fingers along the steering wheel and announced, "I've been thinking."

"Don't hurt yourself," Sam parried immediately, earning a glare. He didn't bother looking up from the phone, entering another failed passcode. He was close, but he was tired and didn't feel up to hooking his computer up to the device for a more thorough attempt.

"Har har, you're a comedian." His brother rolled his eyes and refocused on the road. "If we're going to have eyes and ears in Heaven, we should get eyes and ears in Hell, too."

Sam blinked, not having expected that as the conversation of choice. Yeah, more than half the topics he thought were going to come up involved Cas, but not in an intellectual capacity. He'd been waiting for the emotional one, the breakdown where Dean finally couldn't hide the jitters or nerves anymore and had to fess up that, yeah, he was *feeling* things. Like fear or, heaven forbid, helplessness. Dean didn't really do breakdowns so much as the emotions just toppled over the edge and he freaked the hell out, usually to an audience of Sam.

But yeah, rationally, that didn't sound like such a bad plan. Sam watched his brother, phone forgotten for the moment, as he tried to figure out how two hunters could possibly get a spy in Hell. Not a bad plan, for sure, but definitely not an obvious one. Still, it came to him quickly enough. Having all their future allies written down on paper, in tandem with a having a strong visual memory, certainly helped.

Sam raised a brow in his brother's direction.

"Crossroads?"

"Crossroads," Dean confirmed, pulling the Impala off the next interstate exit. "You get the ID, I'll get the cigar box."

The car jostled as Dean took the first dirt road leading into the fields growing along the highway. "He's gonna be thrilled."

"Well," Sam reasoned as they started trolling through Nebraskan farmland looking for an intersection, "second time's gotta be at least half a charm, right?"

-o-o-o-

Crowley was in another loathsome get-together of Hell's generals (really, people were going to start talking if they kept meeting *civilly* like this) when the summons came through. Which was really just about the worst timing those two moronic hunters could have possibly gone for. It started as a twitch, a surface itch across his damned soul, as Lilith and Azazel debated the merit of inserting angel enemas into human flesh sacks. Really, it ought to have been funny, if they hadn't been at it for *hours* now, and he stuck there listening to it.

"If it's one angel, we'd still have this in the bag, but if it's all of Heaven backing him-" Lilith had her thin, little arms braced against the stone table, the center of which had been carved out as a small basin of sorts, currently filled with blood that bubbled and hissed with Azazel's voice. The Prince was stuck topside at the moment, not willing to risk getting stuck in the pit during such a crucial point in their plans, even if his rotting essence needed Hell's fires to heal the damage he'd taken from touching grace.

"If all of Heaven was in on it, the gate wouldn't be silent," Azazel answered back, his own annoyance starting to show. Lilith was acting like a petulant brat, worrying about things they couldn't bother with. Not when they had a million other things they could (and had to be) dealing with *now*. "There is nothing we can do about the angel or Heaven. We have the Colt; we need to be moving on the Hell Gate."

"What of our newest recruit?" Lilith asked instead, *finally* allowing a change of topic, but not the loss of control. She was in charge. She was Lucifer's first. It might be Azazel's plan, but it was her life they'd be offering in exchange for that reward. A reward she wouldn't live long enough to see. Therefore, she called the shots, no matter what Azazel thought of it. "If we move on that gate without Dean's soul slotted for Hell, Heaven will be wide open to stop us. We need the distraction."

"She's…catching up. When she can speak something not dead by a couple thousand years, then she'll be ready." Azazel responded, his

malcontent coming through even more clearly.

"I want to meet her," the Princess demanded, the pout on her lips in complete contrast to the gleam in her eyes.

"When you're topside." The blood bubbled with Azazel's impatience, but he didn't dare say as much to Lilith's face. "I left her with a house warming gift to get her going. She needs a speed course in the twenty-first century, not to mention English and a serious makeover before she'll be any use to us."

"Go for the nose job," Crowley piped up from the side, contributing his vast wealth of helpfulness to this pointless meeting. "Our analysis department says they're all the rage right now."

"Why are you even here, Crowley?" Lilith asked accusingly, crossing her arms as she regarded the King of the Crossroads with distaste.

"Ah, my point exactly, my dear." The demon tipped his glass of Glen Craig towards her little highness. He had two hunters to string up and skin alive in repayment of the summoning currently crawling up and down his skin like ants, not to mention a yard of paperwork and actual business to attend to. "I'll just take my leave, then?"

"Wait." Azazel's voice bubbled from the blood, stopping Crowley mid step. He bit back the frustrated sigh. "Tell me about the prophet."

"What's there to tell?" The crossroads demon shrugged his shoulders, patience wearing thin but he played the game all the same. At this stage of the game, he couldn't afford to have two of Hell's most powerful demons questioning his loyalties (even if they were absolutely questionable). "He's an alcoholic little twit of a writer, holed up in the Midwestern states with an archangel propped up on his ass."

"A writer?" There was interest in the Prince's voice and Crowley internally winced. He probably could have kept that bit to himself with some success and minor fallout when it eventually came to light. Oh well, too late now.

"Teen novel stuff," Crowley answered, forcing as much nonchalance into his voice as possible. "Real trashy. Dean's full frontal in quite the steamy flashback." He waggled his eyebrows at Lilith, who looked unimpressed. With a dramatic sigh, he continue, "We haven't been able to confirm its authenticity yet-"

"It's published?"

Crowley internally grumbled and ground his teeth. "Small production, limited release. It's not very well known. Probably because it's not very good."

Azazel ignored all of his incredibly helpful reporting and got straight to the point: "What is it called?"

The crossroads King sighed again. "Supernatural."

Lilith snorted, but Azazel was apparently taking his far more seriously. "I will look into myself. If the prophet is writing his visions down, he may not realize what he is."

"It could give us an inside edge on the Winchesters," Lilith piped up, a wicked little smile in the corner of her mouth, despite the ridiculous topic of conversation. "We'd be able to follow them without having to spare a single demon."

"If it's real." Crowley kept his tone painfully indifferent, but inside he was kicking himself. He definitely could have held off revealing the prophet's incredibly, easily accessible writing for at least another couple of months. Now he had to play cleanup to a mess of his own making. "Writers embellish. It would be a shame to trust something written just so a pre-teener could get all hot and bothered over two shirtless brothers having a *moment*."

Lilith regarded him like he'd grown another head (well, *she* hadn't read any of the prophet's work, clearly). Through the blood, Azazel's exasperation was clear. "Which is why we will *look into it*."

Crowley just shrugged, deciding to keep the fact that the books went public months after the events actually happened – what with the prophet writing them in real time, having to edit after the completion of a book, and several weeks of publishing time. But sure, this was a *resource*.

'*Have at 'em, ladies and gents,'* he thought, sipping on his drink and going back to wishing he was anywhere but there. Well, anywhere but there or answering the summons that had upped it's game to the level of fire ants now.

"There's another thing I need from you," Azazel said, dragging Crowley away from the annoying little ringing in his ears repeating his name again and again and again and again. "Find me a human willing to

offer up a little extra juice to fix my arm when he makes a deal."

Crowley had to think for a moment about what the Prince was implying (or even talking about, really. The summons was up to spiders now. *Biting* spiders.) Once he was on the same page, though, he was confident he could find some human schmooze willing to throw in a *'fix my demonic rival and guy about to herald in the apocalypse'* clause in exchange for landing a younger wife with bigger tits or that corner office. That, or Crowley would just sneak it into the fine print. He did enjoy screwing over the inept.

"Shouldn't be a problem," he offered offhandedly. Then the Crossroads King straightened, ice clinking in his glass. "In fact, why don't I get right on that?"

When neither Lilith nor Azazel objected, the Princess going back to the problem of that angel grace *again*, Crowley took it as permission to leave. Not that he should have ever needed permission, damnit. He was a King! He didn't need bloody permission from anyone. In fact, he could walk right back in there and never leave. That would show them.

The spiders were now more like pissed off, aggressive jellyfish covering his entire body and Crowley decided that, just this once, he'd let those high and mighty bastards off with a silent warning while he went and taught two of the world's most suicidal hunters a lesson.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, I know we didn't fix our Uriel problem, but I hope this turned out a good follow-up chapter to have as our back-to-back release :D

Lilith Knowing The Final Seal: So this may just be my personal head-cannon, but I never understood Lilith not knowing what the final seal was, or her sudden panic about it, or the flimsy weird deal she tried to make with Sam, followed up by the next time we see her she seems perfectly calm about everything. Given that she faked wanting Sam dead and lined up Ruby to help him along, she's an adequate liar and often uses red herrings and misleads to get what she wants. It's my opinion she knew the entire time, and her sudden "panic" was a play at Sam. Anyway, that episode, while awesome because we met Chuck, always felt a little forced on Lilith's side to me, so I developed this head-cannon and will stick with it for this story.

Up Next: The boys have a chat with the King of the Crossroads and strike up an informal deal of sorts. Plus, while Castiel may have left Team Free Will on its lonesome to go back to Heaven, (s)he's not the only Castiel we've got on this playing field. Dean *finally* gets his dream angel back on.

Side note, the author has to stop posting double chapters because it's really not so good for that stockpile thing. Something about supply and demand…. Income versus spending… Damn it, I knew I shouldn't have gone to art school!

Chapter 51: Season 2: Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Editing: May be a little spotty this chapter. I had a ridiculously busy week that was somehow also not very productive? Funny how that happens. Anyway, this chapter is up pretty late for my usual Sunday posting because I didn't get to editing until this morning.

Chapter References: Since this story is starting to get quite long and it's been quite some time since the early chapters, I'm going to start including chapter numbers for anything about to be referenced, in case you need a refresher and so you don't have to go hunting for it. In this case, if you don't recall the first time the boys summoned Crowley, refresher course can be found in chapter **9. Season 1: Chapter 8** :)

(Also, why have these sites not figured out how to include a prologue as Chapter 0 so my damn chapter numbers line up?! If anyone knows how to do this, omg, tellme tellme tellme, you will be my hero)

Timeline Reminder: For the purpose of the second half of this chapter, please remember that Chest!Cas is Season11!Cas, and therefore somewhat suicidal and has not had that reconciliation chat in the Impala with Dean yet. We'll get back to Season 12/13 Cas who's more stable, though, in this weirdly angsty, fix-it-but-only-after-we-break-it-all-over-again fic of ours :D

Chapter Warnings: Well, after all the cliffies and dirty rotten things I've put you through – bunker key, vessel changes, getting Cas just to lose him back to heaven again – I think it's time for some of the good feels. You know. Right after we have a chat with the King of Snark and the author meets the required angst quota of any Supernatural fanfic. No, seriously, the angst got away from me, but I promise you there are good feels too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 18

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Took you long enough."

Those were the first words out of the moronic Dean Winchester's mouth after Crowley popped into the crossroads, just slightly off-center in case a devil's trap was waiting for him. Oddly enough, there wasn't one.

"I do have other customers, you know," Crowley drawled, spinning around in a slow circle as he looked at the cozy little dirt intersection in the middle of some charming crop fields in… Crowley was going to guess Nebraska. He straightened his suit jacket as he completed his turn to face the Winchester's again. "Legitimate ones, offering up their souls, who aren't calling to WASTE MY TIME."

The raised words echoed through the fields for a distance, scattering some crows that had been camping out nearby in the late evening hours. Crowley cleared his throat, composed himself, and cracked his neck. "Now then. Moose." He nodded to the younger of the two, then turned to the older thorn in his side. "…Not-Moose. I have to confess, this summoning business is getting old."

Particularly since their last dance had ended with *HIS NECK* next in line for the damn guillotine.

"Then buy a phone," Dean bit back, and Crowley was surprised to see that he was one hundred percent not joking. Maybe poking fun. Certainly being a grump and a right old bore. But not joking.

Interesting.

"Why, Dean Winchester," Crowley batted his eyelashes, slipping his hands into his pocket and putting on a downright coy show, "are you asking for my *number*?"

The hunter bristled while simultaneously looking embarrassed – his pissed off little ears reddening at the tips – and wasn't that just *adorable*.

"So that wouldn't be the Colt in your pocket, and you *are* just that happy to see me," he practically cooed, enjoying this perhaps way more than he should. Especially the way the hunter's face shut down, deadpan to the point of dangerous, and the Moose shifted restlessly beside him. "Oh, that's right, it can't be the Colt. You don't have it anymore, do you? Daddy lost a bet."

And wasn't that just wonderful? Couldn't trust hunters – even

the *best* – with anything, let alone keeping the one and only key to the most accessible Hell Gate in North America out of the hands of, oh, *demons*. Useless. Not that it really mattered. Colt or no, Azazel would have found a Hell Gate to raise Lilith through one way or another. They were way too early in the pre-kickoff warmups to start considering any play to be an endgame.

Didn't stop Sam from making an angry, aborted move forward. He drew his gun from his back with a fierce and furious look on his face that didn't scare the King of the Crossroads one bit. Dean held him back anyway, a hand to his bicep that the Moose eventually relented too.

"Gonna shoot me with that hilariously *average* gun, Moose? I'll let you know if it tickles." Crowley couldn't help but flaunt his utter lack of intimidation, jutting his chin out towards the handgun still in Sam's grip. Dean double tapped the front of the Moose's shoulder as a reminder to back down, but Not-Moose's expression was flat enough to actually be worth paying attention to.

"You wanna see how well you can talk after you take a bullet to the teeth from that gun? I promise you, there's nothing *average* about these, Crowley."

The King of the Crossroads had to pull his hand more hastily out of his pocket than he liked in order to catch the small, shiny object Dean lobbed his way. It was a bullet, and as Crowley examined the sleek, polished metal, he nearly dropped it when his fingers ran over the hastily scratched symbol etched on the side.

The damn thing had a *devil's trap* carved into it!

The demon narrowed his eyes at the bullet, though he couldn't deny his curiosity was officially peaked. (It had actually been peaked months ago when two moronic angel condoms summoned him BY NAME and then weaseled HIM, the KING of the bloody CROSSROADS, into a FUCKING DEAL. Yes, they' had his curiosity then, but now it was *official.*) He was maybe a little horrified at it, too. Okay, more than *a little*. A trap-engraved bullet was a new one. Not a bad idea, actually. It would probably hurt like the devil and likely trap one's powers, if not cause complete immobility.

Oh, the *possibilities*.

Geez, they were lucky most hunters were dumb as their redneck wardrobes suggested. He was sure it was what made the two hunters

standing in front of him, clothing choices aside, actually dangerous. Or, at the very least, particularly troublesome.

"No spray-on devil's trap, then?" He asked instead, tucking the bullet into his pocket for further inspection. Dean didn't miss it, something like a dangerously smug, but also actually dangerous, smirk on his face. So Crowley made a show of looking about the un-painted dirt around him as he rolled back onto his heels with his hands still in his pockets. "Getting ballsy, are we, Not-Moose?"

Crowley settled back onto his feet abruptly, a thoughtful expression overtaking his face. "I guess that would make you the squirrel."

Dean actually huffed something of a laugh, a little quirk to his lips that Crowley would say was almost *nostalgic*, if he didn't know better. "Yeah, I'm more of the dog this go around."

Crowley blinked at the response, which was not only not what he'd expected, but he didn't know what to make of it, either. Had Dean missed the obvious reference? The idea baffled Crowley. Did the man not watch quality cartoons? He was sure that had been in Hell's dossier on the Winchesters. Older brother, meathead, likes pop culture references way too much. Definitely in there.

"Look, we need to talk," the Winchester continued, and Crowley let the dog comment fall to the wayside without vocalizing any of the dozen obvious comebacks. Something along the lines of '*well, you'll certainly be Hell's bitch soon*' being at the top of the list he discarded for the sake of moving this dandy little conversation along.

"Do we now?" Well, if he couldn't have his insults, he could at least be annoyingly vague and unhelpful.

"We know you're against the apocalypse," Moose offered next, that earlier anger calmed for now but still simmering just beneath the surface. Crowley wondered if the demon blood as a child had increased that temper, or it was a pure hand-me-down from John.

"Oh, you do, do you? You seem to know a lot for a pair of meatsuits." Crowley refused to let the metaphoric sweat drip down his neck. Where the hell were they getting their information?

"Think you mean angel condoms, don't you?" Squirrel piped in, the rough sound of his voice telling the King well enough how the boys felt about that particular part of The Plan. The Plan they *shouldn't know about.* His eyes narrowed at the pair. Things weren't adding up.

"Is that a little bird on your shoulder, or is your feathered friend actually in your ribcage?" He dropped his eyes purposefully to the hunter's torso. When Dean's fist clenched at his sides but he didn't offer an answer, Crowley continued, "I hear you got yourself an angel enema, Dean. A pretty cocky one, too, if he's whispering about a prophecy like it's fact."

Which was complete bollocks and it looked like everyone present for this little shindig knew it. Sure, the prophecy was a little open-ended, a Righteous Man in Hell and blah blah blah, but the fact that it was Sam and Dean Winchester – that it had *always* been Sam and Dean – was pretty damn obvious. They fit too perfectly for it to be anyone else.

Unless God had a sense of humor which, given the twenty-first century and everything leading up to it, Crowley seriously doubted.

"You telling me it's not a fact you want Lucifer staying caged up as much as we do?" Dean countered, a raised brow and almost bored expression on his face stating that he absolutely knew the answer to that question. It just ruffled the demon's scales (ruffled feathers were for those annyong balls of light upstairs and Crowley was loathe to be compared to such do-gooders in any capacity.) Because, really, there was no way in bloody Hell they should know that.

"Your halo tell you I was?"

There was no way. There wasn't. Which meant Dean was getting his information from somewhere else. The Prophet? Only, that little twerp was writing about the Winchester boys, and only the boys. Crowley had seen the published books, and he'd gotten a human flunky (a junkie with an insatiable habit) to break in while the Prophet was out in order to check some of the more recent transcripts (something he intended to do every now and then, just to keep tabs on everything. And which he had absolutely no intention of informing his demonic "partners".) There had been nothing in the man's writing, published or otherwise, about Hell's movements at all. Audience suspense, possibly, only his notes hadn't had any details either. If Chuck Shirley was aware of what was really happening down below or up above, he wasn't bothering to write it down.

"Maybe." Squirrel shrugged and grinned something dangerous his way. "Or maybe I'm just psychic."

Crowley actually snorted at that one. Right, if there was one

explanation for all of this, it wasnot that one.

"If I weren't psychic," Dean continued, clearly mocking the demon, "how would I know you're gunning for a bigger crown than the crossroads."

His eyes narrowed at the bold hunter, but he was apparently far from finished.

"Or that before Azazel got the Colt, you were thinking of stealing it. Probably through a human you've got strung out on a deal. I'm thinking a thief, maybe? Good with her hands."

Now Crowley was downright nervous. He would never let it show, of course, but there was *no way* this braindead meat-popsicle could possibly know this. Crowley hadn't even moved on that last one. Not yet anyway. And he hadn't missed Dean's oh-so-specific choice of pronouns or profession. So unless a prophet was not only having visions of Hell, but was literally reading Crowley's mind, *no one could know that.*

He scoffed loudly, settling on false bravado while internally he panicked. "And why would I do that, Squirrel? Using a *human*, no less."

"Free labor," Dean offered less than sarcastically.

"Because you're going to need a bargaining chip when you tell me and my brother you're on our side," Sam offered more seriously, those brown eyes never leaving Crowley. "So we don't kill you."

"There is no way in hell I'm on your side, Moose."

"Well you're not on Heaven or Hell's," Dean countered blandly and Crowley found himself practically squinting, his eyes couldn't get any more narrowed.

"I'm on *my own* side," he finally declared loudly and blatantly. There was clearly no reason to deny it, not only because they seemed to know it already, but bluffing wasn't even getting him spare chips here.

"Great," Squirrel announced, "so are we."

The demon huffed in frustration, really not liking how Dean's words somehow sounded even more like they were on the same side. Next the bloody humans would be suggesting they have team jackets made.

He finally threw up his hands, giving up the game, well and truly baffled now.

"Where are you getting your information?" he asked, actually sincere for once. Well, it would sound sincere if you could hear beyond the confounded frustration in his voice. "I'm genuinely curious, because I can't figure you out."

And neither could anyone else in Hell.

"Yeah," Dean scoffed, half in self-deprecation, half just pure hunter's gruff. "I'm real complicated."

He sure hadn't been at the start of this thing. Nine months ago they'd wrapped up near twenty years' worth of recon. Demons posing in all walks of the Winchester's lives, all keeping an eye on the boys. Teachers, janitors, motel owners, maids, friends, bullies, one had even approached John while possessing a fellow *hunter* (who'd met a rather nasty end shortly afterwards). All had said the same thing. Dean was a meathead, but a damn impressive hunter. Not psychic, not particularly intelligent, unlike his brother, but highly intuitive. Dangerously so. He had ridiculously low self-worth and was loyal to a devastating fault. All things they could and would use to get the Apocalyptic ball rolling.

This… This was a completely different man wrapped in the same snark and insecurities. Sans the sliver of angel sitting in his chest, Crowley could not figure out where the hell he'd come from.

"So, did you call me here to tell me all about my own plans, which I already know, thank you very much, or was there a point to this?"

The brothers exchanged looks, before Sam offered a shrug. "You don't want the apocalypse to happen; we don't want the apocalypse to happen. We figured we should talk."

"Oh, is that what this is?" Crowley slapped on a cheerful smile, voice sugary sweet. "A friendly little con-fab? Well, excellent, I'll just be *leaving then*.

He spun on his heal even as Dean barked out a '*Hey!'* that the demon could tell meant business, especially as it was followed by the cocking hammer of a gun. Apparently, a gun loaded with devils trap bullets. It only served to infuriate Crowley more, however, and he spun back around, finger whipped out and jutting in the arrogant, bossy, idiotic human's direction.

"I don't think so, Squirrel!" he yelled back, face reddening. "I may be against unlocking dear old Lucifer's personal prison, but that's *because* I'm not SUICIDAL. Which is precisely the reason this conversation is *over*."

"Crowley," Moose countered, holding his hands up in placation. Hilarious. He'd obviously forgotten who and what it was he was dealing with. "None of us want the world to end. Let's start there."

"Oh, silly me. I forgot I was talking to a *hero*." The demon rolled his eyes. "I don't give a damn about the world – though I can't say the Apocalypse will be good for business. I care about one thing, and one thing only. Yours truly." He gestured down his body with a little wink that made the yeti of a man blink in discomfort. Good for him. "I haven't made a move, other than considering *maybe*, just *maybe*, stealing the Colt from you mooks, because if anyone – and I mean *anyone* – finds out that I'm so much as *chatting* with you Winchesters, they'll TEAR ME APART!"

Dean winced at the volume, sticking a finger in his ear dramatically even as the king composed himself back to kingly standards. His face was still red and he was still spewing all but fire, but, you know, *kingly*. "I like my life, I'd like to keep it. It's one of the reasons I'm against popping the devil out of his box. But it's also a driving force behind *not wanting to be on the run from all of Hell*, you MORONS."

"Will you stop yelling, already?" Dean growled out, glaring at the crossroads King. "We're not asking you to blow you're cover, we're just talking!"

"Did you miss the part where that could GET ME KILLED?" And no, he would *not stop yelling*, the human *twat*.

"Look," Sam tried again, voice still ever that infuriatingly reasonable calm, though Crowley could tell even the moose was wearing thin on patience, "we're just laying groundwork, alright? We know you've got your own plans to disrupt the apocalypse. We're obviously working on a few of our own. Can we at least start there?"

"I'm not divulging anything to you two meatheads."

"We don't want your secrets. God!" Dean finally shouted, throwing up his hands. "How can we make this any more simple, Crowley? 'Gee, we see you're against the end of the world. Great, us too! Let us know if you come up with a good one, kay?' 'Okay!' That's it. That's *all*.

Jesus!"

Crowley watched the explosion through ever narrowing eyes. Was that… Was that seriously all they had summoned him here for? 'We've got a common end goal, keep us in the loop?' That… That couldn't be it. That was monumentally *stupid.*

"What the hell makes you think you can trust me?" he asked, blurting it out, dumfounded, because he just couldn't believe two humans – two *hunters* – were stupid enough to get in bed with a demon. And not even by force or blackmail or bribery. Just…because. And it was all *their idea*, too. Crowley couldn't… he just couldn't even wrap his head around it.

"Oh, we definitely don't trust you," Squirrel countered immediately, a look crossing his face that said he knew better. One of those looks that reads '*been there, done that, Personal Experience Achieved.'* Crowley wondered, for a brief moment of curiosity amidst his mind being blown by the sheer *insanity* in front of him, where that look was coming from. "We're just not above using you. Or you, us, I bet."

Huh.

Well, it was no less stupid, but at least it had possibility.

"Hmm, a mutually beneficial relationship based purely on taking advantage of one another?" Crowley let out a little hum of thought as he weighed the offer with an exaggerated expression on his face. "The good old 'I scratch your back, you give me a hand job'arrangement. Can't say I'm entirely against that..."

Dean's eyelids shuttered in annoyance, that deadpan expression something Crowley suspected he'd be seeing more of in the future, should he take them up on this. Sam coughed awkwardly beside his brother, face definitely caught between *'he's joking, right?'* and '*wait a minute, we didn't say anything about sexual favors, here…'* The embarrassed moose amused the demon to no end, and Crowley considered saying yes just to continue to be a pain in their stupidly tall asses.

Of course, there were other reasons, as well. Mainly that the two mooks thought they could take on the Apocalypse and win. Something deep in Crowley's smoke-filled, rotting gut was telling him not to underestimate the flannel-wrapped speedbump in an otherwise dangerously perfect plan.

He supposed they would need a hand along the way if they were going to actually pull it off. Their terrible choice in clothing and plucky attitude would only get them so far. Plus, a failed apocalypse would leave plenty of vacancies in Hell to be filled. Positions a tad higher up the ladder than Crowley currently sat.

"Alright, boys. I suppose I can offer my services on the rare occasion. For the right price, to be negotiated at the time." He ignored the shift in their glares from elation to annoyance or the snort from Squirrel. Crowley shoved his hands back into his pockets, the very picture of laid back, even as he dropped his voice into a far more dangerous range that promised pain and suffering. "But if I hear so much as a whisper about my involvement-"

"Relax, Crowley," Dean bit out before he need finish. "We've got just as much riding on this."

Somehow, the King of the crossroads seriously doubted that. All they were risking was their lives.

"I think we'll have our hands full," Moose added on, voice sardonic. "End of the world doesn't leave a lot of time left over to betray you."

Well… *Yet*, Crowley thought. But that was a bridge to burn much further down this road they were now caravanning together. A road trip with two hunters. What fun.

"Well then, gentlemen." Crowley regarded them for another drawn out minute, eyes narrowed more for show, though the two certainly provided plenty to be suspicious of. "Can't say it's been fun."

With a parting smirk, the King was gone.

-o-o-o-

Sam let out a breath that felt like it took his body with it, leaving him a deflated, saggy balloon in the middle of a crossroads in Nebraska. He glanced at his brother, who didn't look much better. Annoyance seemed to be keeping him inflated for the most part.

"Why do I feel like we just made a deal with the devil?" the younger Winchester asked, part in jest and part absolutely not.

"Well…" Dean gave a helpless little shrug as he rubbed at his chest. The muscles there felt tight, aching and hot like they hadn't in a long time. He hoped that meant good things for the Cas sitting in his chest.

He hoped it didn't mean bad things for the Cas sitting upstairs.

His brother wasn't wrong about Crowley, though, getting back to the matter at hand and the only one of his current worries that he had any control over. The King of the Crossroads had his uses, despite his untrustworthiness and a coming future ripe with double crosses. From both sides, Dean could admit. So the man from the future added a little more reasonably, "We might need him. Maybe we can stop from stealing the Colt this time, but if not…. Better to be on the same page now than in the middle of a crisis."

And the crises were surely coming. As surely as Time wanted things to stay the same.

Besides, Crowley might be a demon, but as far as that breed went, he'd come through more than once for the Winchesters, sometimes for reasons Dean never had figured out. Even with him being at least partially responsible for the Mark of Cain and certainly not a great influence on Demon Dean, there were still enough times when Crowley had been more ally than enemy. The hunter didn't want to risk closing that door.

Plus, as dangerous as Crowley was on the throne, he was nothing compared to the actual devil.

"He's kind of a dick," Sam mentioned so offhandedly – tone sort of affronted and pinched expression *definitely* affronted – that Dean laughed, and laughed loudly.

"Oh, yeah, a total dick," he agreed, a real smile on his face for the first time in at least a couple days. "Resourceful one, though."

Sam looked constipated for a minute – probably flitting through at least six dick jokes and hand-job rejects in that brilliant (and totally dirty, no matter how he pretended not to be) brain of his – before he held out his hand and gestured for the keys. Dean pulled a face, but didn't argue as he dug them out of his pocket and tossed them his brother's way.

-o-o-o-

They ended up crashing at a motel not long after, both exhausted from taking out a nest of vampires and following it up with somewhat hostile negotiations with the King of the Crossroads, all on almost forty-eight hours without sleep. Dean declared they'd earned it, so he slept for a whole six and half hours this time (a real treat for him).

For a good chunk of that, he dreamed, like he hadn't in far too long.

"Hello, Dean."

The hunter craned his neck to look over his shoulder at the angel, who was standing beside the picnic table Dean found himself camped out on. He'd been watching Ben run around at another kid's birthday party, a cold beer in hand and content smile on his face. The arrival of the angel came with conflicting emotions that both enveloped his chest with warmth and stole the smile right off his face.

This memory had been one of the few times in his life with Lisa and Ben Braedon that he hadn't been praying to see Cas again. A moment when he'd almost been happy. Almost been apple-pie. It figured that *now* was when the angel finally showed. But that had been a long time ago and a lot had happened since. Beyond the pain of those days without Sam or the angel (and why did it have to be in *this* dream, of *this* memory, that Castiel finally came back?), there was the overwhelming relief because Cas was alive and *here*.

"You real?"

In lieu of a response, the angel tilted his head sharply, brow pinching and Dean bit back the sharp annoyance it triggered. Damn, but he was tired of his emotions being all over the friggin' place.

"Damn it, Cas, are you really here?"

"I've always been here, Dean."

Gee, if that was true, wouldn't it have been nice to know, *six freaking months ago*!

"I mean right now. In my head." The hunter gestured around at the eleven year old's birthday party, the streamers and balloons bobbing in the wind, the kids laughing and screaming as they ran about, the parents milling with red solo cups and beer bottles. Normal life. A life Dean had tried so hard to fit into, but his heart just hadn't been in it. Never like Sam's.

Dean's throat was getting awfully sore for no damn reason as he forced out a croaky, "In my… In my chest?"

Cas's eyes lowered, ever so slowly, to the man's torso and Dean felt the muscles there constrict around his heart like a noose. "I couldn't get you here by my power alone. I didn't have enough."

The hunter let that sink in and dropped his gaze to the bottle in his hands. It was still icy cold, with condensation pooling along the surface until it ran in occasional rivets down the side. That beer would never get warm, not in this place.

"You've been here the whole time."

Cas didn't answer. It hadn't been a question. Instead, he crossed in front of the man and Dean let out a chuff as the angel climbed onto the picnic table, spinning to sit atop the table's surface beside his friend and charge. Dean took the opportunity for a long draw of beer.

"Thought I was dreaming you," Dean answered, lips still wrapped around the bottle. It didn't feel any lighter as he lowered it back between his legs. The neck dangled from between fingers, arms draped across his knees, and he watched condensation drip to the peeling wood of the bench.

"You are currently dreaming." Castiel mirrored his posture, legs apart and hands clasped loosely between his knees. He was watching the children with an intensity that would get him in trouble in the real world, but Dean knew it was the angel's super weird appreciation of humanity. "And I am currently in that dream."

"Damn it, Cas." He let out a long breath of air, shaking his head before he speared his friend with a look that told him to cut it out. "For once, will you just give me a straight answer?"

Castiel fell quiet, his gaze dropping to the boards and grass beneath them. "I'm as real as a shadow can be, Dean."

There was that word again. People kept using that word to describe the angel – the chunk of grace lodged in his chest – and Dean was getting pretty frickin' sick of the riddle he didn't know the answer to. "I don't- what does that even mean?"

Beside him, Cas sighed deeply. Dean had come to realize that sound was one Cas made when he didn't want to tell him something, usually because Dean wouldn't like whatever it was. "I didn't have enough power to send you through time and maintain myself in 2016."

"Then how am I here? How are *we* here?" The hunter gave his chest a harsh pat, the thumping force echoing through his own ribcage in an oddly satisfying way. Blue eyes dropped once more, then met his eyes with a pointed look that Dean had seen too many times in his lifetime. He let out a bitter huff as he got his answer. "You didn't have enough

grace. So you… what, took a debt out of the life power bank?"

That look didn't let up. "Grace is life, Dean."

"Are you saying you-" Dean bit the inside of his cheek for a minute, then licked his lips and tried to ignore how *angry* he was. "You used your life to get me back here?"

"Yes." The immediate and unwavering response only made it worse. Damn it, he'd already known this – suspected it at the very least – and it still pissed him off. Of all the angels, of all the friends, why had he gotten the one just as stupidly self-sacrificing as himself? "I had to make sure you got to your destination."

That gaze dropped to his hands, once loosely clasped together but now wringing out with a slow sort of anxiousness that just screamed exhaustion. Dean didn't know why, but he got the distinct impression of it. Had those dark circles always been under Cas's eyes, or were they new? "Maintaining a vessel takes a small, but constant flow of grace. I surrendered what was left and put everything into the jump. I took you as far as I could before it burned up."

Dean couldn't help himself. He reached out and stilled those hands, realizing what he was doing even as he did it and managing not to pull away immediately. Once Castiel had stopped, fingers faltering beneath Dean's grip, the hunter withdrew his hands, awkwardly aware that he'd practically dive-bombed his friend's hands between his knees to stop the fidgeting.

Castiel didn't comment, barely even let it interrupt him, and Dean was ridiculously grateful for that. "I believe this, what I am now, is nothing but an after-image of that power. A sliver of unburned grace shielding your soul to see the jump through."

And now stuck in the tendrils of Dean's apparently clingy soul, if the other Castiel was right.

But Dean wasn't as bothered by that as he was by Cas's words, buried in the verbal sprawl that was meant to distract from the truth. "You died sending me back."

Cas pinned him with another look, but this one was far too sad to ever resemble anything the angel had ever looked at him with. It took Dean's breath away to realize, so damn suddenly that it was friggin' painful, that Cas had looked like that for a long time.

"I was dead already, Dean."

The hunter couldn't keep that gaze. His throat fucking *hurt* from the lump there, the swelling that felt like he was going to start crying any minute now, and he blinked away the evidence of that immediately. God damn it, he had seen Cas die too many times. Too many fucking times, and to hear him just accept it…

There was something else in the angel's tone, in those eyes, that twisted Dean's stomach into tiny little knots that he wanted to claw out with his bare hands. Something wrong, that he couldn't name and, damn it, didn't want to. He climbed off the table. He had to *move*. Had to leave the truth of this- this… *bullshit* behind him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The hunter whirled back to face the angel, fists clenched at his sides as Cas only met his stare. "You were here the whole time. Damn it, you were *helping* me, Cas. Why didn't you just tell me you were here?"

Why didn't you answer me?

"I'm not, I couldn't…" Cas's eyes filled with pure anguish, the kind that stole Dean's breath away, and he didn't know where it was *coming from*. The angel closed his eyes and Dean hated himself for being relieved he didn't have to see those pained blue depths anymore. He was a fucking coward and a terrible friend. "I can't be of use to you like this, Dean. I have nothing left to offer."

The angel ducked his head, and Dean didn't know if it was the dream world, where he already knew emotions were harder to hide, or the connection they had because Cas was actually a part of him now, snuggled up to his soul, but he could practically see the guilt and shame wafting off the angel in waves. He could certainly *feel* it, and the heartbreak there practically bowled him over.

"I'm barely here. There are times… sometimes I don't even remember what I am. Who I am." Castiel's voice grew almost too soft to hear, but thanks to dream-fucking-wonderland, Dean heard every single syllable, and each fiber of misery within them. "I can't be what you need, Dean. I'm used up."

Dean clenched his fists. "Yes, you can."

The angel's head whipped up, and he looked so full of despair – so full of dread at what Dean was going to ask of him next – that the hunter wanted to throw up. God, how had they let this – how had *he* let it –

get this bad?

"I don't need you to be useful, Cas. I just- I just need you to…be. Here." He trailed off lamely at the end, the grip on the neck of his beer bottle tight enough that he probably would have hurt himself if any of this were real. He sighed and set the bottle safely on the table, off to Cas's side. "I know I haven't- wasn't there for you a lot lately. Uh, in the last couple years, I mean. Sometimes Sam and me… we get caught up in our own shit. Forget about everyone else and that- that's not…"

Damn it, why were words so fucking hard?

"You don't need to concern yourself with my problems, Dean." Cas was staring at his hands again, and damn it, all Dean wanted was for the angel to *look at him*. But look at him like he used to. Strong and solid and unbreakable. Not… not this broken thing he was. Had become. God, Dean was so fucking selfish, but he had no idea how to deal with this. "I'm not as important as the Darkness, or changing your and Sam's fate."

Expendable.

The hunter blinked at the word that crossed his mind. It was definitely Cas's voice, but the angel's mouth hadn't moved and the hunter recognized that slightly off sound of words that hadn't been vocalized. From ghosts to angels to the whispers of Hell, he knew enough what something in his head sounded like.

Damn it, this wasn't his department. He was no good at this! This was something Sam usually handled, because Dean only made stuff like this so much worse.

"You're not expendable, Cas. You're *important*. To me, to Sam. You're family," he insisted, only to have his mouth dry out and his heart plummet into his stomach at the look Cas sent his way. A look that said *'that's a nice sentiment, Dean*,' and nothing more. And yes, damn it, maybe he deserved that. How many times had he said that and never followed through? How many times had he and Sam told the angel he was like a brother only to throw him out of the bunker, ignore his problems, from Raphael to Naomi to Metatron. But he had time now. Time to do better. "That's my point, damn it. I know I've messed up. So… so many times, Cas. I never should have…"

Fuck, he couldn't even say it, could he? Had he ever even apologized for kicking Cas out of the bunker? For beating him almost to death under the influence of the Mark? For any of it?

Dean suddenly swallowed past the lump in his throat, damn near threatening to choke him, as he heard the echoes of a memory. His brother screaming. Crowley being more on their side than their own angel. Cas, staring at him in a dark, dank factory and telling him he didn't fight anymore.

'*I'm not good luck, Dean.*'

He'd apologized then. He'd told the angel he had been wrong and Cas had just fucking smiled and talked about bees. He'd wanted to go watch the bees. He hadn't wanted to fight.

That was *years* ago. How long had Cas wanted out? How many times had Dean dragged him back in?

The hunters' chest throbbed and ached and felt so damn hollow, like an endless pit, as he remembered the look in Castiel's eyes that night they'd stabbed Dick Roman, after Dean had finally, *finally*, talked the angel into helping them. That look right before the world had gone to Purgatory in a handbasket, and he'd lost his best friend for months. For a lot longer than that, really.

Cas had *chosen* to stay in Purgatory. Just like he'd chosen to say *yes*.

Dean wasn't going to survive if his heart kept hurting like this. He couldn't. He wanted to claw the traitorous thing out of his chest.

How long ago had Cas told him he was worried he might kill himself if he saw the damage he wrought in Heaven? That…that had been before Metatron tricked him and Heaven got even worse. Before Lucifer possessed him and killed so many more. That confession had been fucking *years ago*. And Dean had never checked back in, made sure the angel didn't still feel that way.

Suddenly, Castiel saying yes, Cas being *expendable*, was taking an entirely new perspective that froze Dean's blood in his veins.

'I was dead already.'

Cas hadn't expected to survive. Any of this. And he hadn't, really, had he? Just a sliver. A sliver that would have burned up, the angel gone forever – permanently – with Dean none the wiser. The hunter raised a shaky hand to his chest, struggling to breath as he tried to rub some warmth back into that suddenly frigid black hole.

He had no doubt, suddenly, that he was the one who had clung to the

chunk of grace, tangled himself up in it so tightly that Cas couldn't slip away, and not the other way around.

"I'd rather have you." It was all he could think to say, blurting it out through numb lips and a numb tongue and an aching mind. His hands were shaking, and he clenched them to hide it. Dean met his angel's eyes, and hell if there wasn't just as much pain there as Cas's. "Cursed or not. Remember?"

The angel was slow to nod – and hell, he'd been pretty far off his rocker when Dean had said those words to him – but his eyes stayed locked on the hunter's and there was recognition in those blue depths. "I remember."

"All I need you to do is believe me, here. I don't know how else to say it." Because he'd meant it that night. Maybe… maybe he was starting to realize how often he thought he said it, and how often it had sounded different to the angel. A request for a hammer, not a friend. But he'd *meant it.* Every word.

With a shaky breath, Dean clambered back onto the table, sitting closer to Cas this time. Close enough to feel the imagined warmth of the angel beside him, even if he couldn't find the warmth from the part of him in his ribcage.

"So no more of this- this not useful crap. I want you here, Cas. Just you. Useful or not." He closed his eyes, and managed to make his hands stop shaking as the realization he was sitting beside the angel he'd missed for so damn long made a laugh bubble out of him. It wasn't nearly as real as he wished it could be, but he'd take it. He shook his head, laughing again at the swell of relief buzzing through him as his mind finally registered that Cas was *right here*. Right beside him. Had been the whole time. Dean buried his head in his hands and scrubbed his fingernails against his scalp as he relished in that release, that momentary, almost hysterical relief. Castiel was staring at him as he opened his eyes and looked at his angel. "Hell, I'm…I'm so fucking happy you're here, man."

Because the angel almost hadn't been. For six months, Dean had been alone in one way or another, faced with an impossible task, years long, with a terrible fate if he failed, praying to an angel he didn't think was alive to hear him.

There were plenty of conflicting emotions in Castiel's eyes as he met them head on. The pain, the despair, were still present, but there was

hope, too. Such painfully clear and fearful hope, that Dean vowed to do better. This battle, this little war he hadn't even known he was losing, was far from over, but he'd do better now that he knew he had to fight.

Even if it was just for a shadow.

"I'm going to change it, Cas." The angel's brow pinched at the topic shift that really wasn't a shift at all. Dean swallowed down all that emotion he wasn't equipped to deal with anyway and surged on. "I'm going to save them. Sam, and Bobby, and Ellen and Jo. I'm gonna change their fates. And I'm gonna change yours too."

Cas blinked at him, as if he hadn't even considered his own past – future – might be changeable. Or that he might need saving.

"I can't keep you – the other you – out of it," Dean confessed, wincing even as the memory of that panic when he thought about Claire returned with just as much force. The panic that came with every change he made that only seemed to make things *worse*. Of that relieved look on Angela Garrett's face when Castiel confessed she was going back to Heaven. Back to the lion's den. "But I promise. I won't- we won't let you fall this time, Cas. You won't lose your home."

He refused to call those dicks his family, though. They weren't. Shouldn't be. They didn't deserve him.

Castiel watched him for a long time. Long enough for Dean to swipe his never-ending beer and take a long, only slightly desperate swig.

"Of everything that has happened or will happen," Cas finally spoke, eyes never leaving his charge's in that soul-searching gaze of his, "meeting you and Sam is not one that I, or any version of me, will ever regret. Not for all of Heaven would I take back what rebelling brought me, Dean."

Family.

Dean swallowed, shutting his eyes against the stupid water stupidly swelling behind his stupid eyeballs as Cas's voice filtered between his ears again. He didn't know if the angel was aware he could hear him, or if it was dreamland, or hell, maybe Dean was just hearing what he wanted to hear. Truth was, he didn't care. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, and all that.

He took a moment to clear the emotion from his throat and eyes,

sniffled something manly, and hopped off the picnic table. Cas just watched him as he crossed a few feet of the yard – dodging kids as they ran around him – and fetched two new beers from the large, blue cooler hanging out next to an assortment of juice boxes and a large red barrel full of water. When he returned, he offered one of the beers to Cas, who accepted it with just the barest hint of a smile, and clinked the neck of his bottle to the angel's.

"To family," he said, tipping the beer Cas's way. His friend shared in his smile, the closest one to reach his eyes that Dean had seen in far too long, and Dean settled close beside him again. For the warmth. And maybe for Cas, too.

He nursed the beer slowly, the both of them watching the party. Dean nodded to a parent he vaguely remembered as she walked by with a smile, and knocked his knee against Cas's. "You gotta go, or you got some time?"

Cas gave him a slightly wry look, a little of that wicked sense of humor coming back there for a moment. "I've got nothing but time, apparently."

"Damn straight." Dean took a sip of his beer with a reassuring nod, hiding the tease of a smirk crossing his face.

The angel waited just long enough to knock his knee back that Dean choked on his beer when he did, trying to laugh and swallow in the same go. He tried to shove him off the table with his shoulder and almost spilled what was left of the bottle on the rebound after hitting a wall of unmovable angel. Cas just stared straight ahead with what would be some next-level innocence painted on his face, if it weren't for those sarcastic little eyebrows climbing up his forehead.

The little shit took a casual sip from his beer and Dean muttered something under his breath about flabby angels.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd sat with Cas, or laughed with him. It felt good. It felt damn good, and he planned to soak up every minute of it that he could, since, for once, neither of them had anywhere to rush off to or the end of the world riding on their shoulders. At least not for the next four hours of blissful sleep and comfortable companionship.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I love me some quiet Dean/Cas moments like I love me

some Dean/Cas angst. (The angst actually took over here; it was supposed to be more of a quiet moment . We'll get there…)

More the dog this go around: So for anyone who might not have gotten this more obscure reference, Mr. Peabody was a time-traveling dog first introduced on the Rocky and Bullwinkle show (where the reference Moose and Squirrel comes from). I swore I would get a Mr. Peabody joke in here at some point, and once Crowley learns Dean's from the future, there will be plenty more ;) It's too perfect with his habitual Rocky and Bullwinkle references. He just hasn't picked up on it yet.

Full Caps: You may have noticed, but I pretty much hate using full caps in stories. If a character is shouting or screaming, it should come across in context. (i.e. "No!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, loud enough to shake the very building they stood in, wake the dead only for those poor souls to suffer death a second time, that of the blown ear drum (totally fatal, didn't you know?) and, oh yes, scare the poor mice living in that little hole by the base of the stairs. They'd been having such a nice family dinner, utterly ruined by the need of one moose to shout at the top of his lungs in abject horror. Humans could be so selfish sometimes.) However! Crowley is a very special character with a very special exception. He likes to scream mid-sentence, roller-coastering us through a delicious journey of enjoyable snark highs followed by back-the-fuck-up-from-the-suddenly-screaming-demon lows. Lol. It's one of my favorite things about the way Mark Shepherd portrayed the character. So he gets access to my rarely used caps locks (except in chats. I love all caps in chats. Screaming is the beeeeest)

And yes, I just wrote some weird vignette about Sam yelling loud enough to disturb a mouse family having dinner. Shut up, you liked it and you know it. ;D

Up Next: Dean wakes up to Sammy sitting upright in the next bed, dressed and ready for the day because morning person (those freaks are almost as bad as house guests), dad's phone pressed to his ear, listening to a voicemail from none other than Ellen Harvelle.

Delay Warning! I'm out on vacation next week, and while I anticipate lots of writing (I hope, I hope, I hope), I may not be able to post next Sunday. Chances are kind of low, considering internet isn't much of a thing where I'm going. I'll do my best, but

if I'm unable to post in time, the chapter will most definitely be up the following weekend.

Please Review! I know you guys may be bummed by the possible delay next week, but I have also fallen behind in writing due to switching jobs and being stupidly busy and taking on too many projects with too little currently functioning brain power. So, if you have it in you, please pressure that muse into getting some writing done this week! She apparently needs the push -_-

Chapter 52: Season 2: Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Editing: Hopefully not as spotty on this chapter, but oh, boy, it's a long one and I wanted to get it to you guys early to make up for the two week delay, which means I probably rushed but I hope I didn't (Okay, Silence, breathe, and end that run-on sometime soon, girl).

Chapter Warnings: Sam's cracking voicemails, the boys are off to the Roadhouse, cameos are cameo-ing (because they can), Ellen's a badass mom-friend, Jo is making Dean all sorts of confused in the feels, and Ash is just...well...Ash. Did someone call for a killer clown?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 19

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean woke up from the most restful sleep he'd had in a long time. Not just in mind, but body too. That yellow-eyed bastard might have healed him back at the hospital, but his chest hadn't been right since. Not warm enough. Too tight. Too hollow. Aching when it had been fine only moments before. Whether it was the touch of that demon interacting with the chunk of angel in his chest, said angel recovering from his grace explosion, or just Dean's continued worry having not seen or heard from him since, despite Castiel's confirmation that her slivered counterpart was, in fact, there… Well, it was anybody's guess at that point.

Now, though, that comforting warmth was back in its rightful place. Maybe not as strong as before, but *there*, and Dean knew that counted for something. Everything. Most things.

Sam was already up, and movement from his side of the room drew Dean's attention. He was sitting on the other bed, cross-legged with a phone raised to his ear, a growing smile on his face and excitement in his eyes. Dean sat up, happy, dream-drugged brain a little slow on the uptake, but he realized that wasn't Sam's usual phone quickly enough.

"I got it," Sam announced with a wide grin, even as he pulled the phone from his ear, hit a button and followed it with the speakerphone.

"John, it's Ellen. Again. Look, don't be stubborn. You know I can help you. Call me."

Dean swung his legs off the bed as the message finished, that warmth in his chest right back to an unnatural tightness that had nothing to do with the angel sitting behind his ribcage. He tried for a grin matching his brother's – damn but it was good to hear Ellen's voice, even just a recording of it – but he had to fight through every ounce of guilt and pain that flared up at the follow-up thought: where their involvement in that woman's life had led.

Not that he hadn't had almost a week since finding Sam fiddling with Dad's phone to sort through all that. Of course, emotionally challenged as he was, he hadn't gotten that far. In fact… he'd kind of pushed it all to the side anytime the guilt and worry and questions came popping up, figuring he'd deal with it when it happened.

Well. Now it was happening and, like always, he really should have given himself more time to deal with the crap emotions that came with it. Right now he was somewhere between a bitter *'Some things have to stay the same, huh?'* and the knowledge that some things actually did have to stay the same. The angel he'd almost ruined the Novak family's lives over (just for advice and a relief for the loneliness of this time traveling crap) had given them the wise wisdom of sticking to the original timeline. So, stick to it they would, which meant their next stop was the Roadhouse.

"We're going, right?" Sam asked, the brightness in his eyes reminding Dean that his kid brother was just that; a kid. A kid who'd grown up on the road, without friends, and who might have made a couple good ones in his four years of college, but lost them all to a road trip with his from-the-future brother fighting off the end of the world. Didn't leave a lot of time for friends. Or other people at all, really.

Fuck it. Sam needed this. Dean needed this. And not to toot their own

horns, but he'd like to think the Harvelles wouldn't be worse off meeting them.

…As long as he could keep them alive this time, that was.

"Yeah, we're going," Dean replied, and the smile came easier that time. They hadn't gotten far through the state of Nebraska on their drive away from Manning yesterday, and Dean had purposefully taken the long road around. The one that went right past the Roadhouse. "We're only an hour out, tops."

Which would put them there a little earlier than they'd gotten there the first time. About a month sooner, but, hey, Castiel hadn't specified on timing over sequence. They'd cracked Dad's phone, learned about Ellen. The next logical step, if they weren't from the future and didn't already know who she was, would be to go check it out.

Time could suck it if she had a problem with that.

-o-o-o-

They were on their way into the bar – too early for the Roadhouse to be open – when they bumped into two guys walking out. The one, a tall, broad-shouldered man that could give Sam a run for his money in size, was busy walking forward while looking back, hollering something back into the bar with a gangly-armed wave. Dean, not having expected other patrons to be hanging around a dive bar at ten am, stumbled through the suddenly open door he'd been mid-push, and bodily shouldered into the dude.

"Watch it," he grumbled as the guy managed a step back, surprisingly kind eyes wide at the minor tumble.

"Whoa, sorry about that, buddy," the towering giant had either hand on Dean's shoulders, steadying him like some sort of child, and that just pissed him off even more. He was not a child and this guy and his ginormous hands and stupid eyes could fuck the fuck off.

(Dean wasn't really a morning person.)

He opened his mouth to tell the guy off, when Ellen's voice rang out from the bar, the dim lighting and bright outside sun making it difficult to see her. "Everything alright, Asa?"

Dean blinked, anger completely forgotten as the name echoed bells in his head and he took a second look at the beanstalk in front of him.

He was a good looking guy, oozing charm and sincerity, with hazel-green eyes and short blonde hair.

Holy shit, Dean thought, *that's Asa Fucking Fox.*

"Yeah, Ellen, we're good!" Asa hollered over his shoulder, then turned back to give Dean a good-natured thump on the bicep in apology, smile bright on his face. Dean remembered Ellen and Jo practically fanning themselves over the man's smile, grinning conspiratorially between each other as Dean – and the other manly hunting men in the Roadhouse – balked. Women. Only now, yeah – aright, *hell yeah* – Dean could see it. His weak little fanboy knees could *feel* it. And he would take it to his grave that he was right there with Ellen and Jo, needing a little fanning himself.

Asa Fox was a *legend*. He was up there with Dr. Sexy, damnit.

"You're Asa Fox!" he announced loudly – too loudly – and Sam cringed behind him. Dean broke out a smile of his own, the patented Winchester grin. "Didn't you kill, like, five wendigos in one night?"

Behind the hunter, a second man laughed loudly, slapping Asa on the back of the shoulder. "That's our boy. Every time the story gets told that number grows." The man, shorter than his buddy by about a foot, with a red beard and unfortunate hairline, stuck his hand out to Dean. "Bucky Sims."

"Dean Winchester," the older Winchester offered as he shook the hunter's hand, still grinning back and forth between the two. "Was it really five?"

"You're just lucky we ain't drinking, or the next round would be on you." Bucky winked at him rather than answer. Asa gave his shoulder a playful push and rolled his eyes, apparently quite used to this reaction.

"I'll remember that," Dean answered with a grin. He'd spent enough time at the Roadhouse and the other occasional hunters' haunts that they stumbled across to know that most of those who'd made a name for themselves came with a code word that usually got them a round of drinks in honor of achievement among the ranks. Or it got everyone else around them drunk. Depended on the crowd, really.

"Winchester?" Asa echoed, meanwhile, a curious pinch to his brow. "Like John Winchester?"

"Our dad," Sam offered behind Dean, who suddenly remembered he had a younger brother among all his fanboying and glanced over his shoulder at him. As the other beanstalk in the conversation, Sam stuck his hand out to shake Asa and Bucky's, introducing himself.

"Sam and Dean Winchester." Bucky shook his head with a wry smile. "Heard about you guys. Heard about your dad. Hell of a hunter."

It was clear from the grin on his face and the admiration in his voice that he didn't know John Winchester was dead. News like that traveled fast, but it usually had to make it to a place like the Roadhouse first. Dean shared a look with his brother, and neither of them said a thing.

"I knew another Winchester, once," Asa was smiling, but there was something sad about it. "Hell of a hunter, too. Mary." His voice turned nostalgic, eyes in a far off place, an old smile on his face. "She saved my life once. Got me into hunting."

Dean blinked. Then blinked again. Because he couldn't be talking about their mom. He *couldn't*.

"Huh." Bucky was staring at Asa, having clearly heard this story before. "You never told me her last name was Winchester."

"You knew our mom?"

It was Asa's turn to be shocked. Actually, it was *everyone*'s turn to shocked. Bucky, surprise lighting his face though it clearly wasn't so much for him as it was for his buddy. Asa, whose eyes had widened in size and that nostalgia replaced with something like eager hope. And Sam. Sam, whose reaction was such a bodily jerk that Dean felt more than saw him behind him.

Right. Spoilers. Kinda rudely delivered shock-spoilers.

Oops.

"Mary Winchester was your mother?" Asa parroted, shock still painting his face. He glanced between the boys. "Wait, your father-"

"Got into hunting because of her death," Dean supplied without needing to know the rest of the question. "She was retired, but…uh… that didn't stop her past from finding her."

Sam's hand fisted the back of his sleeve, near his elbow, and Dean

winced. There were still some things he hadn't told his younger brother. Not because he was keeping secrets, but because there was just *so much*, and not all of it came up in, you know, every day conversation.

Like mom being a hunter long before John Winchester knew what demons were.

"Shit," Asa whispered, still staring down into those green eyes that he could now see Mary Winchester in so *easily* that he wondered how he'd missed it. "I thought… I'd hoped I hadn't found her because she got out."

Dean swallowed heavily, feeling his brother's hand shaking on his elbow with how tightly he was clenching his jacket. "She did. For a while."

The man huffed something sad and shook his head. He put his hands on his hips, and that smile was back on his face albeit there was more regret there now. "All this time. I could have just talked to John Winchester." He laughed again, but it was more self-deprecating than anything else. "You know, I met him once? He wasn't really a people person."

"Yeah," Sam laughed shakily from behind. "That sounds like our dad."

Asa had never been able to picture the woman he'd met in the woods that day – his guardian angel, really – with a man like John Winchester. So he'd written it off as a coincidence and never *asked*. Not to mention, John Winchester didn't really talk to people, and everyone Asa knew told him to stay away from the man. How damn stupid he was, after all the searching he'd done, to pass on the most obvious clue there ever was.

"Hey, man, I'm sorry," Dean suddenly spoke up, holding out his hand as some sort of apology and peace offer. Because, frankly, he was glad Asa Fox hadn't asked their dad if he knew a hunter named Mary. That… would not have ended well. "If I'd known, I woulda sought you out."

Not that he could have known. He wasn't supposed to find out about Mary Campbell's life before motherhood for another couple of years. But if he'd known… Hell, he would have sought Asa Fox out on reputation alone (screw what John Winchester had to say about associating with other hunters). But Asa knowing Mary? Dean would have hunted him down just for the family connection. Just for the

story.

Asa grinned at him, understanding was clear in those friendly eyes, and he grabbed Dean's offered arm up to the elbow. He clasped it firmly in something the younger hunter recognized easily as comradery. "Bucky and I are on our way out. Middle of a case; just needed Ellen's help. But it's an honor to meet Mary's kids. We should grab a drink another time, trade stories. On me."

Dean couldn't help the grin on his face. They had never, in all their lives, been called *Mary's* kids. Only ever John's boys. Never Mary's.

"Absolutely," Sam offered with a shaky smile, finally releasing his brother's elbow, not that the other two hunters could see it. The Winchesters stepped to the side of the door, letting Asa and Bucky pass by them and head for their car.

"Hey," Asa called back just as the two brothers were about to disappear inside. They turned back to face him and he propped his elbow on the roof of his jeep. "If you two are anything like your mom… Or your dad, than you must be pretty damn good."

Sam exchanged a loaded look with his brother, a look that shared everything that had happened and was going to happen, and Dean's answering smile to the retreating hunter was weaker. "Yeah. We, uh… we do alright."

Bucky was laughing again as he climbed into the passenger seat of the jeep, shaking his head as he yelled something jumbled back but sounded like '*more than alright, if the rumors are true!'* The two Winchesters watched as Asa Fox climbed into the driver's seat and the jeep pulled away, disturbing the dirt and leaving behind a low-hanging cloud.

Dean turned to go back inside and Sam grabbed his arm again. "Mom was a *hunter*?"

"Yeah," the older Winchester answered, an apology clear in his eyes right beside the anguish of that haunted memory from 1973. "The Campbells. Whole family were hunters. Came from a long line of 'em. Hunting's in our blood, Sammy."

Sam released his arm, a worried frown taking over the anger and hurt that had immediately flared up at yet *another* thing his brother had hid from him. But Dean sounded haunted, not secretive, and so Sam followed him into the Roadhouse without further argument. There'd

be time later for all his questions, and he expected his brother to answer them.

-o-o-o-

By the time he slid onto one of the barstools, Dean was back to grinning, brutally shoving down the thoughts of Mary Winchester and her unavoidable fate with the skill of an emotionally challenged champion. Ellen Harvelle stood on the other side of the bar, propped up with an arm against the counter and an unimpressed look on her face at the man sitting in her saloon like he knew – and owned – the place.

"That was Asa Fox!"

The older Winchester couldn't help it, giddiness showing through (and if anyone pointed out that some of it was a little more forced than genuine, they could just fuck off.) Asa Fox was a damn near legend and Dean had been a bit of a fan for a while. Ellen used to tell stories of him all the time. Hell, everyone at the Roadhouse did. And it wasn't just running into something of a hero among the hunting community, it was that Asa knew their *mom*. Mary had gotten him into *hunting*. Asa. The legend. A hunter because of Mary Winchester.

Not even Sam's look – that one with the raised eyebrows and just a hint of embarrassment on his brother's behalf – the one that managed to say *'settle down'* and *'grow up'* all in one breath without ever opening his mouth – could kill his high now.

"Do I know you?"

But Ellen sure could. Her cold voice and hardened eyes, one arm on her hip and the other braced on the bar, smacked the smile right off Dean's face. Sammy came up to the bar just as Dean's expression sank, and then reformed into that terrifying blankness born from a future that hadn't happened yet. Sam bit back a look of sympathy, knowing his brother wouldn't appreciate it. More of his anger dissipated as he was yet again reminded that this wasn't easy on Dean, either. Like his brother had said on more than one occasion, being from the future *sucked*.

"Uh, no," Dean answered with a fake smile stretched so tightly across his lips that it looked painful. "I guess not."

Beside him, Sam cleared his throat, tried for a smile, and took over for his brother, "I'm Sam. This is my brother, Dean."

Ellen's eyes narrowed, but it wasn't suspicion in that almost unreadable gaze, just doubt. She glanced between the two young men, apparently deciding something as she eventually asked, "Winchester?"

Sam straightened, not having expected her to recognize them. Of course, knowing their last name didn't mean she did. Just that she'd heard of them, which he shouldn't find surprising. Dean had said her and Dad had been close at one time.

"You John's boys?" she followed up before either of them could answer her first question. They didn't really need to, though. It had practically been rhetorical. When the brothers just shared a look and Sam nodded with a weak *'yeah'*, her entire demeanor shifted. Gone was the harried, hardened bar owner used to strangers and trouble. A smile – wide and genuine and charming – overtook her face and she dropped her arm from the counter, likely right above where a shotgun was stored beneath the bar. "Son of a bitch."

Dean's smile was a little less tight, but only a little. So Sam tried to make up for it, though he wasn't exactly on even footing here. The fact that they couldn't screw this up, because they were supposed to befriend her, was not exactly helping. He'd never experienced meeting someone he sort of knew, if only through stories told by his brother, but which he knew he'd know eventually. Which, really, kinda threw you off your game. It was hard to act normal when the situation wasn't normal. Of course, by not acting normal, he or Dean could totally change how their entire friendship with this woman went. What would happen if they got off on the wrong foot? Or Sam said the wrong thing? Or nothing at all, which was the current event unfolding *right now.* All scenarios that could have completely unpredictable and possibly disastrous consequences for the future. Because he wanted to be friends with someone he didn't know, but knew he wanted to know, and already knew too much about to act one hundred percent like he didn't, but he needed to, and that was entirely the problem.

God, this was just meeting one woman. How had Dean *done* this for the last eight months?

"I'm Ellen," she said in the weird silence that had followed her abrupt change in stance and welcoming. She glanced between the two boys even as Sam cleared his throat with a jolt and nodded back at her. At least she was still smiling.

"I'm Sam," he said in response before wincing almost immediately.

He'd already *said* that.

"Don't mind my brother," Dean said with a snort and a conspiratorial grin that was suddenly so much more believable than it had been a minute ago. Like Dean had just stowed all his crap and carried on. Sam refused to think about how intimidating his brother's proficiency at that really was. "He's a little star struck, running into Asa like that."

Sam choked and whipped his head at his brother with The Ultimate of bitchfaces (unnumbered, for it was *Ultimate*). "Me? I'm not the one tripping over his own-"

The younger Winchester blinked at Dean's open grin, realizing mid-sentence what his older brother had just done. Sam blushed slightly in embarrassment, but also relief, as he realized how easily he had fallen back into that realm of normal he'd been almost panicking to achieve a second ago. How easily Dean had pushed him back there. Because his big brother had seen the mounting panic and did what the older Winchester had done his entire life: watch out for Sammy.

Ellen was laughing, wiping her hands on a bar rag. Sam spared Dean a thankful, if not still bitchy, face and the jerk just winked at him. "Yeah, Asa's something else, alright."

"Was it really five wendigos?" Dean asked, maybe a little too eagerly, as Ellen raised an eyebrow at him and Sam snorted, muttering about who the real fanboy was. Dean kicked his shin without ever taking his eyes off the bartender, whose amusement only grew.

"You'd have to ask him that," she answered, which, damnit, is how she had always answered any time Dean asked, usually after one of the more outrageous tales of the man came up. The older Winchester managed not to pout only because Dean Winchester did not pout (and yes, he was sticking to that story, thank you very much.)

"So what can I do for you boys?" Ellen braced both hands against the bar in a far more open and friendly stance then before, a completely different woman than five minutes ago. And yeah, one Sam could definitely see them striking up a friendship with. "Did John send you?"

It was probably the silence that tipped her off. Or maybe the way that neither of the two boys quite met her eye, despite it looking like they both tried. But Dean dropped his head, for however briefly, and Sam looked away, if only for a second.

Ellen fell silent and dropped her arms from the counter, straightening

unconsciously as she tensed for bad news. She stared at each of them, not wanting to believe it. "He didn't send you…"

Dean cleared his throat, though it was a strangled thing. "No."

It looked like he was going to say more, but when nothing came out, Ellen wanted to believe it even less. "Well… he's alright, isn't he?"

Sam chanced a glance at his brother, but the older Winchester was warring a battle in his head that he wasn't easily winning. Sam knew if there was one thing crippling to Dean, it was guilt. And God knew his brother was swimming in enough of it right now, no matter how many life preservers his family threw his way or how strong he was at swimming.

"No," Sam spoke up instead, eyes still lingering on his brother, who shot him an uncertain, but thankful look, before the taller Winchester turned a grieving – albeit strong – gaze back on Ellen. "No, he isn't."

Ellen looked…stunned. The kind of stunned that was completely understandable. John was a legend in his own way. A more terrifying, boogyman sort of legend than someone like Asa. The kind of dark knight that other hunters avoided tangling with, but still a hero of sorts. The kind that seemed immortal. John had been so strong, had survived so much and taken down even more, for so long… well, even Sam was still having trouble believing he was gone. That he could be taken down.

"I'm so sorry," Ellen offered, lips drawn tight but expression sincere. "Was it the demon?"

She looked immediately regretful to have asked it, expression clearly kicking herself, but she didn't take it back. Didn't tell them not to answer. Just stood there, hand back on her hip, no pity there. Sam kind of appreciated it.

"Yeah," Dean answered, fiddling with one of those cardstock coasters. He'd snagged it off the bar, needing something to do with his hands. "Guess it just got him before he got it."

The words sounded rehearsed to Sam's ears, and he wondered if Dean was trying to stick to a script formed from their first – their other first – meeting here.

"I know how close you were with your dad-" Ellen started, but Dean cut her off before she could continue on that topic, which was still a

no-go even ten years later.

"It's alright," he said quickly, a forced smile spread across his lips. "We're okay."

Ellen hesitated for a moment more, the decision to call bullshit or not was pretty clear in her face, before she nodded. She knew the drill of fallen comrades and friends. They'd all been there, after all.

"Well, if there's anything you boys need…" She left the offer open, which got her a nod and a shaky smile in return. But her expression pinched as she thought a little further down that rabbit hole. "How did you know to come here if John didn't send you?"

"We heard your voicemail." Sam caught her gaze as he slid onto the stool next to his brother. The further furl in the bartender's brow said she wasn't quite following. "On dad's phone."

Her surprise when she realized what they were talking about was endearing, really. "That was months ago."

"Yeah." Dean's voice was a little rougher, but his smile more real. "Think we both know he wouldn't have taken you up on the offer but… He kept it cuz I think it meant something to him all the same."

Her eyes swam, a very not-Ellen thing to do, and yet also so much the woman he remembered that Dean's stomach did some weird flipping thing that was usually reserved for that warmth in his chest. She blinked to ward off the building water, looking up and off to the side in an attempt to disperse the lingering emotions. With a light sniff and a watery smile, she turned back to them.

"Yeah. Yeah, we weren't always on great terms, your daddy and I, but… I would have helped, if he'd have ever let me."

Which they all knew he never would have.

"How?" Sam asked, somewhat abruptly. "I mean, I'm assuming you're a hunter, but-"

"Oh, I just run a saloon," Ellen corrected, hands raised way too modestly. Dean had seen this woman fight. She was absolutely a hunter, through and through. "But hunters and the like have been known to pass through now and again."

She tossed her head towards the back of the bar, where Sam spotted a

door with a dartboard hanging on the back of it. "I won't be much help against a demon, but Ash might." She huffed something that was probably closer to a snort than a laugh. "Whenever he wakes up."

Dean straightened in his seat because, holy shit, he'd almost forgotten all about that mulleted genius who had first helped them crack dad's research. Who had led them to Fossil Butte Cemetery and the Hell Gate.

…Who had died for that knowledge.

"Jo!"

Both boys jumped at Ellen's sudden holler, aimed over her shoulder at that same door. It slid open a minute later and a blonde head popped through, slim fingers wrapped around the edge of the darkly painted wood.

"Yeah, mom?"

Dean could only stare. Stare at that beautiful, young woman – just a kid, really, damn it – whose skin was filled with color and life, not drained of it – grey – as she bled out, splattered in blood, her own insides on the outside, lifeless in a forgotten hardware store-

He looked away, pretty sure he was going to throw up.

"Get Ash vertical, would you?" Ellen smiled at her daughter, who glanced at the two strangers next to her with a hint of wariness. "Got some folks he should meet."

"Sure thing." She disappeared back behind the door, which settled closed in her absence.

Ellen turned back to the boys. "He wandered in a couple months ago-" she paused with a sudden thought, blinking- "Hell, that was almost half a year ago now. Damn. Anyway, he isn't exactly a hunter, but he's scrappy. And-" she glanced between the two boys- "he's a genius."

-o-o-o-

The next time Ellen turned her back – dipping beneath the bar to snag a large container of pretzels – Sam snuck in a glance to his brother. The name had come up in some of Dean's stories, but they'd been more about the crazy, mulleted guy at the Roadhouse than anything actually helpful. And he hadn't mentioned that he was who Ellen had

been calling their dad about. Which left Sam wondering what the heck they could get form a 'scrappy genius' in a back-road dive bar for hunters.

Dean just gave him this sort of apologetic shrug that said *'Later, Sammy'* like he always did.

"What kind of genius?" he asked, curiosity winning out over patience. Dean might already know the answer, but asking would get it faster for Sam. Besides, there was an element of control – like being able to determine his own future – that came with not waiting for his brother to supply him with every answer he could ask for. And Sam craved that control more than he wanted to admit.

Plus, asking would only help them with their whole 'we're-not-from-the-future-we're-just-a-couple-of-normal-hunting-brothers-who've-never-met-this-Ash-man-before-just-perfectly-normal-boys-right-here-yeppers' cover.

"You'll see," the woman answered with a smirk, just as the back door opened and Jo walked back in.

"Well, he's awake," she said as she crossed over to them, coming to a stop a few feet away from the boys. She settled her hands on her hips, the spitting image of her mother, and jutted her chin their way. "Who are these guys?"

The words were sharp; no-nonsense and not planning on putting up with any either. *Spitting image of her mother.* It made Dean grin like an idiot, which only got him a raised eyebrow and a caustic glance up and down his body. Jo looked utterly impressed, a hint of *'in your dream's, buddy'* painted across her sarcastic eyebrows, and Dean could only grin all the wider for it. Cas should be proud; that was pretty much the same as the first time, right? Score one for sticking to the timeline.

"These are John Winchester's boys." Ellen came around the edge of the bar to join them a little more informally. She set the pretzels aside for later, wiping her hands on her daughter's apron, tied low around the young woman's waist. Jo gave her a scandalized glare, even as her mother nodded to each of the boys in turn and introduced them as Sam and Dean.

"It's nice to meet you." Sam was up and off the stool, extending his hand to her, which got him a look as sarcastically incredulous as they came. A real *'are you kidding me?'* and Dean was gonna need a crowbar

to unhinge his jaw if his smile got any bigger. He couldn't help it. Damn, he'd missed this little lady.

Jo shook the younger Winchester's hand anyway, that look morphing into a wicked grin that Sam just knew was making fun of him even more than the sarcastic one. When she turned that sharp look Dean's way, he just stuck to a little two-fingered salute and Jo went back to looking unimpressed. Amused, but oh-so unimpressed.

Right on timeline, then. Score numero dos.

"What do they want with Ash?" She directed the question at her mother, and Sam shot Dean a little look that had his brother rolling his eyes.

He knew that look. That was the look that said *'you didn't tell me she was exactly your type.'* The one that was usually followed up by a wry little *'How 'friendly' is this friend of yours, huh, Dean?'* The less-than-scandalized-no-matter-how-hard-he-argued-he-was little brother looking for blackmail and humiliation ammo because he had fallen behind by about ten years.

Dean just glared back.

Truth was, he could absolutely feel that stirring of long-buried emotion at the sight of her. Jo had been different. A hunter, so he hadn't had to worry about the problems he'd had with Cassie. A badass, both with a gun and a sharp-witted tongue, which had never failed to turn him on like no other. Not to mention she was gorgeous, in a rugged, hardened way that Dean appreciated almost more than soft skin and gentle curves. A warrior, through and through, with the kind of body he wanted to sweep right off the floor and pin to a wall, those strong thighs wrapped around him and blonde hair tangled in his fingers.

Despite the obvious attraction between them, though, it had just never…triggered. Never lined up right. Dean had deeply rooted affection for Jo, there was no denying that. It was a love of sorts, for sure, but not the kind that evolved into more. They'd sort of tried, on occasion, but they misfired every time, on or both of them. Always the wrong place, wrong time.

And after… Well, after, there had just been too much guilt. Regret for ever getting her or her mother involved in their lives, their problems. Terrible grief for the terrible end they met. Overwhelming shame that it should have been him in their place. That feeling of star-crossed

lovers, never quite meeting up, had faded into a distant fondness instead of heat. A memory of love lost in that idealized way that softened hard edges and painted everything a little more rose-colored.

Now, though…. While Dean couldn't deny the return of many of those distant feelings, nor the swell of warmth and *family* building within him at the mere sight of Jo giving him that wicked smile, he knew he couldn't, still. Even if he was back in the body of a youthful (*translation: horny as all get out)* twenty-seven year old, in mind and spirit and everything that really should count but absolutely didn't, Dean was almost pushing forty and he knew it. No matter the form he'd come back in, he was damn near twenty years older than Jo Harvelle now, and that was just…skeevy.

And Dean Winchester was not skeevy. It was a primary goal in Dean's life to never, ever have anything in common with witches, including adjectives. And *witches* were skeevy. So nope. Nuh-uh. No way. Dean Winchester might not be classy, he sure as hell wasn't skeevy.

Which meant that, while he could grin and appreciate that second glance up and down his body Jo was currently giving him even as Ellen talked about their mutual mulleted MIT mutt, Dean could not pursue that avenue this time around with anything more than the fondness of a big brother or a badass buddy.

Admittedly, it was going to take a hell of talking-to to get his receptive, stupidly horny body on the same page as his forty-something, dating-twenty-year-olds-is-just-plain-wrong brain. He'd have to, uh, work on that.

Sam's kick to his shin brought him back to the conversation, only to find Jo now openly smirking at him and he cleared his throat. Ellen was staring at him expectantly. The motherly kind of expectant. The badass, boy-I-can-kill-you-with-that-container-of-pretzels-if-you-look-at-my-daughter-wrong-again kind of mother. Dean swallowed a little loudly and offered a weak grin.

"Think Ash will be able to make heads or tails of dad's research?" he asked, forcing that smile through and completely falling back on the beauty that was being from the future and knowing what conversations were likely about if only because he'd lived through them once before and not because he'd actually been listening.

More than covering his own ass and not getting on the receiving end of Ellen's terrifying ire, getting Ash on their dad's research again was a

good idea. Even if Dean knew what the crazy dude would find and where it would lead. It would not only keep the timeline close to the original, but Ash had been able to track Azazel. That was something they should probably have on hand again, especially if they started running into changes in the timeline.

Of course, it had been that research that got Ash – and others at the Roadhouse – killed. Maybe this was one of those things they should be changing. And gee, wouldn't it be nice to have an expert in time travel – like an *angel* – around to talk this over with. Dean fought down the urge to grumble and wallow about that, and instead decided, worst case, if it came down to it he could always warn Ellen and Ash about the Roadhouse attack closer to the actual date.

It was a compromise he wasn't thrilled about, but maybe it would satisfy the stupid timeline and its stupid having-to-stay-the-same stupidness.

Ellen's eyes stayed narrowed on him for only another moment before she offered a shrug. What Ash could and couldn't do was a mystery to all. The back door opened just then, admitting the one and only genius, in all his business up front, party in the back glory.

"What can I do for you, amigos?" he asked, sauntering up to the bar in what might be more leftover drunkenness than intentional swagger. Ellen reached over the bar to the soda hose, snagging a glass and filling it with something clear and bubbly – club soda? – then handed it back to Ash. He accepted it with a flourished brush of his long brown hair over one shoulder and an exaggerated wink in her direction.

Jo just rolled her eyes, hands back on her hips.

"We've got some research you might be interested in," Dean answered, glancing at Sam to see his younger brother following along with ease considering they hadn't exactly talked about this before coming here (his bad, he'd work on that too).

"What kind of 'research'?" The finger quotes were really less effective with just one hand, the other busy tipping the glass back as Ash drained almost the entire thing in one long go. The ladies looked amused. Dean remembered how crazy this guy was. Sam just stared. Ash lowered the glass with another head toss. "Ah. That's better. Thank you, mamacita."

"Call me that again and I'll dump the next one over your head," Ellen

answered back easily enough, taking the glass from him and setting it back behind the bar.

"He could use the shower," Jo snorted from beside her mother and Ash favored her with a squished up face.

Sam cleared his throat, unsure if he should be getting them back on topic or not. "It's our dad's research. Weather patterns, crop and animal mutilation. Omens. He was tracking a demon with it. The… uh…" The brothers shared a look. "The one that killed out mom. And… and him."

Ash turned squinting eyes to the sasquatch, face screwed up in something like a raspberry, before he nodded and his features smoothed back out. This guy was crazy. "Condolences for your loss, my friend. Let's look at that research and see what you got."

Sam raised his eyebrows in surprise, but Dean was already up and off the stool, heading out to the Impala to grab the thick file that had gone into her trunk after they'd rebuilt her, along with anything else useful their father had on him or in his old pickup.

As he passed over the folder to a maybe-finally-sobering Ash, Dean repeatedly told himself (little good it did him) that he wasn't handing the man his death sentence.

-o-o-o-

Ash really was a genius, even more than Dean remembered. And just about as crazy, too, something Dean had sort of figured had become exaggerated in his memories over the years. But nope. Not so much. Dude was off his rocker, but he tackled their dad's research with the same gusto he had last time. First with amazement that anyone had tracked a demon this way with just a human brain and ridiculous amounts of research, and then excitement at the possibilities it presented when paired with his genius tech. He told them he'd have something in fifty one hours – which sounded familiar to Dean – and disappeared back through that door with his suped-up laptop.

They didn't need to hang around for his conclusion this time. Dean knew Ash would set up a brilliant tracker program for the omens and weather patterns his dad had been able to identify. However, he also knew that program wouldn't turn anything up immediately, and when it did the Roadhouse could just give them a call. So, as Ash disappeared into the back, muttering about non-parametrics, statistical overviews, and blah-blah-blah, Sam and Dean discussed

their next move. They could return to Bobby's – check in on Angela – but, as Sam reminded him, they needed to get back on the road at some point. The family business called, as did Azazel's condition to Jess's safety, and Castiel had told them to stick as close to ordinary as possible, which meant hunting.

Speaking of hunts, Dean slid back onto the stool in front of Ellen, who had gone back to the chores of owning a bar, washing the counter down once Ash was busy with the Winchester's. Jo had been sent off to the store on a supply run, so Dean drummed his fingers along the wooden top until the bar owner spared him a look that said, clear as day, *'What do you want?'*

"You boys heading out?" she asked instead, though that look didn't diminish and Dean was back to grinning again. Damn, he'd missed the Harvelles.

"Soon. We figure Ash can call us if he finds anything." Dean glanced over his shoulder at Sam, who wandered back over to them now that Ash had taken himself into seclusion. The older Winchester resisted making fun of how put out Sam had looked the minute their mulleted friend disappeared, taking his tech toys with him. "But first, there's something I gotta tell you, and you're not gonna believe me."

Both Ellen and his brother frowned at that, Sam glancing at him sidelong, trying to be subtle about it, and the bar owner outright staring.

"Because it's going to sound crazy," Dean continued, spreading his hands out in front of him on the bar. Sam came up beside him, now opening eyeing him with wariness – likely thinking he was about to drop the time traveling bomb – and Ellen just propped herself up on one arm, other hand securely at her hip in every mother's *Oh-here-we-go* pose. "But in a month or two, I'm gonna be proven right."

Ellen huffed something of a laugh, eyebrow raised in that patented Harvelle skepticism. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Dean answered, trying and failing not to return the Harelle look with the Winchester smirk. It was instinctual. Couldn't be overridden. "See, this carnival is gonna come to town. May be a county or two over, but you'll hear about it. It'll have a clown."

At this point, Ellen wasn't managing to hide her amusement any better than Dean. He could practically see the snarky, *'Really, kid? A carnival with a* clown*? You're shitting me.'*

Dean couldn't help but think, *'Hold onto your butts*,' in Samuel Jackson's voice, which then immediately switched over to a Jokered-up Heath Ledger because, *'Here…we…go.'*

(Plus, the whole, you know, *clown* angle.)

"He's gonna kill some people."

Ellen's expression shifted almost immediately. First it was surprise – probably not the ending to that little story she'd been expecting – and then quickly suspicion, which was kind of valid. You didn't just tell a hunter that a hunt – a ridiculous hunt that no one had ever heard of before – was going to roll into town, and not include *how* you knew that.

Sam, meanwhile, knew the *how* and was busy standing ramrod straight, with eyes way too wide even as he fought to hide the obvious reaction. Dean would have busted out laughing at his poor, coulrophobic kid brother if Ellen wasn't right there with them and he was actually (mostly) serious about this.

"A killer clown?" the woman repeated, the skepticism on her face losing some of the sarcastic edge and falling more into incredulity. She wasn't sure if Dean was joking or not anymore, but she was probably hoping he was making it up. Hell, he knew Sam was sure as shit hoping for that.

"Yup. Killer clown."

Ellen was still regarding him uncertainly. "And how exactly do you know where it's gonna be?"

Dean opened his mouth and gave his most winning smile. "Because I'm psychic."

Beside him, Sam snorted in that way that suggested if he'd been drinking something just then, Dean would have been getting a shower.

"For real," he insisted as Ellen's thoughts clearly shifted towards this being a joke. One she wasn't particularly amused at as she eyed Sam, who was recovering. "Ask my brother."

She was, with intimidating mom eyes. And given the way that unamused look slid into unimpressed, she wasn't going for it.

"Oh," Sam breathed out once he could, you know, actually breathe

again, "he's something, alright."

"Hey!" Dean sent a glare lacking any heat at the Samsquatch, and turned back to Ellen. "Don't listen to him; he's psychic too."

Sam was now eyeing him more than just warily, like he really wasn't sure they should be telling people this. It was one thing to play off Dean's future knowledge as a gift. Hunters used psychics all the time. But Sam's powers weren't natural; they came from the kind of source that a hunter would see as needing a shallow grave.

Dean didn't look worried though, still smiling at Ellen, who eyed the two of them warily now as well.

"If he's psychic, why didn't he know about the clown?"

Oh yeah, she'd noticed his little freak out as easily as Dean had, and Sam flushed a little. All six and a half feet of him fidgeting like a chastised child. He just didn't like clowns, alright? *Lots* of people didn't like clowns. It was normal!

Despite Dean making fun of the kid (which he would not be stopping anytime soon), even the older Winchester could admit a fear of clowns wasn't entirely unhealthy. At least, not when considering that a killer one was about to roll into town. And they would run into at least two more murderous types again in the future. Including ones that exploded into glitter of all things. Yeah, that case had been *real* fun.

"Oh, Sammy doesn't see the same stuff I see," Dean answered easily enough, having already prepared for all of this. He probably should have told his brother what that cover story would be, but he couldn't help it; the kids face when Dean mentioned the clown had been totally worth it.

The man from the future leaned into the bar, hunching his shoulders and maintaining a conspiratorial gaze with Ellen. She met him, play for play (still not sure this wasn't a joke), and leaned into the counter as well, as if the two were about to share some secret.

"He see's dead people," Dean whispered loudly. Beside him, Sam rolled his eyes. Well, at least if they were gonna spill that secret, of *course* his brother would make a joke and a movie reference out of it in one breath.

Ellen didn't pull back, but she did send a quick glance Sam's way, still playing along, though it was obvious she still wasn't sure if this was

all a joke or not. It looked like she was starting to realize it really wasn't.

"Don't we all," she said, leaning a little closer to whisper back, "They're called *ghosts*."

Oh, yeah. This was definitely where Jo got it from. Like mother like daughter for sure with these two.

Sam finally gave up, letting out a lengthy, resigned sigh. "I get death premonitions."

Ellen finally straightened back up, regarding the brother that seemed less likely to be pranking her. She'd suspected Dean wasn't kidding, but the kid didn't exactly help much with the conviction bit of it. But Sam… Sam wasn't joking. She could tell in the way he wasn't really meeting her eyes, but kept darting back to her, worried. He was self-conscious about this – and she could figure out why easily enough – and probably hadn't wanted to tell her. She glanced at Dean, wondering if the older Winchester had given his brother a choice in the matter.

"You're serious," she said, making sure to keep her voice even. She might be a hunter, but she wasn't particularly quick to judge that line that made up black and white. "You'd think John woulda mentioned you two were gifted."

Dean huffed. She didn't believe them, if that was her go-to response.

"Really?" Sam asked suddenly, finally staring at her. "You think John Winchester would admit to anyone, let alone a hunter, about his freak son?"

"You're not a freak." Dean bit it out so quickly, so damn fiercely, that it surprised all three of them. Dean dropped his eyes to the bar top, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from saying more. Not after he just told Ellen they were *both* psychics, which should really mean they were both freaks.

Fuck, this probably wasn't going so well.

Sam's slip up with the singular form and not the plural might not have helped. Though, it wasn't untrue, either. Even if they went with this little play-pretend where Dean was psychic and more willing to embrace that 'gift' (he fucking wasn't, being from the future *sucked*), Sam, though… Sam had thought he was a freak. Still did, Dean

realized with a dry throat and a spike of pain in his chest. Sam wasn't spinning some cover story. This was pure Sam Winchester. No lie, no story.

The worst part was, he wasn't wrong.

John Winchester never told anyone – even Dean – about Sam, about his powers or where they came from. He never would have said a word. Hadn't, even on his death bed, not really. No. John Winchester would have found a cure or he would have killed Sam himself. That's what John Winchester would have done, and Ellen, hard eyes trying to hide the emotion beneath – the one formed from personal experience of just what lengths John would go to – knew it too.

Her expression smoothed out, likely unable to stand in front of a kid clearly hurting so badly at his own father not understanding – not tolerating – what made him different. What made him special. As a mother – as a *damn good mother* – Ellen couldn't stand for it, let alone indulge it.

"No one's calling anyone a freak," she offered, voice still carefully even, though she nodded once at Sam. The beanstalk of a Winchester almost sagged. He probably hadn't even realized how tense he had become. His fingers unfurled from fists he hadn't even known he was clenching. The tendons ached, and he flexed them outward. She watched him for a moment more as he visibly relaxed, her expression a carefully maintained neutrality. "Just surprised, is all. Hard to believe."

Dean cracked that Winchester smile out again. Surprise he could work with. "You don't gotta believe it. Just call us in a couple of months when a kill clown case shows up on your doorstep."

She still looked at him like he was crazy – that or he was absolutely terrible at practical joking – but the sound of a car door slamming out in the parking lot outside signaled the return of Jo, or a customer or hunter, and so the topic dropped.

-o-o-o-

Five and a half weeks later, a contact of Ellen's and a regular at the Roadhouse walked through the door with a manila folder in hand, red sharpie scribbled across the outside. He set it down on the bar, ordered a drink, got to talking, and eventually pushed it the bartender's way. Reading the scrawl across the top was enough to make Ellen's breath hitch in surprise, but the information inside had

her actually shaking her head. There was a wry little smile on her lips that definitely made her contact look at her all sorts of funny as she stared down at a hunt that was anything but humorous.

"Son of a bitch. He was telling the truth," she muttered to herself, closing the file and all but looking heavenward to avoid rolling her eyes. "Unbelievable."

Saluting her contact with the folder and promising to have someone look into it, Ellen dug out her phone and went looking for Dean Winchester's number. When he picked up on the third ring, she couldn't have kept the smirk or the disbelief out of her voice if she'd tried.

"So. Psychic, huh?"

Chapter End Notes

Asa Fox: It has been my goal since season 12 came out to slot Asa Fox into this story, alive, somewhere. My original idea was the boys joining Bobby in attending a hunter's funeral for Garth with Asa being there. However, it didn't fit with the somber mode I had pegged (I thought about a deleted scene, but it would have been a long one and I haven't had the time). So I managed it here :) And yes, if this story had featured Season12!Dean and not Season11!Dean, he absolutely woulda pulled Asa to the side and told him to keep an eye on that 'best friend' of his.

Ellen and Jo: I know there wasn't much Jo in this chapter, but I'm working them into the story a lot like they worked them into the show. Slowly! Introductions first, and we'll go from there. I promise, we'll be seeing plenty of the Harvelles in the future :)

Update News: Okay, so I have good news and bad news. Good news: next chapter is also a long one! Bad news: I am actually going back to my favorite internet-less vacation spot on only-the-most-beautiful-lake-in-da-world next week (which I snuck into this story a long time ago. Gave it a little cameo description when I realized the boys were actually going to drive right by it. Bonus points if anyone can spot it! Kinda stalkery bonus points actually... Hmmmm...). Anyhoo, in conclusion, I likely won't be able to post next weekend. Apologies once again and thank you for hanging with me and being patient!

Up Next: Back to the good news. The next chapter is jam-packed with SO MUCH STUFF. Including, but not limited to, Chuck, the

bunker key, our mystery green-eyed woman, demon blood, Azazel being a creepy mcCreeper, poor Sammy getting the exact opposite of a feel-good dream visit from his guardian demon, and a FREE TOASTER!

…Okay, the toaster may have been an exaggeration (aren't they always).

Reviews: Alright guys. I know the two week delay is going to suck (again) but please drop a line anyway! I prefer to warn you when delays are coming rather than you guys not know why an update didn't happen, but I also know it hurts reviews, and I do love reviews, as you all well know by now. Hearing from you guys makes me all warm and fuzzy like having a little chest!Cas of my own. So bring on those fuzzy-warm-girly-hair-braiding-slumber-party-emotions-that-aren't-quite-mine-but-definitely-make-me-feel-good-and-are-possibly-homo-erotic-but-lets-not-get-into-that!

…Wait, what? I think I lost my point somewhere in there…

Chapter 53: Season 2: Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Early Post! Yeeeah, that's right, I couldn't handle another two week gap either so I'm posting super early before I go off on my trip. I can't help it; I'm excited about this chapter. It's jam packed with lots of not-niceness (my favorite! Say it with me: No good...dirty rotten...)

Reviews: I have not had time to answer reviews or most PMs in about three chapters now, and I am so sorry for that. I'll be trying to catch up in the next week or so. Feel free to bug me further if you feel I've forgotten you. I really do enjoy talking with you guys, so pester me all you want until I reply.

Chapter Warnings: There's so much going on in this chapter. Bobby and the boys are back together, the former proves he's a badass researcher, the latter's looking for a case and making coffee, Bobby's finding (and losing) things that shouldn't even exist, Chuck's cursing Singers now too, and Sam's having a little trouble sleeping. Oh. And maybe Cas shows up? So. Much. Happening.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Chapter 20

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

In the six weeks it took Ellen's contact to walk into the Roadhouse, the boy's got back on the road and tackled several hunts, most of them mundane. They started by returning to Bobby's; they'd left pretty abruptly with some of their less necessary gear still back at the older hunter's house, and, oh yeah, a braindead human being that was their responsibility.

Bobby greeted them with his usual raised brows and gruff that each of the Winchester boys could read easily enough as a *'welcome home'* of sorts. They'd kept him at least somewhat up to date on the Elkins case, but had neglected to call about the Roadhouse or Ellen. They filled him in while they ate burgers that the boys had picked up on their way in. The older hunter hadn't been up to much. Checked in on their

girl a couple of times, kept up the search for their mystery green-eyed woman, and ran research and interference for a few hunters. For now, it seemed quiet on the apocalypse front, which Dean wasn't all that surprised about.

He knew they had roughly a year until the next big crisis. Since that crisis was Sam's death, just thinking about it turned the delicious burger in his mouth to ash and dread. Dean swallowed it down forcefully and shoved the thoughts away. They had a year to figure it out.

Both Dean and Sam checked in on Angela, who was breathing away, oblivious to the world (or so they hoped. They hadn't actually asked Cas what would happen to the woman's soul back in that comatose state. Hopefully she wasn't just trapped in there, aware but unable to move. When Dean first threw the question out there, a nervous little laugh tacked on to the end as he stared at Sam for answers the kid didn't have, it bothered the kindhearted Winchester. It bothered him enough that over the course of the day he found himself sitting bedside by the braindead woman, reading his research on Canaanite culture aloud, just in case she was in there and could hear them. When Dean caught him doing it, standing in the doorway staring with something a little sad and a lot unfortunate painted across his face, neither of them said a word.

The next morning, Dean stopped in again to check on her (he'd actually checked in the middle of the night too. Housing a body on a ventilator was creepy. And nerve-wracking). He awkwardly said good morning to the unconscious woman, then fumbled because that just felt damn weird to say to an otherwise empty room. His recovery – stumbling through some sort of something (and yeah, looking back, he had no idea what he said) – didn't go much better, leading to him lingering for just a little too long to watch her chest rise and fall with residual anxiety. Eventually he left the room, feeling both paranoid and like a voyeuristic creep.

Awesome, just what he needed. Being responsible for a human's life with zero to little control over the thing keeping that human alive was friggin' stressful. And sucked.

Dean headed back downstairs for some grub and coffee, scrubbing at his face and deciding that those feelings, like all the others, could be dealt with later. Sam was already down there (morning people, man. They were the real freaks), flipping through the newspaper with his laptop, a couple open books, and an empty plate spread around him.

There was half eaten bagel with a (pathetically) light spread of cream cheese in his hand. Knowing Sam, it hadn't actually made it to his mouth anytime in the last fifteen minutes. God, it made Dean's eyes hurt just to look at; that was way too much research way too early in the morning on way too little sustenance.

"Find us a case?" he asked as he crossed the kitchen with one goal in mind: coffee. He reached the life-giving pot of steaming, liquid gold and rooted around in Bobby's upper cabinets for a mug. He gestured Sam's way once he found one, but the kid shook his head, setting what was left of his breakfast back on the plate and lifting a glass of orange juice for a sip instead. (A morning person with *juice*. His brother was beyond saving, now.)

"A couple potentials," he answered when he was done with the OJ. The kid lowered the newspaper to lie across the table, a few articles, most of them small, circled in red sharpie, like he was job hunting. In a way, Dean figured they were. "A language professor at Princeton went missing from his office. Turned up in Wyoming a week later, dead."

"Our kinda thing?"

"Maybe," Sam offered with a shrug of his ridiculously broad shoulders. "The death was pretty nasty."

Dean leaned over his brother's shoulder while pouring the contents of the coffee pot into his mug to look at the circled article, a little larger than the others, complete with a picture of the guy. He looked normal enough. Pretty stereotypical higher-education professor with large circular glasses, an ugly sweater, and greying hair. The death could have been something supernatural – one of the larger quotes on the page said the wife was adamant it was foul play – but it wouldn't be the first time the boys had run into some old dude tired of his lady, sneaking off cleverly to find some younger, hotter piece. Those types usually weren't far off from a violent death, either by a pissed off boyfriend or brother, or a vengeful wife.

"How nasty?"

Sam cleared his throat, an awkward, tight-lipped smile on his face that Dean knew well. Okay, apparently *really* nasty. "They, uh, found his tongue shoved where the 'sun don't shine.'"

Dean pulled his head back with a scrunched up face. It was pretty much the same face Sam had made when he'd first read it. "Aw, ew,

man. Come on, I haven't even had coffee yet."

"You asked."

"They put that in the newspaper?" Dean did a full body shiver and made another face, trying to wash the image out of his mind with scolding hot coffee. It…sort of worked. Okay, not really.

"God no," Sam chuckled, shaking his head. "The article was missing just enough of the right words. So I hacked the coroner's office for the report. It's uh… It's not pretty."

Dean leaned over his brother's shoulder again – already knowing he shouldn't, brain yelling at him not to, but curiosity was a bitch – and made another gagging sound at the picture on the kid's screen, a report next to it. "Jesus. You were eating looking at that?!"

Sam just rolled his eyes and minimized the photo (like it had been for most of the morning and certainly his entire meal, thank you very much). "It may not be our kind of case. The kill was excessive, but nothing else suggests supernatural involvement."

The disappearance was the most intriguing part of the case, and the only part weird enough for them to even look into it. Security cameras on campus showed Dr. Charles Mann entering his office at 8:12pm last Thursday, a room on the fifth floor of the language building with only the one door and no fire escape. The man never came back out and his wife reported him missing the following morning. But there could be plenty of normal explanations for that, too. Not to mention, a week was more than enough time to end up halfway across the country and there were a million ways someone sneaking away from his family could get end up murdered. Plus, a language professor with his tongue… uh, well, cut off, sounded like a message. Those usually came from revenge-driven people, not monsters.

Dean was idly thinking of the first time they'd run into Loki. That sounded like his sort of just desserts, and it had been a college campus the first time they'd bumped into him. But Dean was pretty sure that was the wrong tree for barking. Loki wasn't usually violent. Well, that wasn't really true, Dean thought with a slight wince. Sam's nuts would certainly disagree, as would Cas's face from wherever Gabe had sent him in that nightmare TV Land. And murdering a professor by pushing him out a window on the top floor of a school building had been what first drew them to Loki's playground.

Crap.

The man from the future took another look at the professor's photo. Honestly, it probably wasn't Gabriel. That death was really excessive, and not exactly in the category of trickster behavior. And yeah, Dean may be hedging, but truth was, if it wasLoki, they should probably run the exact opposite direction anyway. Gabriel was going to be nothing but trouble for them until they could convince him to join their side, and Dean had no idea how he was going to do that this time around.

Until he did, he'd really rather not spend a couple hundred Tuesdays dying.

"Could be a normal psycho," Dean offered instead. They'd run into their fair share of normal, murderous psychopaths and serial killers in their time as hunters, after all. Or, at least, they would.

"Sure," Sam supposed. "As normal as a psycho can be."

His brother snorted and went back to his coffee and cooking up what sounded like eggs and bacon. "What else you got?"

Sam listed off a couple more, including what was probably a ghost in Iowa that sparked a flicker of déjà vu for Dean. He said as much and Sam agreed it was worth checking out. The college dude's death didn't sound familiar – Dean definitely would have remembered details like that – and if it was Loki, then they weren't going anyway.

So they agreed to head east to check out a potential ghost. Dean didn't mention Loki, since he was pretty sure it wasn't him, and Sam seemed agreeable enough to let the professor case go so Dean didn't have to. As he was mentally routing out the quickest drive and Sam folded up the newspaper, Bobby came in from the study, where he'd been sprawled out at his desk nose deep in about six different books of his own, feet propped up and coffee cup almost empty.

He tossed one of those books on the table in front of Sam, mug in hand, and kept moving further into the kitchen for the last of the brew. Dean raised his eyebrows at his brother, even as Sam picked up the heavy book. All it took was a single passage – the layout of only one page – for Sam to recognize what he was reading. The kid cast an incredulous look over his shoulder at Bobby, who'd turned back their way as he stirred up the sugar cube he'd dropped into the black, steaming liquid. When the hunter's expression remained neutral – not a joke – Sam looked back at the King James Bible he was holding.

Dean, curious what the two of them were going on about silently, leaned over his brother's shoulder. His eyebrows went straight up at

the passage the book was open to. "Sodom and Gomorrah? Aren't they those two sin cities that God sank?"

"That they are," Bobby confirmed. "He sacked five of 'em in all, or so the story goes, but those two were the most well-known and largest." The older hunter turned a pointed look Sam's way. "Gomorrah had a large temple at the city's edge. On a hill. Overlooking the rest of the city, at least according to a couple accounts."

"You're kidding." Sam stared at the words on the page, realizing what Bobby was getting at. There was no way he'd been in a Ziggurat in the destroyed city of Gomorrah with Azazel and that woman. That would be… incredible. And make no sense.

"That was my opinion too," Bobby offered dryly, sipping on his coffee.

"What are we talking about?" Dean asked, glancing between father figure and brother, definitely not sure what they were discussing. They might as well have been speaking tongues for all he was getting.

"The city from my vision," his brother explained. "The one with the green-eyed woman. Bobby and I have been trying to find it."

"And…" Dean looked between the two of them again, expression growing more and more skeptical, not to mention incredulous. "You think it's *Sodom* and *Gomorrah*?"

Sam shrugged because, *no*, not really. What would Azazel be doing in a city burned to the ground by God? Or…burned into the ground, if that dark, cavernous space he'd been in was what was left. Still, what would some strange, supernatural creature be doing in a tomb in an ancient, destroyed town? What proof did they have, except a possible Ziggurat Sam might have been inside and the right area for the language that he'd seen on those tombs?

"More than a man and his family…" Sam muttered, staring at the Bible passage but mind back in that stone grave with those green eyes and tangled hair.

"What's that?"

Sam looked up at Bobby and his expression – part amazement and part dread caused by the two-plus-two equation his mind was busy solving – wasn't exactly encouraging. "Something she said. More in the city deserved to be saved than just one man and his family."

Bobby's eyes widened a bit, but Dean was back to looking completely lost again. The older hunter rubbed at his beard, thinking. "Lot and his daughters were pretty famously smuggled out of Sodom by angels right before they sacked it. The only 'righteous' man they could find in all five cities."

Dean was looking back and forth between them again like a tennis match. One incredulous tennis match. "So…what? Azazel went and found the remains of two of the most famously destroyed cities in *the Bible*, and raised…. Some super demon who was in the city when God sacked it?"

"I don't know…" Sam looked pretty uncertain of that himself, shrugging a little helplessly and a little self-consciously. It had been his dream after all, and his name the woman mentioned. And him Azazel was after. "He- Azazel, I mean, said she was some sort of guide to lost children. And she was angry about the loss of life."

"Doesn't sound like a demon," Bobby offered, though the information was hardly helpful, putting them back at square one. Not that they'd even been at square two yet, by any account.

If anything, Dean looked even more befuddled. "What the hell would Azazel be digging up some bleeding heart for?"

Sam bit back his most immediate response, which was that the woman had hardly fit that description. Not with the anger she'd radiated, the violence in her stance and bitterness in her words, or those fierce, terrifying green eyes Sam had seen just before he'd been violently shoved out of the vision. He shivered, but said nothing. No. Bleeding heart definitely wasn't the right phrase.

"I'll keep digging into the lore," Bobby said, hand moving up from his beard to pull off his baseball cap and resettle it on his head again absently. He was busy working through the problem with a brain just flat out wasted on auto repair. "The cities were primarily pagan – one of the reasons they weren't redeemable according to the Bible. Some of the Canaanites worshiped Egyptian gods, and Mesopotamia wasn't that far away. It's got a pantheon all its own. Who knows, maybe one of 'ems got a deity for kids who got caught up in God's spring cleaning."

Sam nodded almost absently, still thinking back to his vision. But he'd been over it a dozen times, and the details were already starting to fade. He wasn't going to find any new clues there.

"I can ask Cas next time he checks in," Dean offered, a little one shouldered shrug pairing nicely with how ultimately unhelpful the offer felt and sounded. "See if he knows anything about it."

"She." Both brother and father figure corrected at the same time, causing Dean to roll his eyes while trying to maintain a deadpan expression, which really didn't work out all that great in his favor or as a defense.

"Whatever."

-o-o-o-

The boys were back on the road by lunch that day. They did one last check-up on Angela, who was still steady and stable and breathing away, packed their bags, and said their farewells to Bobby. They were leaving him John's truck to do with as he pleased (most likely to keep on backup as a second running vehicle with a decent load capacity, great for a hunter) and Dean's stolen Ford Pinto, which he'd likely strip for parts just as soon as he had the time.

It was nine days, actually, before Bobby found a spare day on his hands that didn't have him driving off for a case or running his garage for actual money to pay the bills, or researching this or that for other hunters in need. When he did finally break down the Pinto, he didn't get very far into it before he found a small wooden box in the front seat, under the footwell where it wasn't easy to spot.

The old hunter stared at it, turned it about, curious of the irregular star symbol carved on the front. Settling against the edge of the passenger seat, already having been crouching in order to clean out the footwells, Bobby slid open the wooden lid warily. There was a key inside, old looking design, with the same elongated star in the center of its oval head.

Bobby eased it out of the box – cautious of any traps because the thing just screamed supernatural artifact – and flipped it over. There didn't seem to be anything more to the key than the star. Same with the box, which turned out to be empty and without inscription or clue as to its purpose.

"Huh," he mumbled, laying the old key back into the box as equally cautiously as he had removed it and sliding closed the lid. Either it was a trinket from the previous owner of the car – doubtful, given the rundown state of it and the other odds and ends Bobby had found so far – or Sam and Dean hadn't seen it in the footwell and left it behind.

He tucked the box into his pocket and made a mental note to call the boys about it.

Four hours later and well into the breakdown of the Pinto, Bobby went back into the house for a well-earned beer and a late lunch. He pulled the box out of his pocket and left it sitting on his desk, so he wouldn't forget about it.

Of course, back-to-back calls from both Bucky Sims and Steven Wandell, not even halfway through his sandwich, with one needing to know how to get a chupacabra out of a fox's burrow that went deep (*'I'm talking more than arm's length here, Bobby. The sucker is really in there. Don't even know how he got his chubby ass in that far.'*) and the other in pretty dire straits and likely needing backup in the Maine area for an unidentified monster that had already added three additional people to the death toll since Steven had gotten there, meant that by that evening, Bobby was exhausted, in need of a drink, and his desk had enough new books and papers cluttered atop it that the box and it's mysterious key were buried and forgotten.

Another couple of days would pass before Bobby had to hastily sweep the more incriminating – or at least brow-raising – objects on the desk into multiple drawers by the armful before he let in Sheriff Mills, who was knocking pretty insistently on his front door and hollering, more good-naturedly than demandingly, that she knew he was in there and they needed to talk about reports of stolen vehicles on his property.

After all that – with Bobby easily talking his way out of the good Sheriff's suspicions (or, at least, out of a ticket or handcuffs) – it would be months before anyone remembered or found that special key, buried in one of Bobby Singer's desk drawers.

-o-o-o-

This time, Chuck – or, really, God at that point – hit his forehead against his desk multiple times. Un-freaking-believable. Winchesters. Winchesters *and* Singers.

Chuck stood, closed the lid of his laptop with a shake of his head, and decided he needed a break. A nice break. Maybe he'd go have himself a long dinner at that diner he liked. The one with the waitress who smiled prettily at him. Chuck liked her.

He pushed away from his desk and computer, abandoning the story for the time being, and pulled on a pair of jeans over his two-day old boxers (three day old? Maybe he should do some laundry soon…).

Chuck grabbed his house keys and pathetically light wallet, slid some sandals onto his feet that had seen better days, and left his house and the Winchester Gospels behind.

-o-o-o-

Sam knew he was dreaming. The awareness was instantaneous the moment he opened his eyes, just like the swell of warmth in his chest at the site of Jess, asleep, face inches away from his. She breathed soft and deep, her hair moving with each exhale. A strand tickled Sam's nose and he slid his hand up the length of mattress to rub at the offending appendage as discretely as possible.

With a smile more nostalgic than loving, as sad as that may be, Sam reached between them and tucked that strand of hair behind her ear. He took the moment, since none of this was real anyway, and carded his fingers through her hair. Jess hummed lightly, a small smile starting in the corner of her mouth. Beautiful blue-green eyes slid open, crinkling at the corners to match that smile, and she stared at Sam in the dim light of their Palo Alto apartment.

"Hey, you," she whispered in the quiet night, shifting her head against the pillow to undo the hair he'd so neatly tucked back. He grinned across form her, shifting himself forward another inch as well.

"Hey," he answered back, content in this moment, however contrived it might be, to just be with her. There was something oddly comfortable about them, like this. The need – the ache – for this to be real, for him to be able to touch her – really touch her – wasn't nearly as sharp as he expected. He still missed her. God, did he miss her, but there was also relief that her absence from his life was no longer that sharp ache or the slow, miserable pull that it had been.

"How's the new semester?" Sam asked, if for no other reason than to play along with the wishful dream his brain had offered him tonight. He knew any answer she gave would be conceived entirely by his own mind. Still, it was nice to pretend, if only for a few minutes.

"Boring." She scrunched up her face in distaste – it was far more adorable than it was anything else – and he laughed. She resettled her head against the pillows, eyes opening and smiling playing across her lips. The strands of her hair were once again spread all over the pillow, tickling Sam's face. "Would be better if you were there."

The pang that echoed through him at her words was distant, more guilt than actual longing. He didn't want to go back to school. Not

really. It was a realization he'd only recently embraced: only truly in the days following his father's death. Acknowledging that it wasn't the life John had wanted for him, Sam figured – in and among his grief and regrets – that he should honor at least one of his father's wishes. More than that, though, he didn't know how he possibly could return to school. Even if he and his brother ended the plan for the apocalypse tomorrow, something that seemed unlikely (to put it lightly), returning to Jess and his previous life… Well. He'd been lying to himself when he dreamed he could ever have a white picket fence and a dog. That life was gone now. Sam was content knowing Jess would still have it, if that's what she wanted. He was grateful that being with him hadn't cost the woman he loved her life, her future. And he could be content with the rest.

"Be careful what you wish for," he said jokingly, knowing that excitement was just about the last thing the real Jessica Moore wanted out of life right now. Good old boring school was exactly what she needed to get her feet back under her. Mundane. Safe. Normal. "Did you go get that coffee with Brady?"

He didn't know why he asked it. Part of him didn't want to know. But part of him did. Part of him knew he'd ask it in the real world, so why not test run it here. It was the bigger part of him, actually, which he was happy to realize. He wanted Jess and his best friend – even if that best friend had been a lie for two years – to be happy. Even if that happiness was found in each other.

Jess had told him the last time they'd talked that Brady asked her out for a coffee. Fumbled it quite spectacularly, actually. The two had met back up almost three months ago, bumping into each other on campus, much to Jess's surprise. She never thought he'd be back at school so soon. Maybe rightly so.

Brady had been a…disaster. Back at school because he couldn't tell his family about anything that had happened. Couldn't face his parents as a drop-out or even tell them he was taking a break. They wouldn't understand why and they had always pressured him in school. He was at least seeing a psychiatrist, but had to lie about almost everything they talked about. Meeting up with Jess, as awkward as that first encounter had been post-possession, had probably saved his life. For a second time, really. She'd given him the contact information for the same woman Bobby had sent the Moore family's way, and Brady finally had someone – two someones – to talk to about what had happened to him.

So, a few months later, Sam wasn't that surprised that the real Brady stumbled through a quiet request for a coffee. As maybe more than friends. He also wasn't that upset about it, either, surprising even himself. Sam felt fairly neutral about it, like hearing good new coming from a friend who's life didn't much impact you – which was perhaps the part that truly stung – but whom you were still happy to hear from. Sam didn't know if it would last; the two of them would be building a relationship largely on shared trauma. That could go either way, for either of them. But if nothing else, Sam was grateful that they had each other, in whatever capacity they decided.

Jess had seemed less sure. Not quite ready for a relationship (it had only been half a year since 'losing' the man she'd pretty much planned on spending the rest of her life with), uncertain about dating her ex-boyfriend's ex-possessed best friend, even if she was growing quite close to him, and unsure if she should even be telling any of this to Sam. He appreciated it, though. For the peace of mind it brought him, for the trust she still had in him despite everything he'd put her through, and because he still cared for her deeply and he'd meant it when he said he was there for her, no matter what.

So he'd stuck to his guns about that last bit and told her to go for it. Meet Brady for coffee and perhaps the opportunity for more. Be honest with him about maybe not being ready. And let whatever happens from there on out happen. It wasn't as hard to say as he thought it would be. The truth was, Sam knew what he had with Jess was over the minute his brother woke up in a car outside of Jericho ten years in the past. He didn't want her to put her life on hold waiting for a man who would never come home.

She'd told him he was absolutely terrible at relationship advice, and he'd just laughed, happy to hear the relief in her voice.

"Not yet," Dream Jess finally answered, her smile souring just a little. Sam wondered if it would do that for real, or if he was putting it there all on his own. "I chickened out."

"You still should," Sam insisted, voice dropping to the softest of levels; a conversation meant only for the two of them. Not that there was anyone else in his head to hear them. "It could be good."

"It could be terrible," she countered immediately, but there was still that twitch of a smile on her lips. He reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear once more, pulling the strands away from his own tickled skin. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. "I don't

understand why, Sam."

"Why what?"

He pulled his arm back, settling it on the crisp white sheets between them, painted blue in the darkness of the room and the slivers of moonlight peeping through the corners and slats of their blinds. She opened her eyes in the absence of his touch.

"Why you don't want me anymore."

The words alone were painful. No longer the punch to the gut they once would have been, but still a vice around his heart, squeezing until his chest ached and there wasn't much room left. Yes, the words hurt, but it was Jess's eyes that had Sam scrambling away from her, staggering off the bed. His breath caught in his throat, his pulse skyrocketed through his veins, and horror-fueled adrenaline flooded his system.

Her eyes were glowing a brilliant, unnatural green.

Jess sat up on the bed as he clambered away from her and to his feet. The sheet slid off her pale skin and nightgown to pool in her lap. Those wrong eyes were wide with concern. "What's wrong, Sam?"

It was still Jess's voice. Still her expression of worry and confusion and a touch of hurt. But those weren't her eyes and Sam was suddenly certain this bittersweet dream had taken a nightmarish turn.

"Yeah, *Sammy-boy*, what's wrong?"

The voice called from behind him, sending chills down his spine and aligning each of his vertebra with rigidity built from hatred and fear. Sam spun around, fists already clenched hard enough to hurt, even in this dream world that was suddenly far too real. Azazel stood just inside the door of their bedroom, leaning against the frame with crossed arms and a lazy, amused smile painted across his face.

"You," Sam bit out, as much a growl as it was an accusation.

"Me." The demon spread his arms wide, that grin turning to a smirk.

"Get out of my head!" the hunter yelled, putting himself between Azazel and the bed he once shared with Jess. Not that he needed to shield her; none of this was real. He couldn't hurt her here. It didn't matter; Sam knew he could not watch this murderer hurt any version

of the woman he still loved, real or not. Wrong eyes or not. But even as he looked over his shoulder, he was surprised to find the bed empty. The sheets were still pooled Jess had been.

He whipped his gaze back to Azazel, who merely shrugged.

"Like you said, Sam, we're in your head. That big, powerful brain of yours that can do so much more than you know." The demon pushed off the door and started towards him. Sam scrambled back step for step. He should have stood his ground, he knew, but there wasn't an inch of this demon – of what he could do, or what he could make Sam do – that didn't terrify him. "You don't have to hide her from me, of course. We have a deal, sport. As long as you keep up your end, she's safe. Well, from me at least."

Sam's fingers bit into his palms hard enough to almost bleed. He backed his grip off only after a spike of fear pierced through him and he realized that drawing blood into this sickening dream, with Azazel right in front of him, was a terrifying and horrible idea. He didn't want that coppery scent anywhere near this nightmare. Azazel's eyes darted down to his hands, like he *knew* – maybe he did – and Sam took another step back, almost to the nightstand now.

"So long as you don't change the rules, right?" The biting words were pure venom, rage and terror fueling the hunter as he took that final step, the back of his thigh hitting the lip of the small table.

The demon flashed his teeth like yellow fangs in the dim light of the room. "Ah, you got me there, kiddo. I probably would if I could, I won't lie. Picking a crossroads demon was smart of you, Sammy. Or was that your brother's idea?"

Azazel side-eyed him, eyebrows raised suggestively. Sam didn't take the bait, and Azazel eventually continued, "Crowley made a contract and everything. And as much as I could care less if he dies, he was very thorough with the loopholes and I can't have your life forfeited before the big showdown."

As the demon spoke, Sam managed to wedge his hand into the drawer of the nightstand, the movement hidden behind his broad back, and he sought out the gun he used to keep strapped to the underside of the tabletop. Even out of the life for four years, Sam hadn't been able to let go of his training.

He pulled the weapon, cocking the hammer and firing directly in Azazel's direction with zero hesitation. The demon didn't move, but

his body did jerk with the bullet that slammed into his torso. Yellow eyes glanced down at the little hole and the growing circle of blood on his shirt. With a sardonic twitch of his lip and a raised brow, the demon raised his head to regard the hunter almost passively.

"Can't kill me with that, Sammy. Even in a dream." Azazel tilted his head, expression turning thoughtful, with a malicious little tilt to his smile. "Well, not yet. But a few more lessons with me…"

Sam shot him seven more times, emptying the clip into the demon's chest and head. He aimed the last one right at the bastard's groin, just because, and snapped, "It's cathartic."

God, did he wish he could kill him for real. Dean had told him how and when it would happen; that they had to wait for him to show back up at the Hellgate with the Colt. Sammy could wait till then, but it didn't stop him from (literally) killing the bastard in his dreams. Azazel had all but destroyed his family and ruined his life. First taking his mother from him, then his father (this time right out from under him, knocking him out in that boiler room. His dad had been right there. He'd been *right there*, damnit!) and ultimately destroying any chance at a future with the woman he loved.

He reached into the nightstand, ejected the spent clip, reloaded with the spare he kept in there, and emptied that one into Azazel too. It didn't do anything other than amuse the demon, of course, but Sam hadn't been spouting just words. It *was* a release of sorts, even if it wasn't nearly enough of one. Only killing the bastard for real would be, he figured.

"Ya done yet, sport?"

Sam was out of ammo, so he lowered the gun to his side. It took more energy than he cared to admit not to chuck the spent weapon at the demon's head like a child. Biting the inside of his cheek, he spat out, "I want my father back, you son of a bitch."

The demon's smirk grew into a vicious grin. "In exchange for what?"

The young hunter faltered, anger bleeding out in sudden surprise, because the demand had been…childish. Needy. Hurting. Not necessarily serious. Sam's breath hitched in his throat at the idea that he could bring John back.

"Tit for tat, Sammy-boy," Azazel continued, that grin all the worse as it turned knowing. "That's the way the world works. Tell you what. How

'bout…we get you get back on schedule, and I'll give you daddy Winchester."

The demon reached behind his back and withdrew a jar of demon blood, held in his open palm like a sick peace offering.

"He could probably use a break from the rack right about now," Azazel added, bouncing that glass playfully in his hand, the red sloshing along the sides.

Sam visibly paled and slammed his eyes shut, against the blood or the demon's words, he didn't really know. It didn't really matter and it was too late anyway. They were both there, and he was suddenly so certain he could *smell* the blood. His stomach cramped and folded in on itself. His brain begged for it, for an end to the memory of a thirst that robbed him of his ability to swallow, for the *power* that relief promised. His veins were suddenly dry and shriveled and *hurt* throughout his body. Sam clamped a shaking hand over one wrist; the pain radiating up his arm was almost enough to make him cry out.

The hunter spun away from that jar and the terrible truth. He clenched his teeth against the pain and the hunger.

This is a dream. This is a dream. This is my *dream.*

He repeated it again and again in a mantra of desperation.

"It may be your dream, slugger, but that doesn't make *me* any less real." Azazel's voice came from right in front him (*Impossible*. He had turned into the nightstand. There wasn't room. This wasn't real. *He* wasn't real). When he opened his eyes, Sam scrambled back with a gasp. Those pale yellow irises were just inches from his, and that damn jar of crimson pressed between their bodies.

Sam bolted backward, putting himself wide open in the center of the room (vulnerable, indefensible, *stupid*) but all he could focus on was getting away from that blood. He couldn't take it – couldn't accept it or even look at it – no matter what. No matter *what* Azazel threatened him with. He *couldn't*.

"I'm not taking that stuff ever again," he declared loudly and firmly, voice impressively steady for how much the rest of him shook.

"But think of the things you could do on it!" Azazel matched his movement into the center of the room at a much slower pace: a

predator who knew his prey had nowhere to go. He could take all the time in the world and he would still get his prize.

Sam swallowed roughly, having never felt as helpless as he did right then.

"You were strong, kiddo. Maybe not strong enough to kill me, but you could be." Azazel stopped, giving the hunter a few feet of space that Sam knew was entirely of the demon's decision. Sam had no power here and he knew it. Azazel knew it too. There was nothing he could do, nowhere he could run that the bastard couldn't follow, couldn't find him and force that blood down his throat.

Azazel didn't seem to notice that his prey was almost hyperventilating. "Hell, you let me train you up – let me *bulk* you up-" the demon hefted the jar again for emphasis- "and I'll stand here and *let* you kill me."

The demon was grinning, like the idea of it was his greatest dream, his greatest achievement, and Sam thought he must be crazy. But then again, this was the demon who spent decades making deals for infants, who killed dozens, maybe even hundreds, and ruined so many lives in his pursuit of releasing Lucifer. Sam doubted sanity really factored into that equation.

No, Azazel was a fanatic. Those types would readily offer up their life if it meant their goal was achieved in the process. A goal of pumping Sammy up on enough demon blood that he was strong enough to contain Lucifer while he destroyed the world. But that was only after being so addicted to the substance that Sam would be easy to manipulate and tricked into releasing the Devil in the first place.

Sam's tenacity grew. His resolve strengthened. He would not be that puppet. The hunter clenched his hands and forced them to stop shaking. He raised his eyes and refused to look at that jar again. He breathed through his mouth and erased that copper smell of it from his memory.

"It's. Not. Happening."

Azazel's glee dampened. That open, friendly demeanor, crazy as it had been, slunk off his form and left something dark and ugly and *dangerous* in its place. His grin faded, turned right upside down, and he tossed the jar of blood onto the bed beside him. It sloshed and bounced as it rolled on the mattress. Sam swallowed hard and refused to look at it.

"Now, kiddo, I've got a schedule to keep," the demon began, his tone one of warning, in the realm of a parent quickly losing patience. He rolled the sleeves of his flannel up to his elbows as he spoke, and Sam got the distinct impression of a father about to beat obedience into his child. "You can help me with that, or I can force it down your throat. Either way you wanna play it, you're gettin' that next dose."

Sam couldn't stop his body as it resumed its trembling, but he tilted his chin up, jaw clenched, and stood his ground.

Azazel sighed again, this time in a mockery of disappointment. He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "You know, Sam… you pulled through that last little withdrawal by the skin of your teeth." The demon dropped his arm and raised his head, yellow eyes locking on hazel with dangerous intent. "I think we both know you won't survive a second round."

That hard stare lasted the length of a single breath – just long enough for dread to pool in Sam's stomach like cement – and then the demon was on him. Sam was sure he hadn't blinked, hadn't taken his eyes off the bastard, but one moment Azazel was beside the bed and the next he was in Sam's face. Their chests nearly pressed together, one hand clamped painfully tight around the back of the hunter's neck. That hand pulled him forward, towards those terrible eyes, as much as it kept him from rearing away.

Sam brought his arm up on instinct – elbow aiming for the demon's face, forearm aiming for the hand around his neck to break the grip there – but Azazel was too fast. Too strong. He caught Sam's arm in his second hand, fingers tight enough to bruise, grip hard enough to make bones creak. The hunter hissed under the pressure, biting back a cry. He faltered in his defense, knowing he was beat even as his free hand wrapped around that wrist holding his neck in a flimsy attempt to keep the demon from pulling him any closer.

Demons didn't have weaknesses. Not like humans. No pressure points to pinch or press. Sam could dislocate that thumb pushing into the vulnerable, soft spot just beneath his ear and Azazel wouldn't even flinch. The part of Sam's brain that ran on instinct and survival chided him for his foolishness. For believing that bravery was ever going to see him through this unharmed.

Unbidden, against everything he was still trying to fight for, Sam's eyes slid to that jar of blood, abandoned on the bed. In that moment he knew, with petrifying clarity, that Azazel was playing games.

Taunting him. Warning him. Showing exactly how little control he had in this and in everything to come. The demon was a kid with a magnifying glass directing an ant – *little Sammy-boy* – wherever he wanted. The threat of heat and agonizing pain was just on the horizon if he didn't comply. Azazel could so easily point him towards that blood – towards addiction and power and the utter surrender of all sanity – and there was nothing Sam could do to stop it.

The hopelessness was overwhelming: the defeat deafening. For the first time in all of this, since Dean had told him what was coming, Sam didn't see an outcome where they could win. He was going to fail, he wasn't strong enough, he had no way to resist, and there wasn't anything he or his brother could do to change that.

Azazel's hand slid from the back of his neck to his throat and then up, up to his jaw. The pressure only increased as he moved, to the point where Sam had to relinquish his clenched jaw or risk a broken mandible. He gasped under those fingers, digging into his cheeks, surely leaving marks behind, and he breathed harshly through his open mouth. Those pale, flinty yellow eyes slid to the blood, just waiting there on the bed, and Sam shivered.

More games. More forced direction from the magnifying glass, moving ever closer to burning him.

The demon could feel the kid trembling in his grip and he relished the fear. Fear that may not lead to obedience, but oh, how boring it would be if it did. Azazel didn't need obedience, didn't want boring. He needed *fight*. And this boy, red in the face and spitting fire from his eyes even as Azazel taunted him with his own weakness, even as he shook with horror, had that fighting spirit in spades.

"You can always change your tune the next time we cross that bridge, Sammy," the demon whispered, practically against his face. Sam flinched and tried to pull away from the hot breath and smell of sulfur against his skin. He tapped his index finger against the hollow of the boy's cheek, if only to remind him how easy it would be to feed that blood to him. If only to remind him he could. "I'm forgiving, especially for my favorite kiddo."

He released the hunter and Sam stumbled back, breathing raggedly as he wrapped his hand around his no-doubt sore jaw. The kid was rigid, ready for a last defense, even if he knew he'd lose. Fighter through and through. Just what the devil ordered.

"Be seeing you real soon, tiger." Azazel kept those eyes locked on Lucifer's future vessel and didn't bother hiding any of his intention. One yellow eye closed in a wink. "Sweet dreams."

-o-o-o-

Sam sat up gasping, hand still raised to his jaw, which ached like the demon had been right beside him, fingers clawing into bone. Something was ringing: an obnoxious, repetitive sound that set his teeth on edge and his harried nerves aflame.

On the next bed over, Dean groaned, clearly still asleep, and fumbled for his cell, charging on the nightstand between them. Sam was still shaking, still back in his bedroom in Palo Alto, still smelling the copper tang to the air. Dean managed to find the vibrating device, disconnecting it from the cord by yanking as hard as he could. One blearily, half-cracked eye caught a glance at the caller ID before the older Winchester threw an arm over his face to block the morning light and pressed the phone to his ear.

He didn't notice Sammy sitting upright in the bed next to him or see the fear in his kid brother's face or the rigidness of his sharking form.

"What's up, Bobby?"

It was not Bobby who answered, but a female voice, low and gravely, that Dean was just starting to get used to hearing.

"Hello, Dean."

Chapter End Notes

Mystery Woman: She wasn't originally going to be in the story yet (past Azazel digging her up) but I'm enjoying laying down the breadcrumbs way too much to stop :D

Bunker Key: Yeeeeeeeah. Hey, at least I didn't leave it in the car. That's better, right guys? Plus, I mean, come on… I threw in a Jody cameo and everything! That gets me bonus points, right guys? ...Guys? ….Are those crickets I hear back there?

Chuck and the Winchester Gospels: I kind of like to think that when God stops writing, bad stuff is more likely to happen because he's not attending to the story. i.e: He goes to get dinner

and Azazel starts dream walking through poor Sammy's head. Not saying Chuck would have stopped him, I don't think he interferes much, but I like to think maybe it wouldn't have gone quite so terribly if he'd been around to write it. If that makes sense… :P

Jess and Brady: I actually have a whole deleted scene for these two (not completed yet but I will post it when it is), where they ran into each other back at Stanford and a friendship unfolds (a real one this time, since he was possessed the entire time she knew him) which maybe turns into more. I haven't actually decided if it goes anywhere. Part of me thinks no, but I really love the thought of Jess having a full life after Sam, and maybe Brady's the start of that.

Dream Blood: Apparently I can't handle just writing happy for a little while. No, as soon as Dean starts to get to a good place, with his angel back in play and his poor horny body misbehaving to the comedic enjoyment of all… Well, guess that means it's time to torture Sam as much as possible. I'm starting to think I'm not really a nice person...

Hello, Dean: (Case and Point:) wouldn't it be fantastic if it wasn't really Cas, but Uriel taking over Cas's vessel while he's got our poor angel strung up somewhere in Heaven until he can talk some Lucifer-sided sense into him? Meanwhile he forces the Righteous Man to get the apocalypse going (not that Dean would fall for Uriel-pretending-to-be-Cas for long) Eh? Eh? Wouldn't that be just super cruel of me, guys?

XD I promise it's not actually that. I'm not that mean. (…..well… not yet, anyway…)

Up Next: We finally get to see how that chat with Uriel went (not great, but poor Cas and his not-very-good character judgement skills don't quite pick up on it), and then Cas rejoins our boys for a little episodic case time while Sammy tries not to have a panic attack, knowing Azazel and his jar of blood might be around every turn or corner.

Chapter 54: Season 2: Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: (I suggest you read if you are invested in this story's future) *I'm sure some of you noticed this story go off radar for the entire month of September. Turns out, my month was quite the lengthy one and I feel I should explain my absence, though I can't apologize for it this time. My trip to my internet-less, heavenly Lake went well and started off with a bang. Not only was I able to get a surprise chapter up right before I left, but I ran into none other than freaking* ***Gabriel*** *at the airport (and by Gabriel, I, of course, mean Richard Speight Jr!) Hell of a nice (and daaaaaamn, good looking) guy. And absolutely not as short as those gigantors make him seem on screen. So yeah, nice start to my September. However, coming back home to excitedly check my inbox for the first time in three days and not have a single new review...well, I'm not gonna lie: that hurt like a bitch.*

Guys, I wish I wasn't the type of author who needed your support, but I am and that is ***why*** *I write fanfiction. I have other responsibilities and interests: one of which is getting an original novel published. This story takes *hours* of my time and life, and writing it is *not* the part I love. Planning and sharing, that's what does it for me. I chose to put hours of love, sweat, and tears (and there have absolutely been tears, guys) into this story because I love sharing it with you and getting to "see" your reactions. If you don't share those with me, I don't get the motivation I require to continue writing. I have stories about book-hoppers and bowler hats and boys with no luck and anxiety driven, anti-depressant-pill-popping detectives I could be writing about, damnit, but I choose to spend my time with you guys because I* ***love*** *to fangirl with other fans. Writing fanfiction is how I do that.*

*Sharing a chapter that I'm excited about and getting almost nothing in response is like being so excited about news and having the person you're telling answer with, "...so what?" We've all had that moment, and that moment *sucks*. Talk about a motivation killer. So if you guys want this story to continue, I am asking you take five minutes out of your life *once* every *couple* of chapters and tell me that what I'm writing is actually getting a reaction out there in the abyss. I don't need waxed poetics: I just wanna know the part that made you laugh or gasp or cry or wanna murder me in my sleep, so that I keep wanting to write those parts for you! That's it!*

*To continue my lovely month of September and this oh-so-exciting tale, I got sick for two weeks and then thrown on a project at work I left my last job to get away from, resulting in 12-16 hour days for two weeks straight, followed up by this final week of exhaustion-recovery and eye strain so bad I couldn't spend time on my phone (reading fanfiction) or my laptop (working on this story). So, I know this message is pissy and bitchy and angry, but I'm pretty pissed off, feeling like a bitch, and I'm angry because I'm *hurt*. And only, like...probably 25% of that actually has anything to do with you guys, and the other 75% is that I'm tired and cranky and feeling unappreciated in both my work life and my writing life. And there hasn't been *time* for a social life, so work and this story is just about all I got right now. So...I'm not gonna apologize, but yeah, okay, this little letter of mine probably could have taken a less bitchy tone.*

Chapter Warnings: Uriel is a misguided soul, Castiel's a good brother but a naive angel, Angela's on her honeymoon, and Bobby's finally trying to kill his house guests.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 21

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"So you believe Hell is up to something, brother?"

Uriel's voice, while serious, did not quite match his features, which swirled with mirth and amusement, as they so often did around Castiel. The other angel was no good with humor, as he had been told on multiple occasions, and he never did understand what Uriel found so entertaining about his presence (endearing, was what Balthazar had called it, then he'd made a face at the idea of having anything in common with Uriel.)

"There were too many demons: too concentrated," Castiel responded, staring straight ahead with his brother by his side, as they so often were. "They were waiting for something, Uriel, and what they got was Balthazar and me."

Uriel and Castiel had excused themselves from the areas more populated by their brethren to find privacy in a secluded section of

Heaven. A beautiful courtyard, in fact, filled with white-barked trees peppered with dark green leaves that shimmered in a non-existent wind. Flowers lined the smooth stone tiles along the walls and floor. It was little used now, as Heaven was ever expanding, ever shifting, and this courtyard currently sat on the outskirts, too out of the way for the main masses of the Host. It was a place for seclusion and solace, one Castiel used on occasion when he did not want to share his peace of mind with the other tenants of his home. He knew the space well, and was confident they were alone in it.

"Ishim's flight was dispatched," Uriel countered, having heard the tale through the celestial grapevine as it was. A tale told from the very angel's point of view, heavily laden with his unit's successes and Castiel's disobedience. Benjamin had fiercely countered parts of it whenever he was around but with a permanent vessel and an almost indefinite assignment on Earth, it wasn't often enough to stop Ishim's version of events from spreading.

Castiel ignored them the best he could, in part because a moment of mourning would always follow for their fallen brother. Balthazar deserved the honor, but Castiel's grace ached for the loss, still fresh, and guilt was still quick to follow. The other part was that Ishim was what Dean Winchester would call a *dick* – one who seemed particularly unpleasant whenever Castiel was around – so much so that the angel preferred to avoid his company whenever possible.

"The demons were destroyed or scattered," Uriel continued with a shrug, and Castiel could see he didn't find anything out of the ordinary about it, just as their supervisors hadn't either. "Whatever the hellspawn were planning, the might of our brothers has ended it. It's over."

The smaller angel was quiet, contemplating his next words, for they were dangerous. There would be no going back, and while he was confident in his choice to confide in Uriel, Dean's words continued to thrum a chord of anxiety in the back of his mind.

"What if it wasn't?" Castiel's eyes flickered up to his brother's, the hesitancy in his voice not something he could hide so he didn't try. "What if the demons were just the beginning?"

Uriel regarded him with a caution all his own, one Castiel suspected was his brother deciding whether to take this seriously or make a joke of it. Castiel might not be good with humor, but even he could imagine Uriel could spin quite the laugh out of this somehow. His

brother was always the best at weaving humor from the least humorous of situations, and the Apocalypse certainly seemed an epitome of such.

"I returned to Earth. A second time," Castiel confessed, and Uriel's expression broke open into shock, and no small amount of amusement.

"You, Castiel? You disobeyed – on *purpose*?" Uriel laughed boisterously, and Castiel found himself biting back a frustrated noise.

"This is a serious matter, Uriel."

The larger angel did sober, though Castiel could tell he was still regarding half of this as humorous at best and simply not worth solemnity at worst. "What did you find on Earth, brother?"

Castiel hesitated for only another moment more. There was no going back, after all. "A boy. One with demon blood in his veins."

Uriel's colors shifted so abruptly that as a human he would have been aghast, something angels rarely were. His expression was no longer mirthful, all traces of amusement gone. His disgust was palpable in the meaty furling of his grace. "Abomination."

The smaller angel hid his reaction well, saving the cringe and desire to fidget deep within himself. This was not the time nor the place to display further doubt. What he was presenting Uriel with would be enough for the angel to process; Castiel did not want to add the argument that Sam Winchester was a good man.

"His brother bares a righteous soul."

Now Uriel straightened and his features shut off entirely, solidifying in a dark, colorless mass. Castiel could not read him, but he knew this brother well enough not to need to. "So it is time, then."

"If it is, and the first stages of the End are in motion, why has Heaven not struck back?" Castiel leaned into his brother's peripheral and a sliver of color slithered across Uriel's grace. "Why are the gates still shut, Uriel? Why has the host not been dispatched to investigate amassing demons?"

Uriel turned his gaze away again, and Castiel let him. It was a lot to think on. A lot Castiel was asking his brother to consider. "Perhaps they did not believe you."

The angel had to bite back his immediate words – which sounded off with a surprisingly Midwestern American accent and not a British one – and calm himself to prepare a more reasonable, less incriminating response. Castiel took a deep breath, before plunging into that deep pool of no return. "I don't think that is the case, brother."

Uriel stared, something that was not as common coming from the larger angel who preferred physical intimidation to prolonged eye contact. He was clearly taken aback by his brother's implied accusation, which was only too easy to parse. Uriel was still staring by the time Castiel looked away.

"You believe Heaven is aware and doing nothing?"

Castiel could not confirm his certainty of it without incriminating himself in far more than he was currently prepared to tell Uriel. Dean's warning – concern – still echoed in his thoughts. So he went with something that was no less true. "I fear it."

The larger angel was silent, his features stony. Finally, he regarded his brother with a sidelong, troubled look. "I will think on this, Castiel."

Without thought of his actions, Castiel reached out to grab his brother's arm. He didn't know if Uriel had been planning on leaving, but the hint of panic deep within Castiel's grace was enough to make him act. Uriel dropped his gaze to the fingers, manifestations of grace wrapped around his own, with something a lot like surprise, and perhaps a touch of suspicion. Angels did not often engage in physical contact, and both Castiel and Uriel knew this.

"Please, be careful, brother. This information is… sensitive."

Uriel stared at their intertwined grace a moment longer, Castiel's shrinking away under the scrutiny, before he met his gaze again. That wicked grin – Uriel's specialty – was suddenly back on his face. Despite the expression rarely bringing anything good Castiel's way, the smaller angel still relaxed at the familiarity. Uriel patted Castiel's hand.

"This secret is safe with me, Castiel." He said it like it was a joke, but his face was still that blank slate of grey, and Castiel knew he was serious from that alone. "We will figure this out, together."

Oh good, Castiel thought, *because,* "There's more."

Another vein of color sliced through that stone cold grey: something

light blue, surprised and, as ever with Uriel, brutishly amused. "More than the end of the world? Just how many unauthorized trips did you and Balthazar *take*?"

Castiel did not grace his brother's mockery with a response, though he had the distinct thought that if Balthazar had been here, he would have managed a human eye roll one way or another. The two had never gotten along very well, often united only in their Heavenly purpose (and even then, not that united, as Balthazar had never been particularly devout, as far as angels went) and, when that didn't get them through their disagreements, their loyalty to Castiel. It was often like being a mouse between two bickering lions. Something Castiel had not once found enjoyable.

He would have willingly endured it now, though, if only to have Balthazar back.

"This is not about Earth," Castiel returned, rather than indulge Uriel with humor he didn't understand, so rarely answered correctly, and was certainly not in the mood for. "Do you know of an angel named Naomi?"

If the new topic seemed out of place to Uriel, he did not show it. His demeanor fell back to his more natural stance, still held stiff but not rigidly so, and that dull, disinterested yellow flickered through his being. "I have heard the name, but I am unfamiliar with our sister as anything more than that."

Castiel refused to entertain the trill of something worrisome deep in his gut at another angel who had not heard of this Naomi, like she was some sort of dirty secret Heaven kept locked away. Heaven was not supposed to *have* secrets. However, that was clearly Dean's influence on him. Two was a terrible sample size, for starters, and there were thousands in the Host. Castiel did not know all of his siblings personally; Uriel not knowing them all either was not proof of a conspiracy.

"Why do you ask?"

The angel startled, realizing he had lost focus. Uriel was watching him, flickers of lilac curiosity sifting through his grace. On the heels of his suspicions about the Apocalypse and Heaven's upcoming role in it (or lack thereof), the question concerning a random sister of theirs was bound to catch Uriel's notice, if not his interest.

"I heard a… troubling rumor," Castiel decided to answer with, since it

wasn't strictly a lie and he was uncertain how else to frame what Dean had told him. Uriel would surely notice the lack of a named source, but Castiel also knew he wouldn't ask. It was one of the many reasons he chose to approach this brother first; Uriel was not one to gossip. "I have heard she is responsible for brainwashing angels into obedience. Wiping their memories. Con-" The smaller angel had to pause to clear his throat. "Controlling them."

Castiel frowned at the own skip in his voice and the way his grace waivered, ever so minutely, as he said it. He did not like the way that image he'd glimpsed from Dean's mind – the human's impression of him, in Jimmy Novak's body, standing over him with bloodied fists and a blank expression – interrupted his thoughts enough to cause that stutter. Castiel liked even less how long it took him to banish that image from his mind.

Uriel was regarding him silently, expression filled with stormy swirls of greys and deep blues. When Castiel finally succeeded in pushing that intruding memory far away and re-center himself, he realized with a start that his brother was not adamantly denying the possibility, which is what he had expected Uriel – or any brother – to do.

Because it *shouldn't be possible*.

As the smaller angel stared at him, wide-eyed realization taking shape into something ugly – something terrifying – Uriel confirmed the unthinkable. "I have seen it."

It was Castiel's turn for shock to flash through his swirling grace, and his brother shifted beside him, as uncomfortable as the angel had ever seen him.

"Do you remember Egypt? The slaying of the firstborns?"

Castiel recalled the orders, issued by God, and knew he had buried his own sorrow at the command deep within his being. It was God's word. It was just. But it was still the death of thousands of innocents, and Castiel had mourned each of them.

"I was not there," he responded evenly, "but I recall the event."

Uriel sent him a look, not quite head-on. It was as pointed as it was evasive, and something in Castiel's grace froze, solid and hurting and brittle, as he realized what his brother was saying without words.

No, Castiel thought, desperately, and he had to turn away for fear of letting slip all that he fought so hard to keep buried. Emotions he knew he could not let get the best of him, no matter what a pair of humans with brightly burning souls had to say of it.

"I lost track of you," Uriel began, thankfully unaware or blessedly unwilling to mention Castiel's roiling feelings, blatantly spread across his very being.

Castiel could not help but turn back to him, to stare, eyes blown wide in horror and disbelief, at the confirmation that he had been there. That what Dean had said was true. That he was missing memories (memories of *horrible* things). That he had already been a victim of this Naomi and her sinister reeducation once before.

"We split up, and I did not see you again until after the mission was complete."

Castiel could only stare, something terrible and violating shivering up his grace.

"When I reported to Heaven, our superiors told me you had already returned." Uriel's expression was dark, with traces of silvery regret flowing like small rivulets through flashes of angry red. "But I did not see you for some time, and it was decades later that I thought to ask you about it. I recalled our glorious success that night. How the pharaoh wailed and the might of Heaven proved too much for the insolent human to bare." Uriel turned to him, that deep red winning out over everything else, anger evident in his shifting grace. "You said you had not been assigned to the mission at all."

Castiel remembered that. He remembered his brother coming to him, jovial and celebratory in their latest mission, and how he had reminisced of others. Egypt, particularly, which had struck Castiel as odd. Uriel was not the forgetful type (no angel was; it was an impossibility for their kind), but Castiel had not been sent on that mission. Instead, he had been selected to patrol the borders of Egypt, to keep out interference from the other Pantheons that might chose to aid their patrons. He and many others.

"You were there, brother. With me." Uriel spoke softly, perhaps the softest Castiel had ever heard of the angel. Uriel was not known for such softness. "I knew something was off that day."

"Why did you not say something?" Castiel asked, voice and grace numb while his mind flew.

Uriel shifted again, clearly uncomfortable. "You were always fine afterward. An honorable – admirable – soldier. I thought, perhaps they were collecting your memories of battle for further analysis."

It sounded weak, and Castiel could tell Uriel thought so as well. Still, the angel could hardly blame his brother. He had also refused to believe the possibility, even with the memories of a human who had nearly died at the hands of that brainwashing. It was little fault of Uriel's that he had chosen reason, however feeble, to explain the unbelievable rather than confront it.

Despite all of that, Castiel did not miss the fact that Uriel had spoken in *plurals*.

"How many times has this happened?" he asked, cold, breathless. This couldn't be happening. It should not be happening.

"I don't know. But I believe something similar occurred in that city lost to sin, where those filthy monkeys demanded to know us."

Castiel's grace rippled with distaste, which was at least something other than the numbness that had overtaken him. He remembered the occasion. It had been absurd. Outrageous. And the last in a list of unforgiveable sins that had ultimately doomed the people residing there. Uriel had destroyed the blight upon their father's beautiful earth while Castiel got the only righteous man and what family would come with him out of the area.

But Castiel recalled that; he remembered the mission and its conclusion. What part was he missing?

Uriel could not tell him. "We were separated in our task, and again I lost track of you. By the time I returned to Heaven, you were already with our superiors."

Or, as they were both beginning to realize, this Naomi.

"Do you know of any others?" Castiel asked, voice still too quiet, too empty, grave devoid of colors for fear that if any showed at all, there'd be nothing left. The angel was trying to think of all the missions with Uriel that he had separated from the other angel, that such a reeducation experience may have happened, and there were *many*. He was often paired with Uriel; a good counterbalance to his brother's tendency towards wrathful vengeance over diplomacy. It was well known among the garrison that Castiel was slower to anger and therefore violence, and good at tempering such in others. His brothers

had called it, on more than one occasion, a good match.

Castiel had never thought on it further. They made a good pair and always had. But how many of those missions had ended with Castiel's memories wiped? His mind told lies which he believed (how could he not? He didn't even know there was an alternative). His grace, his persons, felt violated. It was *terrifying*, the number of times it could have happened, and Castiel would never know which of them were at fault. Had no way of ever knowing.

It was too much to process. Too much, with everything Dean had also promised was coming, was wrong. Castiel was quickly reaching his capacity to contain it all.

"I am sorry, brother," Uriel spoke, the sincerity clear across his grace even as his voice grew deep and his expression swirled with growing anger. "I did not realize what they had taken from you. It is appalling. Unforgiveable." The angel was fuming, his grace puffing up with building indignation and maybe less-than-righteous fury. "Heaven is not as we thought."

"Sodom and its sisters was destroyed thousands of years ago," Castiel replied numbly, aware of his brother's impending explosion but unable to find room for it among the buzzing in his mind. There was a terrible shudder in his grace that never seemed to end and he could not *control it*. Like his memories, apparently. Or his actions, or his mind.

This was too much.

"Egypt was not so long after," he continued, and Uriel was staring at him, anger paused if only for the moment. Castiel met his gaze. "Was Heaven ever more than it is now? Then it was then? What proof is there that our home – that our brothers – have not always been this way? That we were not just too blinded – *brainwashed* – to see its stains?"

Uriel was visibly upset at the implication and, worse yet, at the lack of argument against it. He fisted his hands and his wings furled and unfurled in clear agitation. Castiel was grieved to be the messenger, but he did not regret coming to his brother. He was unprepared to face this alone.

"How long have we played this game," Uriel muttered, staring into the distance of a Heaven that suddenly was not so bright. To be truthful, it had not been bright to Uriel for some time. Heaven's light had fallen

with its Morning Star and it was only now that he was ready to accept it for the truth that it was. "A game with rules that do not make sense!"

Castiel dropped his head, for he had no answered for his brother, clearly as hurt at this betrayal as Castiel had been. Still was.

"We will right this," Uriel suddenly declared, and Castiel raised his head, surprised by the adamant fury in his brother's voice. Deep brown eyes, filled with years of fighting side by side, met Castiel's gaze. There was a determination there that the smaller angel was not sure he should find comforting or terrifying. "There are still things worth believing in, Castiel."

He wanted to believe that. Was fairly sure he did believe that. Though, given the recent turn of events and the future promised to him by a man who had already seen it, it was unlikely the same thing Uriel was talking about.

For, mistakenly, Castiel was sure his brother spoke of God.

"I will seek out others," Uriel continued, a new strength in his voice as his grace solidified from its whirlwind of emotional output and distress.

Castiel's eyes widened, his own grace leaping with panic, but Uriel merely folded his hand atop his smaller brother's, patting it once more. There was something in his eyes – a swimming sort of awe that Castiel was surprised to see in his usually brutish friend – and Uriel actually smiled at him.

"I will be discreet, brother," he promised, though it didn't settle Castiel's apprehension nearly as much as he wished it would. "We don't have to wait any longer. Others will join us. We need only be unafraid."

With a final pat to his hand, so odd for the often overbearing but physically reserved angel, Uriel took flight and Castiel could not summon the words to stop him. He was uncomfortable with the thought of the other angel spreading word of this, but he also knew that Uriel would honor his promise. They would face this together. He understand the risk involved; he would be discreet. And Castiel knew they would need help in the coming times: others to stand with them against the wrongs that Heaven was soon to pursue. It had been his winning argument against returning to Heaven, after all.

Castiel sank down onto one of the courtyard benches, the silence only echoing Uriel's last words, and the angel realized he *was* afraid. For the first time, in a long time, he was well and truly afraid.

-o-o-o-

The distant humming of the cosmos, always a present melody that vibrated within the walls of Heaven's constructs, was doing nothing to soothe Castiel, whose world was very surely crashing down around him. He knew the feeling was not a literal one. Heaven's walls were sturdy. Impenetrable. They would never crumble, not so long as there were angels there to maintain their strength and beauty.

Angels that were not strong or beautiful. Some of them. But which ones?

Castiel let his head drop to his hands and tried to even out the swells of his grace, like a human breathing through panic. But he could not. His mind had been tampered with, his thoughts *adjusted*, his very being *fixed*. All so he would be a good soldier.

But how – when – had he not been? Castiel could not imagine himself disobeying to an extreme that demanded such cruelty. Such violation. But was it the reeducation – Naomi's brainwashing – that had him unable to imagine such a thing? The thought was terrifying, and led to much bigger, far more unsettling questions that Castiel was not ready for.

(*Who am I? Am I myself? Or am I what Naomi has made of me? What was I before?* Who *was I before? Am I that person still?)*

Suddenly, the walls around him really were closing in. Too close. The leaves fluttered too distractedly. The flowers smelled too strong. Overwhelming. His brothers' voices, perpetually raised in song, as always there was song being sung in the Heavenly Kingdom, were not comforting, but intruding. Spying. Ever present, looking over his shoulder, always *there*, always watching. One misstep, and he would be taken to Naomi, an angel he had never met, to his knowledge. But knowledge – everything he had ever known – was no longer reliable.

Obey.

Obey *who*? Dean had been right. Heaven was not in God's hands anymore, and if it was, then He was no longer a father Castiel could be loyal to. His only choice left was to disobey.

Castiel couldn't breathe, something that was incredibly absurd, because he knew he didn't need to. Among the mounting panic, an echo of a memory – traces of James Novak's voice in his head, offering a kind ear – grounded Castiel for only a moment, but the moment was enough.

He opened his eyes and looked down at himself. His grace was rippling, minute tremors running like waves through the translucent, ever shifting essence. He was shaking.

Castiel could not stay there. He could not stay in Heaven. Not now, not in this moment. He could not be there, where it wasn't safe. Where anything – and he didn't know *what* – could land him back in this Naomi's hands. Where no one would listen, or those that would might join him in his punishment. He needed safety. Sanctuary. He needed… he needed…

That memory of the warmth of his own grace, burrowed in the supernova of a righteous soul, connecting him to another in a way he had never yet experienced, was suddenly a demanding ache, tight across his panicking chest.

Obey.

The angel took flight before he allowed that voice in his head – the voice that had always been with him but which he'd never before known as familiar – could talk him out of it.

-o-o-o-

Angela Anne Garrett was on vacation. Her pre-marital, honeymoon-recon vacation with Mark. Actually, she was pretty sure she was on her second pre-marital, honeymoon-recon vacation. Oh, her first honeymoon-recon vacation a second time.

It was hard to explain. Harder yet to grasp onto. She was pretty sure she'd done all of this before, but anytime the feeling made it through the cocoon of happiness, Angela struggled to hold on to it. In the end, she always surrendered back to the blissful ignorance of a week with Mark on a beach in Aruba (something her mother thought was just ridiculous. *'You* live *in Hawaii! Why on Earth would you want to spend your honeymoon on a beach? Go to Iceland or something!'*)

Angela didn't pay the fluctuating feeling much mind. Ten days of paradise with the love of her life wasn't the worst thing to have on repeat, if that was, in fact, what was happening. She was pretty sure it

was.

That certainty cemented one late afternoon when she looked up from her favorite romance novel and spotted Castiel. She and Mark were stretched out on their favorite beach chairs beneath a blue cabana that had become 'theirs' during their stay here, waiting for one of the most beautiful sunsets she would ever recalled seeing. Although it took her a moment to place the out-of-place man (first there was curiosity – amusement at the man in his fuzzy slippers in the sand – then confusion, recognition that this was a friend, and the feeling she should go greet him as such quickly dashed by a foreboding that finally brought forth his name and purpose here), Angela was suddenly very certain she would not be seeing that sunset tonight. She sat upright as things fell into place with a clarity they had not had for the last several days.

The angel was standing in the sand, water almost lapping at his slippers with each reaching wave. That silly trench coat looked even hotter in the Aruba sun than it had in Hawaii. His blue eyes were locked on hers. She set the book aside, her fancy cocktail with its little umbrella set on the side table. The movement dislodged her fiancé's hand from her thigh, arm stretched across the gap between their chairs, and he startled from his light snooze, free hand automatically catching the Tom Clancy novel as it started to slide off his chest.

"What is it, honey?" Mark reached up to drag his sunglasses lower on his nose, looking to her over the rim of them, but she could tell they were sleepy just from his voice. She couldn't help but smile at him, this man she loved to the ends of the Earth – if the earth indeed had ends – until she once more remembered the angel waiting on her.

"Just a friend," she answered softly, eyes shifting back over to him. He hadn't moved. Hadn't come any closer, like he didn't want to intrude. Or he didn't know if he was welcome. But she could tell even from their spot a dozen feet away that something was wrong. Castiel looked wrecked. No, that wasn't quite right. He looked like a person trying to hide how wrecked he was.

"Oh, great." Mark laid back down, a lazy smile on his face and Angela knew he was already well on his way back to his nap. "Didn't know you knew anyone in Aruba."

"He's a new friend." She climbed off the chair, grabbing her swim wrap and throwing it over her bikini. There was something about greeting an angel in so little clothing that somehow seemed…inappropriate.

Which was frankly silly, considering the guy was in her head right now. Didn't get any more intimate or personal than that. Still.

"Should I come with to meet this new friend?" Mark asked, forgoing the call of sleep to sit up, sliding his sunglasses atop his ridiculously curly, full hair. Island blood; her jealousy of it knew no bounds. She couldn't wait for to see their children. They were going to be *gorgeous*.

"No, I'll just be a moment…" Angela trailed off, realization settling in again that she likely wouldn't be right back. She faltered, unsure what to tell Mark, suddenly unsure if she even wanted to go to the angel she had been seconds away from jogging over to. But something told her she still should, even if she wasn't quite sure why.

So she turned to Mark and cupped his cheeks in her hands. He grinned up at her, a lascivious glance darting down her body following after, waggling his eyebrows in a ridiculous manner that had her laughing even as she bent down. Angela pressed her lips to his: slow and sweet and loving and long.

"I'll be back soon, fiancé," she whispered against his skin, running her fingers over the stubble on his cheeks and chin.

"Soon to be husband," he responded with a wink.

There was something sad about this, deep within the fuzziness wrapped around it, fighting through the cloud of happy the same way the idea that this had all happened before had tried, but Angela chose not to pursue it. She didn't want to know. She kissed her man again, savoring the moment, before pulling away with a smile and jogged down the beach towards the waiting angel.

"Castiel," she greeted, slowing in her jog and tucking the swim wrap around her a little tighter. He didn't greet her back right away, and she bit back a sigh. "None of this is real, is it?"

"A memory," he supplied, and he sounded even worse than he was trying not to look. "May I have your permission?"

Castiel's hand was fisted by his side and he didn't look away from her, but that intense gaze hardly seemed focused on *her.* She hesitated, only because she had no idea what had caused this change in him and was worried about what it meant (for her, for him, for the world). She glanced over her shoulder at the cabana, where Mark was watching them from his chair, even as a waiter brought over a fresh beer from the bar.

"Will he be here when I get back?" Angela turned back to the blue-eyed angel and Castiel nodded, eyes solemn and serious. "Then yes."

-o-o-o-

They both woke up, two lives in one body, in Bobby Singer's spare bedroom upstairs, right where they'd left. Castiel immediately removed the ventilation tube and other necessities for keeping a human body alive, along with the several monitoring wires and intravenous feeds connected to her arms. The machines began flashing lights, warnings popping up across the various screens, but the alarms made no noise, likely a setting Sam selected so as not to disturb the occupants of the house the next time Castiel returned. The angel switched the machines off with a simple thought and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"How long has it been?" Angela asked, awake within Castiel's conscience, protected from the experience of housing an angel the best she could be with Castiel's grace.

"Two weeks," the angel supplied, standing from the bed and testing the fortitude of the vessel, urging her grace to flow through the atrophied limbs and repair any damage that two weeks of bedrest had inflicted.

She could feel Angela's surprised. *"Really? I definitely wasn't in Aruba for two weeks."*

"Time flows differently in the mind than it does on the conscious plane, particularly when one is immersed in memories." It had not been only the one memory either. Castiel had placed Angela in a loop of her most cherished times, unwilling to leave her in that empty comatose state again. If the angel was the one keeping her from Heaven and the paradise of memories to be found there, the least that could be done was to give the human a facsimile. What she could provide would be a more noticeable arena than that of Heaven itself, and Angela would likely be aware what she was experiencing wasn't real if she went looking, but Castiel sensed that anything was better than the vacant pool.

"Thank you," she said, the depth of emotion in her voice suggesting she'd heard far more than what Castiel had voiced aloud.

The angel shifted, unfamiliar with the discomfort stirred by the human's gratitude. Angela was the one doing Castiel the favor by volunteering her body. "You're welcome."

"So what's our next move?"

Castiel was already heading for the door. "We should locate Sam and Dean."

Because they were her charges and she had promised to check in as soon as she could. Not because her grace was burning with uncertainty and lingering fear – something else she was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with – leaving Castiel with a misplaced but driving need to visually confirm the humans were safe as well, and perhaps reconnect with that flare of grace that could confirm for her that all of this would be *okay*.

Not that Castiel had a clue how any of this – any of the things she had learned from Uriel today – could ever be okay.

"We should let that other man – Bobby? The one who owns the house – know we're here first." The angel frowned at the human's words, unsure why telling Bobby Singer of their return was necessary. Surely he would notice on his own. Angela must have sensed the confusion. *"It'll probably creep him out if the body he's keeping alive in the attic mysteriously disappears."*

"We are not in the attic." As if to emphasize her point, Castiel opened the bedroom door to reveal the second floor hallway beyond. The stairwell to the first level was to the left, other bedrooms and the bath to the right.

"*Okay, word of the day. Word? No, phrase? Never mind: human thing of the day!"* Angela Anne Garrett was very fast paced with her words and often did not make sense, particularly in direct correlation to the speed at which she spoke. *"Human thing of the day today is: Exaggeration for Dramatic Emphasis."*

Castiel furled her brow, standing in Bobby Singer's upstairs hallway, trying to figure out the human in her head. "Why would the location of the room emphasize anything?"

Other than the location of the room, which would not be an exaggeration, but a fact. Humans did not make sense. Another fact.

"Because the attic is creepy. Just like an almost dead body stuck on a ventilator, breathing away hour after hour – all comatose-like – is creepy."

The angel worked through that for the underlying importance, which was not inherently clear. "So, the location of the attic increases the

creepiness of the comatose body?"

"Exactly. You're getting it. Now, imagine going to check on that body, tucked away in your attic, only to find it missing." Angela sucked in a breath she wasn't capable of breathing, but Castiel got the impression it was for further 'dramatic emphasis.' *"That's horror movie material right there. Think about it; where did it go? Did it get up and walk away on its own? Did somebody steal it? Is it still in the house with you?"*

She was almost whispering now, yet somehow her voice seemed loud. Castiel raised her eyes skyward, to the attic above which she could sense clearly through the layers of the floor and insulation. There was nothing to fear there, to her knowledge. However, there was little that an Angel of the Lord would find 'creepy' and much that a mortal might.

"In regard to all those questions, the answer in this scenario would be yes."

"See?" Angela sounded immensely satisfied with the answer and, what Castiel suspected, was her performance. Both seemed suspect to the angel. *"Creepy."*

"Yes." Castiel turned and started for the stairs, deciding that while she could perhaps comprehend what Angela was talking about, she hardly understood it, nor did it seem particularly important to do so. Regardless, she would indulge the human, who was attempting to teach her human things (on a daily schedule, apparently). "We will inform Bobby of our return, so we do not 'creep him out.'"

In addition, he may know the location of Sam and Dean, sparing Castiel the effort of searching for them. The angel started down the stairs.

"Next time you use that tone of voice, raise your hands with just your pointer and middle finger up – like bunny ears – and curl them twice. Like this.' Castiel turned her gaze inward to watch the human demonstrate as she continued her way to the first level of the house. *"They're called air quotes. Do it around Dean; he'll love it."*

Castiel was uncertain if she was serious (there was something about the amusement in her voice that reminded the angel of when Balthazar would make fun of her) but didn't think she was entirely joking either. An opportunity to do something that would please her human charge was something Castiel would certainly make note of, however, considering Dean Winchester's sometimes volatile mood.

The angel stepped onto the landing of the first floor, the last of the stairs squeaking as she did so, just as a shotgun blast broke through the silence of the house and their conversation.

Castiel hardly flinched, though the surprise of the hit – the buckshot ripping through the t-shirt Dean had been kind enough to offer her, piercing flesh and muscle beneath, and the strangled cry Angela had released before Castiel was able to shove her deep, deep down – was enough to make the angel blink in surprise and glance down at her damaged chest. She looked back up to Bobby Singer, standing in front of his desk, eyes blown wide as he realized who it was he'd just shot.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered beneath his breath, lowering the shotgun, the end still smoking from the recent fire. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!"

The angel frowned, scanning the older hunter once over. "You do not currently have any blood clots that appear worrisome. Thought there is a fungal infection on your right largest toe that should be treated."

The look Bobby Singer sent her was hard to decipher. Castiel gathered that her attempt to appease the hunter, both in his now and future health, had misfired.

"Gee, thanks?"

Yes, that tone definitely suggested a misfire. Still, it would be rude not to respond at all.

"You are welcome."

Bobby let out a haggard sigh, muttering something about male testicular anatomy under his breath and setting the shotgun against the desk. "Can you heal that, or do I need to be worrying about yer vessel?"

Castiel glanced down at her body, filled with buckshot and salt, and repaired the damage to flesh and cloth alike with a quick flare of grace. She also took a moment to assess Angel's soul, which was certainly shaken but soothed with relative ease beneath the angel's calming probe. Still, Castiel sensed it might be best to give the human some time before raising her conscience once more. She placed her back in her memory loop, with an underlying mantra that all was fine, and returned to the physical plane.

The hunter in front of her seemed oddly relieved by the physical

restoration to her vessel. The tension in his body bled off into more annoyance than distress, which Castiel had heard Dean refer to as 'gruff.' Idly, Castiel wondered if a ventilated, comatose-like body in the attic was even creepier with a bullet wound to the chest, but decided not to bother her host to just find out.

"You looking for Sam and Dean?" Bobby was staring at her expectantly and Castiel realized she missed several of the hunter's last words, though they had been mostly muttered and not entirely intended for her (something about getting her a bell? Castiel was uncertain what the purpose of that instrument would in an angel's hands.)

"Yes," Castiel answered, internally warring about the reason she had come in the first place. What had seemed so desperate and insurmountable in Heaven now felt foolish. "If…they are not otherwise preoccupied."

Bobby reached over to his desk, snatched up a small, dark, rectangular object, and lobbed it Castiel's way. "Ask 'em yerself. Boys are on one."

Castiel caught the object with ease and opened her hand to reveal a cell phone. The angel knew the purpose of the device. She had seen enough of Heaven's souls using them throughout their memories, often talking to their favorite loved ones who lived too far away to see in person. Over the years, the power of the device had grown global, nearly limitless, but Castiel remembered the very first of them that had revolutionized human communication and, more importantly, human relations. Now, as she stared at the largely unknown device in her hands, Castiel regretted not paying more attention to how those humans used their phones.

The angel looked back up with a blank face and a long silence. One party filled that silence with several blinks, the other with absolutely none at all. Finally, Bobby made a noise in the back of his throat and trudged over to show Cas how to use speed dial.

-o-o-o-

Uriel landed in the Lesser Hall, in the eastern reaches of Heaven. There were actually three Lesser Halls (and two Greater) in Heaven's expanse of cathedrals, grand halls, domed amphitheaters, archways, hallways, gardens, and courtyards. No matter how Heaven shifted – how some rooms fell off while others were born anew, or some simply became something else entirely (so that one day you were enjoying the company of your brethren in the Northern Lesser Hall and the next

day it was a broom closet (not that Heaven needed brooms. None of the angels had yet really questioned why they had a broom closet to begin with)). But no matter how their home shifted and grew and changed, there were always two Greater Halls and three Lesser. And it was the Eastern Lesser Hall that Uriel flew to now, a quick search of his target's grace leading him there.

"Malachi." The Anarchist. He turned as Uriel touched down, dull surprise lighting his aura, likely due not only to his brother's unexpected presence, but Uriel's downright joviality. Uriel was never jovial, unless you were at the butt of his most recent joke, and Malachi was not known for a sense of humor. Or patience. Or civility with either of the aforementioned traits in others.

As a matter of fact, the two were hardly close. They had spoken a handful of times, if that. However, there was mutual respect there, even if it remained – would remain – unvoiced. They were, after all, both *specialists*, though their skillsets certainly differed. Still, in this matter, Uriel was confident he would find a like-minded compatriot.

"Uriel," the anarchist greeted in return, that look of surprise still there, though it stunk of derision. It matched his words. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I have news of great interest, brother." Uriel drew himself up to his fullest, chest puffed, muscle and sinew of pure grace bulking. "News which I believe you and I share a similar interest in."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: And so it begins. (to the reviewer who requested Heaven's civil war to happen during the Apocalypse... it's like you *know* me ;D)

Reviews: I really don't want you guys to feel obligated to comment on this story, but my continued interest in writing it does rely heavily on knowing people are out there enjoying it. So I would appreciate some brief feedback - just a couple of words - when something I write gets a reaction out of you. I don't expect every chapter to do so, but please, let me know when I do. Or if I'm wrong altogether and don't have a story that's causing reactions to begin with.

To those who have reviewed: thank you for taking the time to

share you thoughts with me, they have influenced and supported this story more than you know.

...and okay, I apologize for the bitchy tone of the AN at the start of this. I don't apologize enough to go back up and change it; I think it was fair for me to get that out. But...yes, I apologize for the tone because you guys don't deserve to get bitched at just because I needed to bitch.

Until next time.

-Silence

Chapter 55: Season 2: Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Reviews: Thank you very much to everyone who came out of the woodwork to review (and, of course, to my special peeps who review quite often <3). I really appreciate you guys taking the time to say something. And I hope you know that I really do get it: reviewing ain't easy. I've got twenty open internet tabs on my phone right now and at least eighteen of those are stories I've read where I went "wow, this is really good, I should review! ...I'll just leave this tab open and come back to that in a minute." (two. Months. Later). "Why do I have twenty friggin' internet tabs open?! Oh, yeah, this was that story I liked...crap, let me just do a quick little read through here... wow, this is really good! I should review! Okay, I'll just leave this tab open and come back to that in a minute..." -_-

Trust me, guys, I really do get it. It's one of many reasons I do not expect a review every chapter. Other reasons being that not every chapter is a great one and some aren't your cup of 'holy-amazeballs-tea-that-is-review-worthy'. Some are pure action, other's pure chatter, some are filler, some are more fluff or Destiel, who not every reader here is into! I don't expect every chapter to rock your socks, so just let me know when one does and we'll be good :)

And that can be as simple as a quick, 'I liked the part where Dean takes Cas bra shopping.'

...wait, what now?

Quality Warning: Turns out, my eyes are not done being strained yet, so this chapter did not get all the editing it should have, and definitely had some last minute fixes that might be a mess. Mainly lots of Dean-Internally-Panicking which is always fun to write but a bit of a hazard to police for clarity/flow without several read-throughs (you know, make sure it's not confusing to follow given the ninety-two tangents that boy's brain can go through when it's busy panicking.) Hopefully it's not a complete mess (and if it is, hopefully it's an enjoyable mess).

Chapter Warnings: Cas is a klepto, Dean's learning things about the angel's vessel he didn't need to know (and yet, also, really

did...), Angela's the devil, and Sam's innocently shopping for groceries all the meanwhile. And all of that is definitely not where we left off last chapter, so...whuuut?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 22

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean barely glanced at the caller ID, only enough to see the first letter and a general length of name before he flung his arm over his head in an effort to block out the light and the whole 'being awake' thing. The concept didn't get along with him all that well before about ten am. Especially not before a good, hot cup of coffee in his favorite dead-guy-robe.

"What's up, Bobby?" He heard Sam sit up in the bed over, his breathing a little heavy. Bad dream, then? Kid had had plenty of 'em once they left Jess behind, and plenty more that came standard with the job. But he was climbing off the mattress and making his way to the bathroom before Dean could check on him, and considering it wasn't a flat out sprint to pay homage to the porcelain god (and there weren't any telling sounds once the door was closed), the older Winchester decided it probably wasn't worth worrying over.

"Hello, Dean."

Any lingering concern that might have existed for Sam (despite Dean's attempt to play it cool and wave it off) was shelved the instant he realized who was on the other end of the line. It took a minute, but the grin on his face was pretty instantaneous once he figured it out.

"I am not Bobby," the voice continued after a moment's pause. Following another half a second of silence, the angel needlessly added, "This is Castiel."

The hunter resisted the urge to say *'no shit'* back, and instead sat up on the bed. "I kinda figured that, given Bobby's voice is, you know, a dude's."

There was a third pause, and by that point Dean was trying not to

laugh at Cas's unfortunate phone skills. Some things never changed.

"Of course," Cas finally answered. "Where are you and Sam currently?"

The grin only grew and Dean reached over to the nightstand, fiddling around with the pad of paper every motel left on top or in the drawer, with the name and address of the place usually somewhere on it. When he found it, he climbed off the bed, reading it aloud to the angel.

"Just give Bobby back his-" An undertone of flapping wings interrupted his sentence and he looked up, standing in the small space between the beds, to find Cas directly in front of him, Bobby's cell still pressed to her ear. "-phone."

Dean stared at the angel, less than a foot from him – way too close for comfort and personal space – and sighed. He lowered the phone, Cas mirroring his movements, and ended the call with his thumb.

"Go give Bobby his phone back. *Then* come here." He managed not to add '*dumbass*', fond as it would have been. It was good to have the angel back, where he could see her, safe and not rotting in one of Heaven's prisons without them even knowing it.

Cas glanced to the device in her hand, understanding and maybe even a touch of embarrassment hidden well in that blank face. She nodded at the directive and promptly disappeared. Dean always hated how the angel did that, somehow distracting Dean for only that split second with something – anything: a noise off to the side, a brush of air to his cheek that always made him turn or at least look away – so that he never saw the exact moment Cas left. Always just missed it. It drove the hunter crazy, and he had spent years trying not to look away, almost all the way up to Cas losing his wings.

Dean tossed his phone on the bed, unplugging the cord from the wall to throw it on the bed as well so he wouldn't forget it when they checked out. They'd lost their fair share of odds and ends to motels over the years. He could hear water running in the bathroom and eyed the door a little worriedly, surprised Sam hadn't come out to see Cas.

"You alright, Sammy?" he called out. He heard his little brother splash water on his face.

"Yeah, fine," the kid answered through the door, words muffled by even the thin layer of wood. "Bad dream."

Dean scrunched his face up at the door. It wasn't that he thought Sam was lying – he probably wasn't, after all – but he was definitely questioning if his brother was omitting some stuff with that would-be confession. Still, the brothers had a sort of unspoken rule about nightmares, and that was to shut up about them. If someone wanted to talk, they'd talk. And if not, then it was a common courtesy to leave it be.

"Clowns or midgets?" Didn't mean he couldn't be his usual big brother self, though. That was his job.

The rustle of wings announced Cas's return before he got more of an answer than an annoyed grunt through the door. Dean purposefully took a step back so that when Cas returned she wasn't damn near nose to nose with him. They were gonna have to have that personal bubble talk again. Especially this early in the morning. Especially this early in the morning when Dean was wearing nothing but a t-shirt and a pair of boxers. But the talk was definitely for a time when he was fully clothed.

"Dude, personal space, buddy," is as much as he would tackle before clothes (or coffee). He lightly tapped Cas on the bicep, friendly enough (just two friends, in a hotel room, no biggie), to get her to move enough so he could push past her smaller frame. The angel really didn't move all that much (another thing they'd work on: hints), but Dean was able to slide past and gain access to the rest of the room and, more importantly, his clothes (just two friends, of the opposite sex, one of them not really clothed, squeezing past one another in a small space between two beds, alone (mostly) in a tiny little hotel room. Like he said: no biggie.)

"Why would Sam be dreaming of clowns or midgets?"

Dean choked on a laugh as he made it to his bag with minor incident (nothing he couldn't hide and definitely wasn't thinking about) and quickly threw on yesterday's jeans. Better. Good start.

"Cuz little Sammy's terrified of both those things," he answered with a snicker, only to hear a thump and a muffled 'I am not!' coming from the bathroom. Dean just sniggered harder, rummaging around in his bag for a clean shirt, well aware of Cas's eyes locked on his back.

"Why would either of those things be terrifying?" the angel asked, head tilted to the side and a curious pull to her eyebrows.

"After we watch Star Trek, we'll move on to Stephen King. Then you'll

see."

Cas didn't answer, and Dean busied himself with pulling off the t-shirt he slept in and throwing on the fresh shirt as quickly as possible. It was more awkward than he cared to admit (and since when was he friggin' body shy?! This was ridiculous. So Cas was in a hot chick's body. It was damn well time his body – and his brain – got over it.)

He cleared his throat, turning back towards Cas now that he had a couple centimeters of cotton armor between them, only to find the angel's eyes centered on his chest. Dean blinked and, out of habit, glanced down at himself. There didn't seem to be anything worth staring at…

The hunter cleared his throat, and Castiel's gaze snapped up to his. Dean almost made a joke about his eyes being up there, but ended up awkwardly shelving it. Cas in a girl's body was just too weird, man.

"So everything okay?" Dean asked instead, pulling at the hem of his shirt to adjust it almost nervously while Cas's eyes stayed firmly locked on his. So weird. "You're not here with some urgent, world-ending news?"

The angel looked downright fidgety, and her gaze briefly dipped back towards his chest. "No. Nothing urgent. I am just… checking in?"

Dean paused, narrowing his eyes on his friend. Not that he wasn't thrilled to see the angel (weird behavior aside (but then again, when was Cas *not* weird?)), and happy nothing upstairs had gone to shit, but Castiel sounded like she was asking that as much for her own sake as for getting the idiom right.

"You sure?" he asked, setting his socks back down and rounding his full attention on the angel. "You look pretty frazzled." Dean paused, frowning as his nose wrinkled with a familiar smell that hadn't been there when he first woke up. "And why do you smell like gunpowder?"

Castiel did not know what frazzled looked like, but she imagined with the haste she had left Heaven and the urgency she'd felt in locating her charges, that *frazzled* was likely apt. She did not quite understand what had sent her to earth with such drive, and was quickly feeling more and more foolish for the rash decision. Sam and Dean were fine. They were clearly not in any danger. And the sliver of her own grace – that she had so desperately needed to connect with a scant hour ago – was secure as ever in Dean's chest, no change or urgency to note.

Cas hesitated, the foolishness swelling, as she considered lying in response to Dean's question. The immediate response – *no, I am not sure, but I am not sure for no reason* – was not one she felt comfortable admitting. She was now fairly certain there had been no threat in Heaven, nor any reason to flee so irrationally. However, she was also quite terrible at lying.

"I surprised Bobby Singer with my return." Enough so that he had discharged a firearm, though Castiel hardly thought that needed to be said. "But I am…better now."

That was apparently the right response, or at least one Dean found acceptable, because the human lit up and clapped her hard on the shoulder with a wide smile. "Glad to hear it."

"How's everything in Heaven?"

Both angel and human turned at the third voice as Sam came out of the bathroom, a washcloth in hand that he was wiping his face with. Dean frowned at him. The droplets on his skin might have passed for the kid washing his face as he often did in the morning, but Dean knew the signs of fear in his brother too well to ignore that Sam had likely woken up sweating bullets and washing his face had nothing to do with a morning routine.

That must have been one hell of a nightmare.

Sam shifted the washcloth to his ear, rubbing at the wet strands of hair that framed his face. He staunchly ignored his brother, instead focusing all his attention on the angel with what he hoped passed for a friendly smile. "You get back okay?"

Whether his smile was passable or not, Castiel did not seem to notice anything wrong with the younger Winchester. At least not enough to answer his questions. "Yes. My brothers did not take my absence as anything worth noting, and my superiors have not inquired as to my whereabouts. All is well."

"Good, I'm glad you didn't run into any trouble." Sam smiled at the angel as he crossed the room over to his own bag and started rifling through for clean clothes. He stepped into his jeans and wrangled a clean shirt over his head. "How'd that other thing go? Your covert mission?"

"Ah," Cas paused, thinking briefly over how to word it. She was pretty sure it went well. Uriel had believed her. More so than she had

expected, actually; he'd had proof of it. The reminder immediately made that feeling of danger – not so much danger as just not being safe – swell in her stomach. Castiel forcefully pushed it away, worried about how common it was becoming for her body and grace to behave without her consent. "Well, I believe. I have sought out one of my brother's whom I trust. He is thinking on the matter and we will proceed from there."

"Awesome," Dean announced loudly. Maybe a little too loudly. He was just happy to have Cas back around; he didn't want the details. Didn't want to rock that boat, start that argument again, already flaring in his chest like panic. "Well, we were about to head out for a hunt. You got some time?"

Cas blinked at him, seemingly surprised, but she relaxed from Defcon-stiffness-level-three back down to level one. Dean hadn't realized how stiffly she had been holding herself – mostly because this Cas was so much stiffer to begin with than his Cas. He frowned and made a note to keep an eye on the angel. Something was definitely bothering him.

Her. Whatever.

"I believe I have at least a day before my absence will be noticed." Castiel was also fairly confident Uriel would cover for her now. She was glad she'd approached her brother; having a companion in this effort would be immensely helpful.

"Great!" Dean clapped a hand on her shoulder again, right above her left collarbone, and squeezed lightly. "You can join us."

Castiel glanced at the hand, curious but not negatively so, at the physical contact. Cas didn't understand why, but Dean seemed happy, and so she did not worry about it, either. Her own hand twitched at her side and blue eyes drifted back down to the hunter's chest, where that portion of her grace lay. She could almost feel it. If she could just-

But Dean pulled away before the angel could lift her hand and make that connection once more.

Across the room, Sam had straightened up in surprise at his brother's exclamation, staring at the older Winchester.

"Seriously?" he asked, before seemingly catching himself as Dean sent a pair of raised eyebrows his way and Castiel merely shifted focus. Sam corrected, sending a look his brother's way that the angel couldn't properly read without Angela's assistance, "We, uh…were going to go

interview a witness."

"She can come with," Dean answered whatever unspoken question as he sat on the end of one of the mattresses and started pulling his socks on. "And we're not interviewing the lady, Sam. It's a waste of time. Going to the Sherriff as feds will be faster."

"And more dangerous." Sam sounded frustrated, and possibly exasperated. Castiel figured they had had this conversation already, if he understood the younger Winchester's tone correctly. "Posing as FBI isn't necessary. We have a witness, we should start there."

"Whatever, man. We're just gonna end up in the monkey suits when the old lady doesn't pan out." Dean shrugged, pulling on his boots, and nodding towards the angel. "Either way, Cas's gonna need a change of clothes."

Castiel glanced down at her clothed vessel. The jeans, several sizes too large, pinched tight with one of Dean's belts that Sam had driven an extra hole into with a hunting knife, and the worn, black shirt with the logo across the front that meant nothing to the angel. She supposed she could use shoes, though her grace would keep the soles of Angela's feet from damage. Aside from that, she did not see the need for new garments when the ones she currently wore were adequate. Castiel was no expert in human fashion, but looking at Sam and Dean's clothing choices – jeans, boots, t-shirts and an over-shirt (or a green jacket in Dean's case), Castiel did not see much of a difference.

"Yeah, alright," Sam agreed after a moment of appraising the angel, eyes particularly lingering on her bare feet. He didn't sound entirely pleased about it, but Castiel was fairly certain that it had less to do with her and more with his brother. "We can stop for supplies and clothes on the way to Marian Alder's house."

-o-o-o-

Something was up with Sam. Dean could tell. He knew that kid better than he knew himself, and something was definitely bothering him. He looked tired, and he was irritable and jumpy. Especially jumpy. The motel manager knocking on the door had the younger Winchester drawing his gun (and *what the hell*? Why was he armed while they were still in the room and barely even dressed?) which had gotten a hell of a look out of Dean. But Sam had ignored it, keeping the gun drawn, moving behind the door as Dean hollered through it and the

matter was resolved without ever opening the thing.

Yeah. Something was definitely up with Sam; it was more than just a lingering nightmare at this point – even a bad one – and Dean was gonna find out what it was just as soon as they got Cas settled into the hunt.

-o-o-o-

Sam was freaking out. Correction, Sam's primal instinct of fight or flight was freaking out while his brain attempted its best to reason with the reaction and failed miserably each time. Pulling a gun on the motel manager had not been great – luckily the guy had been chased off fairly successfully by his brother – but the cat was out of the bag on Sam being not-so-okay.

Because Sam was really not okay. Azazel's final words still rung in his ear, promising an appearance of the yellow-eyed demon that guaranteed to end in a way Sam absolutely could not let happen. And as a demon, the bastard could be anyone. The manager. The maid. The sheriff Dean insisted they go commit a felony in front of. Hell, even the elderly woman Sam was insisting they go interview.

Azazel could be anyone. Anywhere. And Sam had no way to stop him.

So he ignored Dean's look and even more so the loudly cleared throat in his direction (not even attempting to be subtle. Nice, Dean) and instead focused on the perfectly good distraction they had with them in the room.

Castiel.

-o-o-o-

Sam and Dean stood in front of the angel, a pair of shoes in Sam's hands, both pairs of eyes locked on Cas's feet.

"Which do you think will draw more attention?" Sam asked, glancing between his size thirteen shoes and the vessel's (probably size seven – *in women's* - if they were lucky?) bare feet. Cas looked down at her feet as well, a curious pinch in her brow like she'd never noticed them before. She wiggled her toes against the cheap motel carpet.

"Probably the clown shoes," Dean answered, mostly serious despite the dig. Honestly, his wouldn't be any better, even if they were two sizes smaller. Cas would still be walking around in shoes twice the length of

her foot and flopping with every step. Dean didn't imagine the angel had much coordination when it came to things she'd never experienced or even had to think about, ever.

"Barefoot it is." Sam tossed the shoes back onto his bag with a shrug.

Cas was still staring at her feet.

-o-o-o-

As they exited the motel room, Castiel paused at the sight of cars lining the parking lot. Sam and Dean were both loading their bags – one go-bag and one supply bag each – into the trunk of the Impala. The car was faintly familiar to the angel, through no memory of her own. The same source that deciphered Dean Winchester's moods and actions for her, at least to some extent, was now informing her that the vehicle was of some importance to her charge.

She was also a female car and was named Baby.

The angel turned to the brothers, Sam on the far side of the vehicle, already opening his door and sliding into the seat, and Dean with the driver's side door open, staring expectantly at her.

"You coming, or what?"

Castiel's eyes widened as she realized and pondered the question. She eyed the vehicle warily. She had not been intending to go with them, having no interest in traveling at the rate of humans. However, there was still a niggling worry in her human vessel's gut at the thought of leaving her charges, however temporarily.

Still, the vehicle looked….small. She turned her gaze back to Dean. "I will meet you there."

"Dude, we don't even know where we're stopping." Dean climbed into the car as he spoke. "Don't be a baby. Get in."

Sam opened the back door for her, attempting a helpful (if not, *'yeah, I get treated like a child too, welcome to the club'*) smile on his face. Castiel tried for an audible sigh, something she understood to be an expression of displeasure, and the angel awkwardly slid into the car. The sound only seemed to amuse her human companions and Castiel frowned in the backseat at yet another failed attempt to mimic human habit. Probably, she thought, because humans made no sense.

-o-o-o-

"This mode of transportation is very slow."

Sam snorted. Dean sent a glare with very little heat (considering the insult someone had just lobbed at his car) towards the rearview mirror which, in turn, passed it along to the angel sitting passenger side in the back seat.

"Shut your pie hole. You'll hurt Baby's feelings."

The angel's brow pinched in confusion. The car did speed up with a rev of the engine, though the incremental increase was dishearteningly minor in regard to Castiel's perception of speed. However, she thought it best not to point that out and instead attempted to shut her 'pie hole' (once Angela, who'd begun to stir through the drive, explained what a pie hole was. Castiel decided against following her suggestion of sticking their tongue out in return.)

(Humans still made no sense, but at least she once more had a guide to deciphering them.)

-o-o-o-

Walmart was the first store they came across fitting their needs, which both brother's agreed would work. Sam was the first one out, blinking in surprise when Castiel was in the backseat one second and standing beside him the next. He glanced surreptitiously around the parking lot to make sure no one had noticed the angel's disappearing act, only a little surprised that no one had.

"You're gonna get flabby, Cas." Dean closed the driver's side door and rounded the Impala to join them as he started towards the impressively large store. Cas followed wordlessly, even as Sam sent his brother an annoyed look for his next words. "Alright, I'll get supplies, you get Cas some new clothes."

"*You* help Cas get clothes," the younger Winchester corrected pointedly, stopping to snag an errant cart left beside an empty parking spot. "I'll get the supplies."

"Why do I have to take him- *her* clothes shopping?" Dean complained as Sam wheeled the cart back over to the group. Cas eyed it and its noisy, rattling wheel with some trepidation, obviously regretting her decision to accompany them on this endeavor. "You're better with the

girly stuff."

"Grow up, Dean." Sam rolled his eyes, bitchface # 3 (coincidentally known as, *'Grow up, Dean.'*) rip-roaring right across his face as the three headed into the store. The growing June warmth and bright sun was replaced by blasting air conditioning and halogens. Castiel was looking less certain of this decision with every step. "She's *your* angel."

With that, Sam pushed the cart off towards the refrigerated and foods section, effectively ending the debate. Dean made a face after him, unable to voice the rebuke without calling unwanted attention to them. So instead, he grabbed Cas, who was staring at the passing shoppers just a little too intensely, by the elbow and, grumbling, headed for the clothing aisles in the center of the store.

"Thanks for the backup back there." He let go of the angel's arm once they were on a clear path towards the woman's department, and Cas fell in step beside him without protest. Despite the large store and multitude of things and people to look at, the angel kept her eyes straight forward. Woman on a mission, apparently. "You know, you're not *my* angel."

"On the contrary, given that a chunk of my grace is integrated with your soul, assigning ownership is not that misplaced." Dean almost tripped (okay, so he totally tripped, but he caught himself like a *pro* and no one saw it, so it didn't *count*), sputtering at the angel's words. Because no it most certainly *was* misplaced. Very misplaced! "However, if it makes you feel better, it could be more accurately said that you are my human."

His shoe made the most god awful, outright obnoxious squeak against Walmart's stupidly shiny floor as Dean stumbled a second time. Cas paused to give him an odd look, like she wasn't confident he was capable of walking on his own. He was *fine,* damnit.

"No," he choked out adamantly. "No, that's definitely not any better."

Not only because, *no*, that was absolutely worse, for so many reasons, but also because it turned a couple heads towards them too. He might have been able to write one of them off from his feet trying to make music out of linoleum, but he was pretty sure it was the 'woman' beside him addressing Dean as her human. Like she was his friggin' pet.

Dean squirmed, uncomfortable with the shudder that rippled through him. There was too much in there to unpack and he wanted nothing to

do with any of it. The first of which was *'not my kink!'* and the last of which was an endless string of things he'd heard people – foe and friend – call Cas in relation to him. His loyal St. Bernard (his *bitch),* his pet angel (*'the one that's, you know, in love with you?'*), his guard dog (and again, his *bitch*). God, those had all been when Cas was definitely more identifiable as a man. Dean did not want to see what came next if someone called Cas any of those things *now* (though, mostly that last one.)Yes, he might be old-fashioned in this *one* thing. Yeah, maybe it was a little sexist. But Dean couldn't help it. Men protected women. Real men *respected* women. And Cas, for all intents and purposes, looked like *a woman.* Dean's brain, trained by a hardass, Midwestern marine and a whole lot of black and white Hollywood (actually, yeah, Dean could see where the definitely sexist thread was coming from now…) wasn't going to handle Cas getting called anything but an angel in his- her current state. There'd be broken noses and blood involved. Dean's, probably, if the punch he'd throw was against anything but another human.

So, yeah. Let the universe and everyone in it call Castiel his angel. He had a new perspective on how not-that-bad it was.

"Let's just find you something to wear," Dean muttered, turning away from her and pushing into the aisles upon aisles of clothing. He put his entire focus into that task, beating back the redness in his face and the troubling thoughts in his head. The two made their way towards the clothing designed for business wear and Dean selected the jacket portion of the first pantsuit he saw that said 'fed'. "You know what size Angela is by chance?"

Cas tilted her head to the side, that thick hair falling off her shoulder as her eyes went just a little unfocused. Dean raised his eyebrows, wondering if Cas was like…measuring herself somehow. Could she do that? She could tell him her temperature, heart rate, blood alcohol level, and a million other things about that body he did not need to know (oh, god, he wasn't going down that train of thought. *Abort, abort, abort!*). Measurements seemed like a stretch though.

So when the angel rattled off numbers that meant nothing to Dean, but didn't match what was currently in his hand, he set the hanger back on the rack and started searching for a jacket that did. "You get that from her subconscious or you got a mental ruler in there with you?"

There was that head tilt again. Cas didn't know what he was asking. Dean opened his mouth to clarify something he probably shouldn't be

asking to start with (but damnit, he was curious) when the angel responded, "Angela told me her size."

The hunter blinked at that. "Wait, what?"

"I asked her preferred clothing size, and she indicated pants size eight, shirts-"

Dean shook his head. "No, I got that. You mean she's awake in there?"

He remembered Jimmy telling them what it had been like serving as a vessel. How Cas had kept him asleep for most of it, but even then, bits had leaked through. And being awake had been… Well, it certainly hadn't sounded pleasant.

"She requested it." Cas dipped her head slightly, as though she had her own opinions on the matter but Dean knew she wouldn't be voicing them. "Her comatose state was unsatisfactory."

Dean just stared, suit jacket completely forgotten about. "She's been awake the *whole time?*"

Cas returned his gaze for a moment, before those blue eyes dropped down his body and up it again (lingering for just a moment too long on his chest, hand twitching by her side), not unlike the first night back at Bobby's. Suddenly, Dean was blushing bright friggin' red, and damnit, he so did not need this – *this* being an angel and *his best friend* checking him out! – right now.

"Did she just do that or did you?" he asked, and yeah, okay, that might have sounded a *little* paranoid, but his own reaction to the woman hadn't exactly been *subtle* when Cas first showed up. This was so not cool!

That head tilted again and there was something in those blue eyes – a hint of the amusement he knew Cas would one day learn to show in earnest – that had Dean's eyes narrowing and gave him the distinct urge to hit the guy. Er, girl. Okay, so maybe not *hit*…

"I am in full control of this body. However, she has been helping me respond to social situations more aptly."

Dean swore under his breath. Full body scans were not *aptly*. They were *wrongly,* is what they were. "That's why you've been like that. Using idioms and stuff."

Stuff like *checking people the hell out!* Dean shoved the flare of jealousy (not jealousy, damnit. *Concern*) so far down he was pretty sure his feet were ringing with it.

Not *people*, just *Dean.*

'It had better be 'just Dean' or I'm gonna-'

For good measure, he shoved a little harder and a little more downward.

"They are confusing and rarely make sense," Cas continued, apparently oblivious to the panic attack (midlife crisis? Anxiety attack? Complete and utter mental breakdown?) Dean was suffering. And yup, there was the angel Dean knew. "But Angela has been explaining them to me."

"And she's-" Dean hesitated, managing a pretty decent exterior (if not for the heavy blush and clear panic) considering his internal implosion. Weighing his words with a cautious look at his friend, he fumbled with a weak, "She's alright in there?"

There was another pause – what Dean realized was the two of them likely talking – before Cas nodded. The corner of her lip twitched like she was going for a smile, but it didn't fully form. "She is. It is not entirely pleasant, but she is coping."

"Alright then," the hunter breathed out, turning back to the jacket, eyes clearly saying just how weird their lives were even if his lips remained tightly pressed together.

"She says to thank you for the concern."

Dean cleared his throat. God, this was awkward. "Uh, no problem. Sorry for the…uh…you know…"

The boner? The multiple boners? The staring? The complete and utter lack of control over a single inch of his bodily reactions when it came to this woman?

Yeah. Any of the above, really.

God, he was blushing like a teenage girl. So not cool. None of this was cool! This was the damn right opposite of *cool*! It was like being caught as a voyeur, and considering Dean had never had to sneak peeks at women to get what he wanted, now he just felt gross.

"She says it's okay. You have a cute butt."

Dean missed the rack with the hanger, fumbled the miss, and then managed to grab onto the metal with a damn near desperate grip that kept him from crashing into it.

Those words, in Cas's monotone (but still hot-as-hell) deep, raspy voice had him clearing his throat because, again, *awkward.* That was his best friend. His *male* best friend, deadpan telling him his ass was hot. God damnit, Dean couldn't even. Couldn't even like a friggin' teenage girl.

Angela Anne Garrett was the devil. That's what she was.

He set the jacket back on the rack of clothes *gently*, now well and truly beet red (turnabout is fair play, he supposed) and pulled out – finally – the size she had indicated. The hunter all but shoved it into the angel's arms and followed it with the matching pants.

"Here," he muttered, still fighting back that stupid redness in his face. "Let's just get you a shirt so we can leave and never mention any of this again."

"Now she is laughing."

Dean groaned, grabbed Cas by the elbow once more, and hauled her two racks over to some blouses that he supposed looked like what you might wear under a suit jacket.

"Angela would also like me to remind you that boxers will not go with these pants, and those shirts will definitely show our current state of…" Cas's brows pinched together and that head tilt was back. She pushed the clothes under one arm so she could raise both hands to chest-level and curl her fingers into bunny ears. "…'bra-less-ness.'"

Dean choking on his own spit was entirely the fault of the store (somehow). As was the floor that managed to trip him for a third time that day, and the half dozen shirts he knocked down in his moment of grace.

"She is laughing again."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I will try to get you all another chapter next week, but this stupid eye strain is kiiilling me and I have been struggling to

write this batch of chapters. I've been feeling increasingly distressed over the fact that we're 20+ chapters into Season 2 and I haven't actually gotten us to season 2 yet -_- It's definitely stressing me out and making me feel like I should be writing *those* episodes instead of this incredible tangent I've gotten us all on. My own patience with this lengthy story apparently wore out/turned around to bite me in the butt.

Although, even with all that completely needless stress, I can't deny this chapter was incredibly entertaining to write :D Hopefully Dean's mental crisis wasn't so tangent-y that you all got lost. It *was* pretty all over the place.

Uriel: I wanted to add a quick little note here about something that came up a lot in the feedback for last chapter that I was not expecting, and that was how many of you were angry at me for making you like Uriel (not the anger, that's totally fair ;) Truth is, I wasn't trying to make you all like him, but I'm glad that's what came across! See, I do this silly little thing where I read a fanfic with a cool idea and think, 'Wow, I like that! I'm going to make that my new headcannon!' And I am (apparently) intelligent enough to know it's *head*cannon and not show-cannon, but I am apparently not smart enough to realize that it is not now magically *everyone's* headcannon. So I started reading reviews being like, 'Whut? But...but...Uriel was kinda likeable in that one story. He had more depth in that story. Didn't everyone read that story and adopt that as their new headcannon? I'm sure there was a memo about it somewhere around here...'

:P So in conclusion, I'm a dork, but I'm glad that head-cannon was coming across and, oh yeah, I owe some author-brilliance accreditation! The story that influenced my Uriel head-canon is called "The Road From Sodom" by the talented Misato.

Chapter 56: Season 2: Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I apologize for the surprisingly late chapter, both by a week and by a day. I've been very stressed out lately and very busy; gave myself too many projects, have finished almost none of them, and am currently having panic attacks about all of them. Fun times!

Reviews: Thank you for your continued support last chapter. I appreciate it more than words can convey! I'm so sorry I wasn't able to get you a chapter last week despite your support and wonderful awesome encouraging words. There should have been more commas in that last sentence...

Quality Warning: Ugh, another chapter not quite up to par. So...I massively fell behind in writing and didn't even finish this chapter until Sunday (today) afternoon when my roommate had to pick me up off the kitchen floor where I was curled up in a ball sobbing because I'm a mess who ruined the resin-casting of a tabletop for the third time in just as many days (I hate this project so much, guys, and I did it all entirely to myself by thinking I could build myself a craft table -_-), pushed me into the shower cuz it's my happy place where I get all my best ideas (don't ask) and then shoved my laptop into my hands and kicked me out the door to go find a nice place to hermit and write. So...y'all have a chapter today because my roommate's a boss. But it's not a great chapter because I'm still a definite basket case and forced the last third into existence by sheer force of will. I'm not happy about it, but you guys have already waited two weeks and I can't keep stalling. So, please take the second half of this chapter with a grain of salt. It's not what it should be but I'll get back to my old self eventually (once this friggin' mother friggin' god damn friggin' friggin' crap on a cracker desk is done once and for all)

(P.S. I dove head first into this project to avoid my phone and laptop and all other screens to give my eyes a chance to heal. Bad. Friggin'. Call. I'll take my eye strain and several hundred dollars back, please.)

Chapter Warnings: Sam's grocery shopping, Azazel's helping out ('May I suggest this fine bottle of 1942 Sauvingon Blood, good sir? A most excellent year indeed. Great legs.'), Dean's making

leaps and bounds in lady's fashion choices (next stop, RuPaul's drag show!) and despite all the fun we're having, everyone's getting just a tad bit testy this morning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 23

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam grabbed a six pack of beer out of the cooler section of the store and set it in the cart, mentally going through the rest of the list of items they should pick up since they were on a supply run. The usual road trip snacks to get them through when diners weren't open or available. Beer. A couple bottles of water for Sam (Dean refused to touch the stuff for hydration purposes unless absolutely necessary). They needed new bandages and stitching thread after that ghost in Iowa and the werewolf case that had followed after.

The hunter pushed the cart through the rest of the refrigerated aisle, back towards the bulk of the store and other supplies. The sudden, unexpected chill that crawled up his spine caused his feet to slow and the cart drifted to a stop next to the ciders. Someone was watching him. He could feel it, like ants crawling across his skin, hair standing up along the nape of his neck. Sam took a breath, making a show of looking at the selection of bottles as he tried to parse the source.

Eventually, the hunter used his angle to check just over his shoulder, but the aisle was empty. It was fairly early in the morning for the Walmart to have much customer base, and he was the only one in the section. Still, the ants persisted. His breath came out in a shaky release, and the hunter shivered. Was it colder? Or was it just the cooling units? They were the open kind – no doors, like with the freezer section – and the aisle had several degrees cooler than the rest of the store long before Sam got the sensation of someone watching him.

He didn't realize how afraid he really was until he started pushing the cart forward again, knuckles white around the plastic grip. He dealt with danger almost every day of his life – at least every week, case to case that he and his brother found – and yet he knew if he lifted his hands from their death-grip on the cart, they would be trembling. Sam

couldn't shake Azazel's voice in his head, the moonlight coming through the windows in a parody of what had started as a good dream, the demon's fingers digging into his cheek and jaw.

His hands were shaking even on the cart now, and the hunter sped up and rounded the corner.

Right into somebody.

The man barely dodged to the side, managing to miss Sam's cart by a scant inch, even as the young Winchester pulled back at the sudden appearance. His breath hitched in his throat as he jerked to the side at the sudden stop, ramming the cart right into a display. Chips rained down on the floor as the metal rack wobbled on impact.

"Whoa, sorry, there," the man – middle-aged, Caucasian, wearing a pair of running pants and a wind breaker – said as he righted the last of the movement of Sam's cart with a tight grip to the metal grating.

Sam was breathing hard, brain yelling at him to get a grip, as he looked towards the gentleman, intent to apologize. He was picking up one of the bags of chips and handing it over to the hunter when Sam froze.

His eyes were yellow.

The younger Winchester scrambled back, hitting the shelves next to the chip display as he got as far as possible from the yellow-eyed man as quickly as possible. He was lucky he didn't knock anything else over. The guy was giving him a worried (and apprehensive) look from a pair of perfectly normal, *human*, brown eyes.

"Uh…okay…" The guy set the chips back on the display himself, hedging around Sam's cart and away from the hunter as he side-eyed him cautiously. "Sorry for the…er…scare, there. Have a- have a good day."

The customer scurried off, casting another uncertain look over his shoulder at Sam, who was now feeling like a complete idiot. He forced his chest to stop heaving (*'Get a grip!'*) and he pushed off the shelf with fierce internal derision.

Get a grip, indeed.

Sam moved the cart out of the way, scooping up the rest of the fallen products and putting them back on the rack. He glanced down the

way the man had disappeared again, now quite certain he'd imagined the whole thing, but not yet able to calm his racing heart entirely enough to be sure. The man was gone (who could blame him?) and the rest of the section of groceries was fairly empty. Neither of the two other shoppers that he could see were paying him any heed.

Sam swallowed. He hadn't realized how *alone* he was since parting ways with Dean and Castiel. Vulnerable. Sam swallowed again against the reflexive fear of Azazel's threat.

'Be seeing you real soon, now, tiger.'

This was what the demon wanted. To mess with his head, and it was working.

The brunette straightened back up, casting another quick glance around him. Gripping the cart, he forcefully shook off that feeling of being watched (*'You're being paranoid, Sam*') and quickly moved towards the pharmacy section where he could pick up those bandages. He tried not to think about the relief it would be to meet back up with his brother and his angel as soon as possible.

-o-o-o-

Between Dean and Angela, they managed to get Cas into a pant suit and blouse with surprisingly little hassle. The employee manning the changing rooms eyed Castiel's bare feet with the kind of raised brow that suggested she dealt with this shit all the time, and Dean ushered the angel into the small stall before anything more could come of it. He got more of a look from the attendant for joining Cas in the small room than anything else.

"Uh…do you…need…?" Dean, standing in the open stall doorway, gestured hopelessly to the clothes they'd gathered, undergarments included (and boy, had he faced the opposite direction while Angela helped Cas pick out a simple bra and set of underwear, pretending there was nothing interesting (like sizing or lace or *see-through-ness*) happening behind him).

Castiel, glancing first at the clothes and then the human, needing it spelled out for her apparently, eventually shook her head. "Angela will guide me through it."

The relief on Dean's face was apparently enough to get the devil woman laughing again.

While the two of them disappeared into the dressing room, Dean wandered back into the aisle of clothing (giving the attendant a look as good as he'd gotten from the bored teenager). The hunter mulled about listlessly, picking at the fabrics as he brushed by them. He was idly looking through the racks of clothes closest to the stalls – bored out of his mind and my god, how did men go shopping with their significant others without committing suicide?! – when he spotted it. It was a woman's jacket, light and probably meant to be a raincoat. It wasn't the right style or cut or even length.

But it was the exact right color of tan.

The man from the future couldn't help it. He crossed the aisle to pull the item and its hangar off the rack and stare at it. It was slimmer than Cas's original trench – cut for a woman with a bit more flair than that ugly thing the angel had worn everywhere.

Dean glanced behind him at the stall where Cas was getting dressed. He looked back to the garment, gave it about three seconds more consideration, and folded it over his arm. Feds wore raincoats all the time. This was part of the costume. That was all.

Cas came out several minutes later and Dean was honestly impressed. Angela cleaned up nice (not that she'd needed it (*damnit, no, stop thinking about the woman's looks, Dean)).* She looked like a proper business woman, in faintly pinstriped slacks and a matching jacket, a muted rose-colored blouse with some weird neck tie thingy at the top (shut up, fashion was not Dean's thing. You're lucky you got anything more than general colors). She looked nice. Certainly nice enough to pass for a fed. Well, except for the bare feet.

"Here." Dean held out the coat, gesturing with his chin to the approaching angel. "Put that on and we'll get you shoes."

"Is this a customary garment for females?" Castiel took the jacket, confused as to why she would need an extra article to keep her dry or warm when her grace would do both as was needed. Angela had no wisdom on the coat either.

(In actuality, she totally did, but she was keeping it to herself. Cas still appeared to her as a trench-coat wearing angel in fuzzy slippers, after all. She wasn't an idiot; she could see the similarities to this coat now. Not to mention her growing suspicion that there was a teddy bear's heart of gold under all that gruff worn like armor by the man standing in front of her.)

"Uh…yeah. Let's go with that." Dean cleared his throat, face – still red from earlier – now turning exasperated. "Just put it on, will ya."

Despite not understanding the request (demand?), Castiel slipped her arms through the cloth and adjusted the garment until it felt comfortable. Castiel had never contemplated clothing before, both the look of it and the feel. It was… a necessary nuisance, she concluded. Once she'd finished with the garment, she stood, staring at the hunter who was staring at her. He looked quite serious, something dark on his face, but not necessarily bad. Castiel could not explain it.

Dean nodded and, just like that, the look was gone. "Alright, let's find you some shoes."

-o-o-o-

When they met back up with Sam near the registers, Dean immediately noticed that whatever was going on with his brother, it had gotten worse since they split up. The hunter did a quick, subtle surveillance of the store around them, looking for suspect activity that might have stirred up whatever Sam dreamt about last night.

He was starting to suspect exactly what it was (and in reality, was looking for demons with his quick glance around), but he wouldn't know until he got Sammy alone long enough to make him fess up.

The younger Winchester did an adamant job of stowing it, instead eyeing Castiel's new outfit (which Dean had told her to just wear to the register, since he did not wanna deal with stopping somewhere again for her to change or, heaven forbid, have her get naked in the back seat and have to live with *that* image tormenting his brain every time he even so much as looked at his baby's backdoors). Dean stood there like the dutiful mule all men on shopping trips were apparently doomed to be, holding an empty shoebox and torn off tags, soon to pull out his wallet to pay for it all.

Dean didn't know how normal people did it. Those poor fools.

Sam gave an approving nod over the clothing choices in general, though he spared an odd look and raised eyebrows for the coat. It was sort of a knowing look in Dean's direction (couldn't get much past that kid), but mostly amused by the time he directed it back towards the angel. The coat was…well, it wasn't ugly, but it wasn't exactly flattering either. More of a… female Tax Accountant of the Lord. Sam didn't say anything, reasonably sure why his brother had selected it (and even more sure that Cas didn't know why she was wearing it).

"You look nice, Castiel," Sam said instead, a smile ready for the angel as Cas turned away from the racks of colorful candy and loud magazines.

"Thank you, Sam." She cast a glance down her body again, then gave a satisfactory nod. "If this will help me pass as human, I appreciate the assistance."

"You know what would help you pass as human?" Dean grumbled from behind them, voice low and growly. Cas turned with earnest eyes and Sam sent an ugly look towards his brother, even if he already knew what he was going to say and he did have a point. "Not saying it aloud around a bunch of *humans*."

The angel seemed to realize her mistake, glancing around less than subtly to notice several people well within hearing range of them. A couple were casting furtive glances in their direction.

"Yes, I suppose that would be wise." Even though she was agreeing, the angel was also busy having a stare down with one of the more blatant eavesdropper. Dean, uncomfortable with the way the guy was staring at her, cut in between them, effectively ending the staring contest. Castiel's blue eyes left the weird dude's and locked on Dean, oblivious to what had just happened. "I will endeavor to…act more… appropriately in public."

"Don't worry about it, Castiel." Sam offered that smile again, not so oblivious to what had just happened and giving his brother a third judgmental side-long look in just about as many minutes. At least, it sure looked judgmental from Dean's perspective. "You'll get the hang of it. It just takes practice."

Dean was opening his mouth to tell his brother just how much help Cas had in that department, from his *very much awake* devil lady vessel, when he noticed the angel busy staring at his chest again. The hunter stopped mid word to stare right back at Cas, a frown pulling at his eyebrows because, *seriously?* What was going on with him- her? The intense look (god, was it more intense than usual? Was that even possible?) made Dean want to rub protectively at his sternum.

Castiel's hand moved by her side, reaching up. It was the second time that morning Dean had noticed.

"What is it with you today?" he asked, only a little accusatorily, and caught Castiel's eye as the angel snapped her head back up. "I got something on my shirt, or what?"

Castiel opened her mouth to respond (was that a guilty look behind that stoic expression?) when a lady behind them in line suddenly bumped into Sam, a mumbled *'excuse me'* coming out about the same time she reached past him to grab a soda from the small fridge beside him. Her skin brushed his, the fridge door hit his arm as it popped open, and the beanstalk of a man just about jumped out of his skin scrambling away from her in a dictionary definition of over-reacting.

(Okay, that was an exaggeration, even Dean could admit. His kid brother didn't jump out of his skin. But for a trained hunter like Sammy in just about the most normal place you could be on earth (well… normal except for the way some of the patrons dressed (normal people, man. They were the real scare (where were we? Oh right,))) that knee-jerk reaction might as well have been a six foot jump for the kid.)

Jesus, what was it with everyone around him acting weird today?

Sam recovered quickly and cast a shaky smile the woman's direction. The doe-eyed lady just blinked, stunned from the extreme reaction, hand around a bottle of Pepsi still in the fridge. Both embarrassed and confused, she retreated back to her place in line with a quiet apology. Feeling like an idiot for scaring the poor girl just about as badly as she'd scared him, and over a *soda,* the younger Winchester turned back to Cas. He planned on resuming their earlier conversation (which was actually a counter attack to avoid any conversation about that little freak out he'd just had). Unfortunately for him, Cas beat him to it.

"Are you alright, Sam?" The angel was staring at him in that soul-piercing way, and given what Dean had told him, Cas probably was staring at his soul.

Sam swallowed, chasing away dark thoughts of what the angel would find there. "I'm fine. Just tired." Castiel looked like she might argue that (good luck, because it was the truth, even if Sam wasn't ready to go into details on *why* he was so tired) and Sam decided to head that conversation off too. "I didn't sleep well last night, is all."

The angel blinked, processed that (she sometimes forgot that humans needed things like sleep, as she had no obligatory needs to relate to), and accepted it. Dean didn't though. The older Winchester was still staring at his brother. He wasn't so easily fooled. Something was definitely up, and it had just gone from an orange alert to pure red.

The Walmart checkout line wasn't the place to bring it up, but now the car was going to be good enough.

-o-o-o-

As Sam slid into the passenger side of the Impala – Castiel climbing once more into the back, the discontent look back on her face as she again submitted to inferior human transportation, and Dean in the driver's seat – the youngest Winchester tucked his hands beneath his legs to…. He didn't know. Hide them? Stop the trembling?

One dream and he was a quivering mess. A single whiff of copper that his brain had supplied entirely on its own. It was as infuriating as it was disheartening. God, it had just been a dream. What on earth was he going to do if he had to face the real thing again? And it was coming. He knew it was. Azazel wasn't the type to bluff. Sure, he took sadistic pleasure in messing with Sam's head, but that didn't mean he was lying about his threat. He could be around every next bend, waiting with that damned blood, to either force down Sam's throat or blackmail him into it with one threat or another.

Sam hadn't realized how truly terrified he had been until he'd split up from his brother and Cas at the store. Not until he'd ran into that random guy and lost the tentative control he'd had on his primed and terrified imagination. The fear that gripped him, even after the completely nonthreatening human had been nice enough to help clean up the mess he'd made, was overwhelming.

Hence, the shaking hands. At least, Sam hoped that was the cause of the tremors running through his fingers, and not the promise of the blood he knew he, on his worst days, still tasted on his tongue. Maybe even craved.

"Alright, spill," Dean announced less than a second after Castiel had closed the rear door. The angel blinked at him from the backseat, uncertainty painted across her face as the colloquialism she did not know.

He wasn't looking at her, though, and Sam fidgeted in the passenger seat.

"Later."

"Nope." Dean shook his head, keys still in hand and clearly in no rush to go anywhere, even though they had a case and a witness waiting on them. "What's going on? You almost took out half the candy rack back

there, Sasquatch. What's up with you?"

Sam sighed, rubbing at his eyes. They were dry, gritty, and burning, and had been since he'd woken up. "I'm serious, Dean. Later."

His brother stared at him hard for a moment before he twisted around to look at the angel in the back seat. "Cas, can you give us a minute?"

Castiel looked perplexed and Sam made an aggravated noise in the back of his throat.

"Dean-"

"Alone," the hunter added in an attempt to clarify, cutting Sam off in the same breath. It worked, as Cas tilted her head minutely, blue eyes glancing between the two brothers, and then gave a single nod.

"Of course." She disappeared with the faint sound of a wingbeat. It took Sam a second to spot where she reappeared, outside of the car and about twenty feet away. Like a woman in a suit and trench coat (in the middle of summer) standing stiff and utterly unmoving in the middle of a parking lot, trying not to pay attention to the car with her charges in it wasn't awkward and noticeable as hell. The younger Winchester wondered how long it would take before people started steering clear.

"Alright, now spill."

An aggravated sigh passed his lips and he rubbed at his eyes again, wondering if the developing headache was from his brother, his lack of sleep, or his skyrocketing blood pressure and overall anxiety level. Or maybe it was entirely in his head, a placebo effect of having demon blood waved in front of his face.

"Cas wasn't the reason I didn't want to talk about this, you know."

Dean didn't give even an inch. "Tough. Spill."

His aggravation was ratcheting quickly up to anger and Sam wasn't prepared to deal with his fiery temper on top of everything else. "Not right now. I'm not- I can't…" The young hunter gritted his teeth, took a deep breath, and counted to ten. Dean let him without comment. "Just not right now, alright?"

His brother continued to stare, but the fact that he wasn't immediately pushing back meant Sam was probably going to get his way on this.

Probably.

"Is it world ending?"

Sam wasn't entirely sure. In a way, yes. Right this instance? No… But he couldn't help the way his eyes darted around the parking lot, looking for pale skin and yellow eyes. Dean didn't miss it, but, surprisingly, he didn't flag it, either.

"It's Azazel," the younger Winchester confessed with a world-weary sigh. God, he felt it, down to his bones. "It was just a dream, Dean."

Until the moment that it wasn't, at least. He knew he needed to tell his brother about the demon's threat – this was not the sort of thing he could afford to hide for long – but it wasn't as though there was much Dean could do about it in the meantime. If there was a way to keep a demon that powerful away from him, they'd have done it already.

"Was it?" Dean's voice was accusatory, but didn't carry much heat. More concern than anything. "Cuz you're definitely acting like it's more, Sammy."

"Look, just…later, okay? I need to…" Not think about it. No, Sam would rather forget it ever happened all together. To stop expecting the demon to be around every corner, jar in hand and crimson liquid sloshing just behind that thin layer of glass-

"Time. I need time," Sam finished a little shakily, shoving off those thoughts and the faint echoes of the dream which, no, he wasn't sure was just a dream. Was pretty sure it wasn't. And wasn't that the story of his life, lately. "I'm not like you, Dean, alright? I haven't seen this all before, I don't know how it works out!"

Dean fell silent at the outburst Sam definitely hadn't intended to let out. He was tired. Tired, and apparently terrified, which was humiliating as it was exhausting. The younger Winchester pinched at the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, trying to force back the tiredness and the headache that came with it. "Let's finish the hunt. Then we'll- uh, we can talk about it then."

"…Alright." Dean didn't look happy – and what a role reversal for the older Winchester to be the one pushing for a share session – but he didn't fight back, and Sam was grateful (if not thoroughly surprised). It was clear the older of the two wasn't happy about it, but Dean just pushed open the driver side door to go fetch Cas and finish this hunt so Sammy wouldn't have any more excuses to hide behind.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Sam interrupted his movements, and Dean paused before he was fully out of the car. "Bringing Cas on a case?"

The man from the future frowned sharply at the total change of topic, pulling his head back. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. She's just…"

"Just what?" Dean sat back down on the seat, staring expectantly at his brother. If he hadn't just given Sam his way and not insisted they talk about whatever the hell was bugging him – and yeah, Azazel showing up in his dream seemed like a pretty friggin' big deal (definitely something they should be *talking about*) – Dean would have thought his brother was bringing up Cas as a distraction.

Maybe he was. Or maybe he was just pissy over that dream of his. He was entitled, Dean figured, able to hazard a guess as to what the yellow eyed demon had to say to his baby bro.

He was going to enjoy gunning that bastard down a second time.

Sam was rolling his eyes, bitchface all huffy. "Does she even know how?"

Dean scoffed immediately. If that was Sammy's big concern, he had a hell of a surprise coming to him. "Trust me, Sammy. She's good to go. Just you wait; Cas makes hunting *easy*."

-o-o-o-

Well, she certainly didn't make interviewing witnesses easy. The three 'FBI agents' left Mrs. Alder's house to the sound of the door being slammed purposefully behind them and quickly locked. Yeah, they probably needed to leave before the woman decided to call the cops.

Sam leveled a look his brother's way – he'd probably call it a bitchface, but it was deserved – and Dean rolled his eyes, though the fidgety way he cracked his neck afterward suggested at least some level of fault on his behalf.

"Alright, so, we'll leave Cas behind on the next interview."

It was Sam's turn to roll his eyes. '*You think?!*'

"I do not understand," Castiel interrupted the two, standing between

them, which still gave Sam plenty of freedom to glare at his brother over Angela's head. "What did I say?"

Dean bit back the retort that immediately came to mind (*'Oh, really?* Now *you're devil lady doesn't wanna help you decipher humanity?'*) and instead rubbed the back of his neck with a sigh. He needed a hot shower and a night on a better bed than their current accommodations. "Generally, mentioning that someone's granddaughter might have turned into a 'savage vengeful spirit' ain't exactly normal human behavior, Cas."

The angel frowned, both at the annoyance in his tone and the words themselves. "It was the truth of the situation."

"It was a little harsh," Sam offered helpfully, a tight lip smile failing to lighten the mood as they climbed into the Impala. "And most humans don't know about the supernatural. They won't believe you when you bring it up."

"That would explain why she insisted we were 'crazy.'"

Dean shot a glare into the rear view mirror as they settled into the car. "Alright, enough with the air quotes, Cas. Point is, we got nothing out of the old bag." He reached past Sam's grasshopper legs to pull open the glove box and rifle through their badges, tossing the FBI ones to Sam. "Time for Plan B. Which should have been Plan A all along."

Sam didn't even pull a bitchface, resisting the fight his brother clearly wanted to pick. Turned out, they were both pretty pissy today. Sam's lack of sleep was his excuse. Dean's fallback was his certainty that Sam ought to be spilling his every fear to him. Like Dean had any right to bitch him out about keeping secrets.

And it wasn't a secret. He just… needed time to figure it out for himself, first. Whatever 'it' was.

"Maybe if you hadn't written Mrs. Alder off to start with, she might have had something useful to tell us." Okay, so maybe he wasn't resisting the fight all that hard. To be honest, he could probably use the venting. Although, Sam knew well enough that he wasn't his brother. Getting into it with Dean only ever escalated his anger; it wasn't the release that it was for the older Winchester.

"Written her off?" Dean argued back immediately, a glare across his features. He gestured emphatically around them before starting the Impala's engine. "We're here, aren't we? We tried, and she was useless,

Sammy."

Sam was biting out the words before he could stop himself. "She wouldn't have been useless if *your* angel hadn't-"

"Whoa, hey!" Dean cut him off, and Sam bit his tongue, already knowing he'd crossed the line, even if it was a small one. This wasn't Cas's fault, and both of the humans in the car knew it. "I know he's new to this whole thing-"

"She, Dean."

"*Whatever*." Dean practically yelled it, and damnit, he was *trying*, alright? "You're seriously gonna take your pissy-ness off on the angel?"

There was a light throat clearing from behind them – hesitant and kinda gargle-y, like the owner didn't actually know what she was doing – and Castiel, staring at both of them with a look that definitely came from a Warrior of God, said, "I can speak for myself."

Dean immediately leveled his pointer finger at her, shaking his head. "Uh, no. No more talking for you. You are banned from talking."

Cas's brow pinched in a way that screamed affronted angel, but Dean turned away from it only to find Sam staring at him with a similar – although far more judgey – look.

"What?"

Sam's deadpan eyebrows said it all, but just in case Dean hadn't gotten the message, the Samsquatch verbalized it: "Nice, Dean."

"What- will you just- will *everyone* just calm the hell down?" Now he was definitely yelling. Damnit, why were they always yelling? "Jesus! It's like everyone woke up on the wrong side of the friggin' bed!"

"I did not wake up in a bed this morning," Castiel clarified and, given the look on her face, she was definitely speaking just to prove that she could do so and would continue to do so as much as she damn well pleased. The sass was practically palatable. "Angels do not sleep: in beds or otherwise."

Dean was torn between glaring at the passenger in his back seat or rolling his eyes. Attempting to do both kind of gave him a headache. "Yeah, well, you sure flew outta the wrong side of Heaven, then."

Cas went quiet, likely having Angela explain the meaning of the words, but whatever understanding the angel came to, it didn't garner a response, apparently. Dean let the silence between the three of them hang a moment longer before he put Baby into drive and pulled away from the curb, pointing them in the direction of the Sheriff's office.

-o-o-o-

Castiel sat in the backseat of the slow-moving vehicle and watched the world pass by the window.

"Castiel?" Angel's voice was soft. Not timid like Jimmy's had been, but cautious all the same. *"You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to, but… what made you leave Heaven this morning?"*

She could sense the anxiety still flowing off the angel, and even more so the shame and confusion that followed. Dean's words, once Angela had explained the meaning of waking up on the wrong side of the bed, had seemingly resonated with the angel in a way that only made that shame worse. Whatever had chased Castiel out of his home that morning, he was embarrassed by how he had reacted to it.

"I would rather not speak of it," Castiel responded between their wedged essences, rather than aloud in the small car.

Angela chewed on her lip – a leftover habit from being alive that didn't seem to stop now that she didn't have an actual body – and nodded. Castiel could probably use some time alone, actually, and she was feeling pretty wiped from the last couple hours of possession.

"How about I take a nap for a while," she offered, tone still soft, "*if that's okay?*"

"Of course," Castiel answered, only feeling a little guilty at the feeling of relief that came with the humans' offer. The angel returned her to Aruba and the memory of her fiancé, and went back to staring at the passing human world.

-o-o-o-

Dean pulled up out of the Sheriff's building, put the car into park, and turned to face his brother and backseat passenger. "Alright, look. This is not me benching either of you…"

The man from the future held up a hand to stop his brother, who was already opening his mouth to argue. "You wanna come, then come.

But I think you should stay. Walk it off or sit it off, whatever. I can get in, get what we need, and be out in ten minutes. We don't need a Mexican jumping bean knocking over more candy displays or…"

Dean slid his eyes over to the angel, who was regarding him with an expressionless face. The hunter sighed, running a hand down his face tiredly. This day had started out so well, damnit. "Just…I do the talking if you come, okay, Cas?"

Sam huffed, sitting back against the corner where the seat met the door. He looked out the window, towards the quiet police station, and silently mulled it over. The truth was, he probably should stay. *Not* because Dean had a point (okay, maybe Dean had a small point) but because he'd wanted to call Jess since he woke up from that terrible dream. He knew she was safe, knew she was okay, but he still couldn't shake the need to hear her say it. Not after Yellow Eyes had threatened her like that.

If Cas went with Dean, which she seemed rearing to do if that Warrior of God look had anything to say about it, then he'd have a minute alone to make that call. So he slumped against the door paneling and gave his brother a glare. A conciliatory glare, maybe, but Sam made sure to keep it a glare. They were, after all, having a pissing match and Sam was no quitter.

Dean spared him a momentary look that ended with an approving node before he climbed out of the car. Castiel disappeared from the backseat, reappearing on the sidewalk as Dean moved around the car to join him.

Sam watched them disappear into the building before pulling out his cell.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: So the last third of this chapter is not my favorite, but I just flat out ran out of time to do better. Hopefully, as in the past, you all won't feel it too much.

Up Next: Sam and Jess have one of their chats, as few and far in between as they are growing. Cas gets kicked out of the Sheriff's office, Dean has to deal with babysitting brothers and angels, and Sam has a question or two to ask Cas about dream-walking demons…

Up Next Timing: I am hoping to resume a weekly post, but I've

just been really struggling lately and I was hard pressed to write a chapter in a week when I was in a good mindset. This is the first time I've ever actually run out of chapters when it comes time to post and I'm frankly embarrassed by it. I think I'm in one of my funks, and it's a stupid time for it to happen, damnit. I'll keep working on the story (no fear there; I have way too many fun things planned to give up now!) but I may end up slowing down some until this passes.

Thanks for sticking with me and for your understanding, guys. I really appreciate it. There's still tons to come and we're (I'm) not done yet! :)

author goes back to grumbling about a desk and resin casting and omg so much money I shoulda just bought a damn craft tableforallthetimeandtroublethisiscostingmewhatwasIthinking?!

Chapter 57: Season 2: Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I apologize for the lengthy delay in getting you this next installment. As warned, I have indeed slowed way down in writing as I struggle with some tough times. I've definitely had a bit of a battle when it came to writing these next few chapters, so thanks for baring with me.

Reviews: Thank you for your continued support last chapter and even more so your support for me and my current state of mental and emotional heatlh. Seriously, so many of you spoke up and reassured me that no matter how long it took for me to get this story out, you would be waiting for it. I really appreciate that. I hate to wait for story updates myself and I hate to make you guys wait for them as the author. But I really appreciate your understanding of my schedule and my not-always-stable state of being that effects my ability to write. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

Quality Warning: Okay, this is just getting redundant at this point, let's not even talk about it. It's not where I want it to be, but we'll get back there eventually. Soon? Dear Chuck, I hope soon.

Chapter Warnings: Jess is wonderful but ever the bittersweet reminder of another time, Sam is on the verge of a constant panic attack, Cas has good news (once he's done messing up more interviews) and Dean's watching a Jaws marathon while his angel talks with...herself? Himself? Themselves? Ugh. Whatever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 24

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Jess picked up on the second ring, the line connecting practically mid-sentence at a speed that Sam knew meant she was doing at least two other things at the same time. "If you're calling about the Brady coffee

date, it hasn't happened yet."

The pause down the line wasn't intentional on Sam's part. Honestly, it took him a moment to register the words, in part because he hadn't been expecting them, or the energetic rapid fire of them.

"I…chickened out," Jess added in the silence between them, trailing off awkwardly.

Mostly, though, he hadn't been prepared for her first words to so closely echo his dream. The silence stretched, his mind too stunned to form words as panicked thoughts started flying. That had *just* been a dream, hadn't it? The part with Azazel, *maybe*, had felt too real, but even if the demon had somehow been dreamwalking through Sam's mind, Jess should have only been a constract.

God, that had to have just been a dream.

As he sensed the tension on the call growing in the seconds ticking by, Sam forced an answer out without thinking, relying on a numb brain, and only played further into the dream. "You still should."

"It could be terrible, Sam," Jess answered, a little too quickly and a little self-deprecating, trying to get back to the energetic start of the conversation that had already train-wrecked so spectacularly. Sam knew he was the one who'd thrown it off (still was), but he couldn't think through the miasma of fear clogging his brain. "Brady's a mess. I'm a mess! And you may want to go Disney, fairy-tale, everyone-gets-a-happy-ending on me, but that's not how real life works! Real life is terrifying and miserable and – okay, it's not miserable all the time, but sometimes it is – and that's just not how relationships work!"

Sam heard her take in a deep breath on the other end, and knew what he should say. What he would normally say. He'd laugh. He'd tell her to take a breath. One day at a time and it was just coffee with a friend. But he couldn't form the words, still seeing Jess sitting on their bed in their Palo Alto apartment, with glowing green eyes. At least she wasn't on the ceiling or bleeding.

"Sam?" Her worried voice broke through his mounting panic attack and the young hunter's grip tightened on the phone. "What's wrong?"

The act of physically shaking himself out of it worked well enough that Sam was able to close his eyes and at least let go of the phone before he broke the damn thing in half. He hadn't meant to scare her. He really needed to stop calling her, doing this to her. These

conversations did nothing but drag back memories she was trying valiantly to leave behind.

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Everything's okay. I'm sorry. I- I gotta go."

He should never have called her in the first place, but he never seemed able to help it. Couldn't help but bring her back into this when he shouldn't. And now… now he couldn't help but expect Azazel to show his face at any moment, just like in the dream. A dream where he and Jess talked about a coffee date and he ached for how much he missed having her in his life. A dream that had ended with Azazel and a jar of blood.

Shit, the last time the demon had shown himself for that purpose, Sam had been alone in the car just like this. Why? Why hadn't they warded the car against demons? Why had he let Dean and Cas leave? Why hadn't he gone with them?

His fingers began to ache around the phone, his joints protesting the ever tightening grip. He should have hung up already.

"Don't do that, Sam. Don't shut me out." Jess's voice was soft down the line. Gentle, and scared, but still so caring and Sam didn't know what he'd done to deserve having her, even as a friend. The pause lingered, and Sam thought about hanging up. He should hang up. He knew he should hang up, but he couldn't. "If this is about Brady-"

"No," the young man answered immediately, shaking his head adamantly and using the physical movement once more to kick himself into action. "No, it's not about- it's not about that. I promise, Jess. It's…something else. I shouldn't have called."

"Yes, you should've. I'm glad that you did." That answer, never given the same way, never sounding rote or obligatory, always came immediately. Sam loved her all the more for it, though he wished it wasn't true. Letting her go once and for all would be so much easier if she pushed him away. "So talk to me."

Sam leaned his head back against the seat, slouching down as he closed his eyes and bit back the sigh. She needed to let him go just as much, damnit.

"I…had a dream." He could hear the tension in her lack of response immediately, and he understood. He could almost see her fingers tighten on the phone, so similar to his own, and the way she would worry her bottom lip.

"About me?"

He picked his head off the seat, eyes widening at the tremble in her voice, despite her braving the words. He should have seen that coming and put a stop to it before it started. "No. I mean, yes, you were in it, but it wasn't about- it wasn't like that. You're safe, Jess. I promise. I'll keep you safe."

He didn't know that and couldn't promise that, but he swore, right then and there (and not for the first, nor the last time) that he would figure out how to keep his promise.

"I know, Sam." It killed her that it was at the expense of his own happiness – their happiness together – and maybe even his life. But Jess also knew it was a lot more complicated than that. "Are you safe?"

Sam hesitated. He didn't want to hesitate, but he knew the second he didn't answer that it was too late to lie. He missed the days when he never considered lying to Jess about anything but his past. "…I don't know. I'm… I'm scared. I'm so damn scared I'm going to do something I can't take back. I'm no good, Jess. What if I- what if I'm-"

She took in a shaky breath but stopped him before he could stumble further down the dark and dangerous rabbit hole. "I know I don't know everything that's going on, but I do know you, Sam, and you *are good*. You're one of the most honest, caring, *loving* people I know. And no demon or monster or sinister plot will change that. Will change you, Sam."

Tears slipped free and Sam wiped them away with the back of his hand. "I love you," he whispered, and he knew he shouldn't say it. Knew he needed to let her go, stop calling her, stop loving her. Even this new, distant love they were adjusting to, diminished from what it once was by time and space and tragedy. Even that, he needed to let go of, or risk dragging her down with him. But Sam Winchester was a practical man, so he knew it wasn't something he could stop doing in a hundred years, either.

"I know."

Sam smiled at the response, a light chuckle on his lips as she Han Soloed him with a smile in her voice that said she knew it "I gotta go."

"Please be safe."

The young hunter let out a long, shaky breath but nodded in the quiet of the car. "I'll try. Jess, I-"

"You don't need to say it, Sam; I'm not mad. I love you, too."

Sam ended the call with a hesitant thumb, slowly lowering the phone back to his lap as he stared at the black screen. He closed his eyes against the thoughts circling his brain, refusing to think them to the best of his ability, and refusing to let what did slip through overwhelm him. He would figure this out. Dean and he would figure it out, like they always did.

"Hello, Sam."

The words came from the backseat and Sam was spun around, back to the dash, gun drawn tight to his chest and aimed at the new passenger before he registered the wingbeats or the gravely, female voice. He almost pulled the damn trigger, too, expecting yellow eyes and practically putting them there himself in his panic. But it was only Castiel staring back at him, completely unmoving, as blue eyes went from his face down to the gun and back. Realization hit like a tidal wave, the adrenaline left Sam like the receding water before one, and the hunter all but collapsed in the front seat, shaking.

"Shit," he breathed out, immediately disarming the weapon and engaging the safety. His heart was hammering a mile a minute and his hands were definitely trembling. At least this time he knew it was the adrenaline crash. "*Shit*, Cas. Don't do that to me."

"Are you alright?" The angel was still staring unblinkingly at him as Sam struggled to stow the gun. The last thing they needed right now was a case of friendly fire.

"Yeah. Yeah, you just…surprised me." Scared the shit out of him, was more accurate. Sam's heart finally started to calm from the almost painful thrumming against his ribcage as he worked on calm, even breaths. Realizing the angel was supposed to be with his brother, he straightened, eyes darting to the sheriff's building and back to Cas. "What are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

Castiel's eyes didn't quite stay on his, and Sam wondered if he was reading Angela's face correctly for the sheepishness he saw there. "Dean exiled me to the car."

Sam's eyebrows went up and yep, he was definitely reading that look right as it got worse.

"Apparently, using air quotes during an interview with a sheriff, particularly when telling you are an 'FBI agent'" -and here Castiel did, indeed, raise her hands to repeat her apparent misstep inside- "is not appropriate human behavior." Her gravely tone was haughty with indignation and Sam let out a relieved little laugh. The angel watched him with a small frown. "Is everything alright, Sam? You seem to be preoccupied."

The hunter didn't answer right away, resettling against the seat to stare through the windshield for a moment as he battled with his choices (and maybe, still, the adrenaline crash and twitchy trigger finger). It was possible Castiel could help. It was also possible she'd find Sam's low-burn desire for demon blood and cowardice too weak and inhuman to be worth heavenly assistance. Sam closed his eyes against the poisonous thoughts that filled him. Dean spoke better of the angel, and Dean didn't speak well about very many people at all.

Besides, Sam's own interactions with Castiel so far suggested that his insidious inner voice had nothing backing it but self-doubt and loathing.

"Dean says that you can visit people in their dreams." Sam angled himself to bring Castiel into his vision, shoulder against the Impala's seat. "That you – or at least the you from his time – would do it if you needed to talk but couldn't be there in person."

"Yes. All angels can dream walk in the minds of humans."

"…What about demons?"

Castiel's head tilted to the side, and Sam thought maybe he was starting to read the angel a little better because he recognized the confusion in that steady, unchanging blue gaze.

"Demons do not dream."

"No, I mean, can demons dream walk?" Sam held his breath as Cas seemed to mull over the question. He avoided meeting the angel's gaze completely, worried it would give away exactly what had deterred his sleep last night.

"If one was strong enough," Castiel answered slowly. "The older or more powerful of them could, yes."

Sam released his breath, forcing it to be slow and silent. They didn't know how powerful Azazel was. At least, Sam didn't. He had no frame

of reference for demonic strength, and Dean hadn't mentioned it past the yellow-eyed bastard's leading role for the apocalypse. The younger Winchester swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. Only a fraction of him had hoped last night's dream might have been something born of his own vicious imagination and wasn't the demon himself. Now he wish he hadn't asked, because he was suddenly aware of just how powerful a demon he had mucking about in his head.

"Why do you ask?" Castiel met his gaze through the rear view mirror when Sam tried to look away, aiming for the windshield but unable to avoid those piercing blue eyes and the realization there. "Sam, has a demon visited you?"

"Azazel." The name was out before Sam could think twice about it, though he had to clear his throat after the word practically choked him. "H-He was in my head last night."

Hadn't Max Miller said he'd spoken to a yellow-eyed man in his dreams? A man who told him to get stronger, to practice his powers. To kill his parents with them. Suddenly, it was much harder to breath in the small space of the car.

"Did he harm you?"

Sam glanced Castiel's way, breaking their connection through the mirror in favor of a physical one. He couldn't help but be surprised at the definite concern in the angel's voice. Concern for him.

"Could he have?" the hunter parried, unfamiliar with the physics of demonic dream walking. The question might have come out calm, but Sam was feeling anything but. If Azazel could hurt him, that meant he could hurt others. Worse, if pain transferred in a dream, would drinking demon blood?

The angel broke the intense staring contest as she looked out the window towards the Sheriff's office and Sam wondered if she was going to run off to tell Dean. "His reach would be limited, but the human mind is very powerful and incredibly delicate. If he wanted to hurt you, he could have."

It hurt to swallow and Sam had to force his throat through it. "He threatened me. Wanted me to drink more demon blood."

Castiel's frown sharpened, eyes darting back and forth as she thought. "Consuming demon blood in a dream would have no effect on your body."

Sam's deflated with the relief, though he knew they were hardly out of the woods. Hell, they were still deep in the woods, and the woods might as well be on fire at this point.

And they hadn't even started the Apocalypse yet. How on earth was he going to do this?

"I don't think he's planning on keeping it just in my head."

If Castiel noticed the way his words were as dry as his throat and shaking almost as badly as his hands, the angel didn't say anything of it. "This is very worrisome, Sam."

The hunter couldn't help the sardonic laugh that ripped out of him, leaving a strip of sore, burning slick down the back of his throat. He felt sick. The taste in the back of your mouth you got when you realized you'd caught a cold and knew it was going to be a bad one. "You're telling me."

It was obvious from the quirk of Castiel's head that she didn't understand (yes, she had, indeed, just told him…), but she didn't dwell on it either. They had more important things to focus on. "Perhaps we could hide you from him."

Sam sat upright at that, turning fully around in surprise. "You could do that?"

It's not that it hadn't occurred to him, it was that Sam didn't know of anything that could keep his *dreams* safe. He knew there were spells and such out there that could hide him and Dean physically, though he didn't know any of them yet, but how was he supposed to protect his mind?

"Yes," the angel answered, so matter-of-factly that Sam simultaneously felt ashamed for his pessimism (but seriously, how could he have known?) and kind of wanted to shake her for not leading with that when this conversation started. "Blocking your mind will be significantly trickier than disguising your physical presence, but both are quite possible."

Sam let out his tenth – hell, maybe his hundredth – breath since the angel had popped into the car and scared the crap out of him.

"This is very a serious matter," Castiel tacked on unnecessarily, though given the look in her eye she felt it was very necessary to say. "Your health and safety are paramount, Sam. I will not return to Heaven

until we have ensured the demon cannot get to you again."

Leagues of tension left the young man like the air from a balloon and he slouched against the seat, staring at the angel with awe and relief and a gratefulness he couldn't begin to put into words. Not to mention exhaustion. "Thank you, Castiel."

There was a moment of silence between them, the type that seemed to carry a physical weight, before Castiel almost hesitantly asked, "You were afraid I would say no?"

Worried he'd insulted Castiel – he had been worried the angel would be more judgmental or disgusted than sympathetic – Sam hurried to explain, "I was afraid there would be nothing you could do. Nothing *I* could do. And…" he hesitated himself, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth as he stalled. "I thought…maybe you'd- I didn't want to admit how much I want it. But I do."

His voice had grown quiet at the end, ashamed and also horrified of his own weakness. A weakness he was now very certain Azazel was not done exploiting. Worse, Sam knew it was not a battle he would win. He would fight – he would go down fighting with everything he had – but it wasn't going to end the way he wanted it too, and it terrified him how surely he knew that.

"Your craving is not a choice, Sam. It is an addiction, and not one you are at fault for suffering." Castiel's voice was so firm and confident, carrying the weight of Heaven behind it even if the angel wasn't acting as a Warrior or speaking for God in this moment. It was so comforting Sam hadn't even realized how badly he'd needed to hear someone who wasn't his brother – who wasn't biased by love and family and obligation – say it. "The fact that you are struggling, that you are fighting against it, is proof enough to me that you don't truly want it."

Sam had to look away, biting back the tears again. He was usually the one to tell Dean that bottling that stuff up wasn't healthy but, darn it, he didn't exactly want to break down in front of an angel, especially one as stoic as Castiel. He settled back against the seat, closing his eyes as he worked his throat against the burning lump there.

"Thanks, Cas."

The angel gave a nod as serious as her gaze, but when he opened his eyes, Sam was pretty sure he saw the corner of her mouth twitch. "You are welcome, Sam."

Then Dean was striding out of the front doors of the building and back towards the Impala with the information they needed for the case. They were back on the hunt and since Cas didn't feel the need to bring up their conversation again in front of Dean, Sam decided not to say anything either. For now, at least.

-o-o-o-

The FBI shtick, while certainly riskier and paired with greater consequences, did tend to get them more information. The sheriff had eventually given up the details that hadn't been in the report. Their primary suspect was in an altercation several months before her death (which had been ruled a suicide). The case had never gone to trial, the charges dropped due to a lack of evidence, but the police report, concerning the alleged sexual assault of one Nicole Alders, had some pretty damn convincing evidence in there. Sam, ever the lawyer in brain and heart if not degree, could see no other conclusion than a cover up. That left the Winchesters with a sour taste in their mouths and a pretty firm hunch the Sheriff was more involved than he'd let on, considering he was the driving force in burying the case.

Unfortunately for them, Nicole Alder had been cremated and all her possessions returned to her grandmother. Sam quickly recalled the urn resting on the fireplace mantle, a delicate gold necklace with a single heart pendant hanging around its neck, from their previous visit. He'd asked the older woman about it, considering it seemed just the thing a ghost would attach to in order to hang around and exact revenge on the men who had attempted to assault her and gotten off scott-free.

Dean still wasn't convinced her suicide wasn't another cover up of foul play, considering the skeevy vibe the entire Sheriff's office had given him.

However, seeing as Marian Alder was not a fan of theirs and was guaranteed to call the cops if they showed their faces at her Victorian style home again, they were going to have to wait until the old broad went to her weekly Bridge game the next afternoon (it had been hand written in her calendar tacked to the fridge when Dean went to use the restroom and snooped instead). Maybe if they were lucky, Nicole wouldn't strike again so soon. Not to mention, she was out of targets, the three assailants described in the police report matching the victims closely enough to be conclusive, in Dean's opinion. And if her death hadn't been a suicide and others were involved, the Winchester had no idea who, so they had no potential victims to protect. They're best bet was robbing the old lady's house and burning whatever the hell Nicole

was still attached to. Hopefully it would be as simple as that necklace she'd worn every day of her life since her fourteenth birthday.

With any luck (not that the Winchesters were ever used to having any), they'd lay her to rest once and for all and be back at Bobby's in time for dinner.

Of course, all of that meant one more night hanging around the dull little town that didn't even have a decent bar scene. Not that Dean was jonesing for a drink. Maybe another night, when Sam wasn't as jumpy as a tweaker on six straight energy drinks and Cas wasn't… well, *female*. Dean might finally be getting his body on the same page as his head, but he didn't think adding alcohol to that just-barely-getting-there situation was a stellar idea.

So, instead, he plopped down on the cheap mattress, his body bouncing on the thin yet somehow still rock-hard springs. Remote in hand, he decided to find himself some quality television to spend the next hour not thinking about.

Of course, that would be a lot easier if Cas wasn't standing in front of the TV, milling about like she didn't know what to do with herself.

"You make a better door than window, Cas," Dean said with a hint of amusement. Cas frowned at him as Sam grabbed something out of his bag and headed past her for the bathroom. Dean gestured to the bed with the remote. "Come on, sit. We'll get a head start on that pop culture education of yours."

Cas awkwardly perched on the edge of the mattress, clearly new at this, body mostly turned towards the TV but eyes locked on Dean. The hunter just shook his head and flipped the television on. He started channel surfing, Cas's attention finally pulled away from him by the rapidly changing moving pictures, until Dean found something mindlessly satisfying. He settled on Jaws, perking up a bit at the old classic that was apparently part of a marathon. Maybe not as mind-numbing as he'd been going for, but you just didn't pass up the classics.

"This is a good one," he said aloud, Cas turning her head back to lock that blue gaze on his as he launched into a basic plot synopsis for the angel. He'd just finished identifying the main characters as the last one – Quint – showed up on screen, when Sam came out of the bathroom in his workout gear.

Dean, halfway to telling Cas it was gonna be hard for her to watch the

movie if she was busy watching Dean and not the television, stopped mid-sentence when he spotted what his brother was wearing. The older Winchester raised his eyebrows. "Going somewhere, Forrest?"

Sam rolled his eyes but answered exactly how his brother was expecting anyway. "For a run."

Which only got him Dean's raised eyebrows looking pointedly at the clock. "At eleven at night?"

The brunette ignored his brother and headed for the door, snagging his iPod and headphones on the way. Aggravated and just about done with being kept out of whatever loop his brother was playing in – a loop apparently bad enough to call for midnight runs instead of, oh, say, *sleeping* – Dean sat up on the bed.

"Okay, that's it. What's going on with you?"

"Nothing, Dean." Sam strapped his iPod to his arm with one of those stupid looking armbands and plugged his earbuds in. "I've just got energy to burn."

"Bullshit." Dean swung his legs over the edge of the bed, done pulling punches. "You mean you don't want to go to sleep."

At Sam's fierce glare his direction, Dean knew he'd hit the nail on the head. Not that he'd had any doubts. He knew this kid better than any other person on the planet.

"Damn it, Sam, will you just tell me what this is about?" He stood from the bed, tossing the remote onto the comforter. In his periphery, he saw Cas stand as well. "You too freaked out to sleep, but not too freaked out to go put yourself out, alone, in the middle of nowhere without even a weapon on hand?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, do we have a weapon that can stop a demon?" Sam shot back, bitchiness turned all the way up at his brother trying to control his life. First Azazel, now Dean. Sam refused to be kept hidden from the world just because it was trying to kill him. And yeah, maybe that was stupid, but damnit, he needed *out.* He couldn't stop living because of fear. He wouldn't, even if he couldn't stop himself from jumping at every damn corner. That was why he needed to run. To pound pavement and feel the air burn in his lungs because he wasn't gonna get that anytime soon hunting down a demon they couldn't find but sure as hell could find them.

Dean ground his teeth in response, because no, they didn't have anything Sam could arm himself against Azazel. At least not yet.

"I will watch over you while you go on your…run."

Both brothers turned at Castiel's grave voice, her look as serious as ever as she glanced between the two and they just stared right back. Her intense gaze settled on Sam. "If it is okay with you, I will monitor you while you run. I can be at your side in an instant should something happen."

She directed that last bit at Dean, and Sam turned his own challenging gaze to his brother, as if to say 'there you go.' Dean pulled quite the bitchface of his own, but answered by grabbing the remote off the bed and plopping back on top of the mattress.

"Fine," he conceded, clearly not happy about it. "Cas can hang with me, but I'm telling you her education is gonna be severely hampered if she's busy watching you do your best impression of Usain Bolt."

It was Dean's way of agreeing while still being a total jerk about the whole thing, but Sam would take it.

"I don't even know who that is, Dean," he bit back, though his tone was one that said 'suck it'. He grabbed a jacket and threw it on as he opened the door. "Cas, don't listen to anything he has to say. The only stuff you'll learn from Dean's choice of shows is how to pick up chicks. Poorly, too."

The older Winchester let out a loud harrumph from the bed, turning scandalized eyes on his little brother. "Nonsense, Sam. She's a *lady*. We're gonna find a good soap opera and then she's gonna learn the glory that all soaps teach us: how to slap a dude."

Sam shook his head, knowing they had a hell of a lot more to talk about than *this*, but appreciating his brother letting him have it, and his need to get out, all the same. As he closed the door behind him, he heard Cas's voice as she got the final say on the non-argument she probably didn't realize they were having.

"I thought we were learning how to be killed by man-eating sharks."

-o-o-o-

They didn't even make it ten minutes further into the movie before Cas was doing more Dean-watching than she was TV-watching.

Specifically, some Dean-Chest-Watching. The hunter finally rolled his eyes and gave the angel a pointed look where she sat on the edge of the mattress, looking entirely out of place in her fed getup and completely rigid posture.

"Definitely hard to watch man-eating sharks if you're busy watching me, Cas," were the first words out of his mouth, and Dean managed to clamp down on his tongue before he could let out the second set (a quip about the only exception being that he himself was a legendary *wo*man-eater…Well, you get it). Apparently, his brain was not quite on the right page yet either and that was definitely not something one said in the company of angels. Or most females. Or most female angels.

While Cas probably wouldn't get the joke (either side of it, and it *was* a pretty good one, if Dean did say so himself) the devil lady currently playing host the angel would. And Dean really didn't want to be any more of a creep or a dick to Angela than he already had been by nature of…well, nature.

"Apologies," Castiel eventually said, raising her eyes up to Dean's face.

The hunter narrowed his eyes in return. Seriously, what was up with everyone around him acting all weird today? Cas shifted on the bed, hands restless in her lap, before she dropped her gaze and Dean couldn't help but raise his eyebrows at that. That was what Cas did when he was embarrassed or ashamed. What the hell was shameful about staring at Dean's chest? Creepy? Absolutely. Annoying? Sure. But *shameful*?

"I was hoping to seek conference," the angel confessed, much to Dean's confusion because…what?

"Conference?"

Castiel let out a breath of air that very well could have been a sigh, only Dean was pretty sure Cas hadn't figured those out naturally yet. "The brother that I conferred with in Heaven. He told me things that were very… disturbing."

Which was back-in-the-day Cas speak for 'freaked him the hell out.' Dean frowned, realizing that Cas was getting real here and this was probably about what had been bothering her all day. So he muted the TV and sat up, pushing back against the headboard. It still didn't sit well with Dean that Cas was intent to follow through with the insane plan to recruit angels to their side. Dean knew how wrong that could

go and he'd been waiting for that shoe to drop for weeks now.

"What things?"

Cas met his gaze, and he could see anguish in that otherwise stoic ocean. "He has seen proof of Naomi's tamperings."

The hunter couldn't help the way his hands curled into fists against the thin comforter, but he kept his breathing even with years of mastering rogue emotions. Given the little oddities throughout the day in Cas's behavior and the look in her usually neutral face, Dean could well figure that proof had come in a Castiel-shaped box wrapped with a big, ugly bow.

God, he wanted that bitch as dead as she'd been in his time.

"I'm sorry, Cas." He could see the devastation in the slight slump of his friend's shoulders, and certainly in her eyes. She hadn't wanted to believe him, which was fair. What he'd had to tell royally sucked for the angel. He woulda wished it wasn't true, too, if he had that luxury.

Cas turned her gaze away, focusing back on the silent images flickering one after the other on the television screen. Dean knew she didn't give a crap about what she was watching, but he knew how a distraction made things easier in moments like these. "It was hard to hear. I… I felt an urgent need to leave Heaven. To…escape…to somewhere safe."

Safer than what was supposed to be her home.

Dean nodded. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the angel having something like a panic attack, though the Castiel of this time probably wouldn't be familiar with them. Still, it turned out with things like that, angels were a lot more like humans than they thought (or ever seemed willing to admit). So he did what he would do for any human; he offered an encouraging, sympathetic smile. "I get it. I really do, man. I'm glad you came looking for us."

Cas was staring again, but at least this time it was directed at Dean's face. The hunter fidgeted as the silence turned from companionable and acceptable to just plain awkward. "So…uh…did you wanna… talk?"

The head tilt suggested no, but Dean cleared his throat and tried again. "You said you were looking for, uh, conference?"

Cas straightened (the angelic version of "Oh") and seemed to realized what Dean meant. Her face might have barely moved, but Dean narrowed his eyes at the sudden impression of sheepishness he got. He knew Cas too well.

"Not with you," the angel offered in explanation, and perhaps a slight apology in her gravely tone, though not one that anyone else on the planet had any hope of picking up. Again, Dean knew this guy too damn well. Er…girl.

"Not with me?" Dean balked, half insulted (cuz, *rude*) and half confused, because there wasn't exactly anyone else there to talk to. Maybe Cas meant Sam, but then why help him go off for a friggin' midnight run when he should be sleeping like a normal person who tells their brother the truth about shit going down. "Then who the hell else-"

Dean's words were cut off by that blue gaze dropping to his chest again, and oh. *Oh*. Dean blinked in realization, glancing down at his sternum and the sliver angel apparently sitting pretty just behind it. Cas could do that…with…himself? Herself? Uh, themselves? Ugh, whatever.

"You can do that?" Dean sat up straighter, something between a frog caught in his throat and a flutter in his chest playing tug of war with his body. "You can…talk to him?"

"It will not be a conversation as you would think of it," Cas answered back, "but yes, I should be able to commune with my grace in a manner of speaking."

The hunter sat, blinking stupidly at the angel. About a dozen and a half thoughts went through his head (the first five discarded under the category 'grow up, Dean' (oddly said in Sam's tone of voice), the next five thrown out for 'get your head out of the gutter, Dean' (Jo's voice), the two after that were a stuttering mess Dean couldn't identify (but were accompanied with an 'Aww, that's so sweet. Gay as a leprechaun in a thong in the middle of a pride parade. But really sweet'. Charlie's voice. Definitely Charlie on that one) and the last were pretty much just a series of Cas himself thanking Dean for his understanding and patience about a dozen times throughout their friendship, and only like one of which the human had friggin' earned. So, yeah, ending on that note meant he sucked up his manliness, tucked away his sarcasm, told Charlie to maybe just cool it with the imagery (because, uh, what the hell and also *eww*) and moved the hell over on the bed to make

room for his friend in need). The shuffle across the comforter was a little awkward, and Dean cleared his throat when Castiel didn't move despite it. Eventually, with an epic eye roll, he had to pat the warm dip in the mattress he had previously filled for his friend to get the hint. "Okay, uh, come on over and… commune, or whatever."

Once the invitation was painstakingly clear, Castiel didn't hesitate. She stood from the end of the bed, crossed the distance around the mattress, and resettled beside Dean. Like the angel she was, Cas didn't know well enough to settled on the bed beside him, instead sitting stiffly and awkwardly half-turned towards the hunter with her legs off the side and feet planted firmly on the ground.

Dean didn't bother telling her otherwise, because her hand was spread across his chest in about the same breath she'd sat down, and the hunter was busy breathing through the sudden warmth fluttering through his pecs. He hadn't forgotten the flip-flopping feel of that grace in his sternum reuniting with its original source, but he'd sort of let himself forget just how damn good it felt. Like cotton candy at a county fair or the spin-o-cycle you'd ride right afterward.

Or, you know, really good sex.

Another clearing of his throat later and Dean forced that – and any follow up thought of the same line – so far from his mind they probably landed somewhere in Timbuktu. He glanced at the angel, hoping Cas hadn't heard any of that (though they were working on that whole privacy-of-mind thing). But Cas had closed her eyes and Dean was suddenly distracted – taken, though he'd never use a term so chick-flicky – by the look of peace that stole over her features. Her breathing deepened, her body stilled but not in that stiff, unnatural way. Dean was suddenly aware of how oddly intimate – and therefore very, *very* awkward – the moment had just become.

"I am making you uncomfortable."

Dean blinked at the suddenly blue eyes open and locked on his, though that hand was still flush to his t-shirt clad chest and he got the impression Cas really didn't want to remove it.

"Uh…" He gave an awkward cough but told all that interior panic to shut up. This was *Cas*, and all he – she – wanted was some comfort. Uh, conference. Dean decided it was probably for the best if he spent the next however-long-Cas-was-communing looking anywhere else, though. "No, man, it's- uh…it's cool. Do what you gotta do."

The hunter straight up yelped when Cas went and, like friggin' lightning, slid her hand up under his shirt to resettle in the exact same place, now flush to flesh.

"What the hell!" he wiggled underneath her cold fingers and the angel froze, bright blue eyes locked, all wide and innocent on his (and that was *not* friggin fair. No way Devil Lady wasn't in there telling his innocent angel to friggin' feel him up).

"This is worse?" she intoned, and damnit, she really did sound confused. Cas wasn't that good of an actor, which made all of this so much worse.

"You thought it would be *better*?" Dean countered, incredulous, as he switched between staring pointedly at the arm buried under his t-shirt and the angel.

"Skin contact allows for a much clearer connection," Cas explained, like the answer was obvious and Dean was the one causing problems here.

Dean couldn't help the deadpan glare if he tried, and he absolutely did not try. He collapsed back against the pillows, muttering, "Of course it does."

The angel seemed hesitant for a minute, and Dean could tell she was considering pulling away. So he grumbled that it was fine, just do whatever it was she needed to do in order to 'seek conference' and he'd go back to watching Jaws II. Although Cas could tell her human charge was not entirely pleased with this despite his words, she really could benefit from communing with the grace inside his chest. So, cautiously, she settled back onto the bed beside the hunter and closed her eyes, welcoming the entanglement of her power with the dormant sliver deep inside her charge's chest.

"You tell Angela she better shut her pie hole about this," Dean grumbled again after a moment of tense silent.

"Angel is currently sleeping."

Green eyes slid her way and Castiel could tell he was trying to decide whether or not to believe her. Finally, Dean seemed to relax a fraction more, and Cas filed the interaction away for later inspection. Apparently, what her human host thought of Dean mattered to him, which Castiel did not understand. It was unlikely that he and Angela Garrett would ever speak face-to-face, and there was no one but

Castiel with whom she could share her thoughts or judgements, as the angel suspected was Dean's true fear.

Perhaps *that* was what the human found worrying, then.

"You have nothing to be concerned about," Castiel concluded, and Dean raised an eyebrow her way, not following the conversation. "She likes you. As do I."

Bright red colored Dean's cheeks almost immediately, and he looked away like something Castiel had said was not something he had wanted to hear. Humans were confusing as ever.

"Uh. Yeah, thanks." Dean cleared his throat again and was it dusty in here or something? Maybe he should try a glass of water. "That's- yeah. Uh. You too- or, uh, me too. I guess. You know."

Castiel did not know, given that none of that had been a full sentence or particularly informative. But she accepted it all the same, the awkward intent obvious enough. And as Dean turned his attention back to the television set with laser-like focus, Castiel closed her eyes and once more sought out her matching existence in the man's chest.

-o-o-o-

Dean couldn't help himself. Between the fact that Jaws II was just not that good of a movie (definitely not a classic like the first one and lacking the ridiculousness of the third) and the warmth blossoming in his chest in a current loop of happy little pulse-explosions, he couldn't ignore the angel sitting next to him like he had planned to. He kept sneaking glances at her when he was pretty sure she wasn't paying attention. Which was the entire time, actually, and the more confident he got about that, the longer he would stare.

Angela was a beautiful woman, no doubt about it, but what Dean realized the longer he watched her was the more of Cas that he could see in her features. It could have been her distant relation to Jimmy that saw such similarities, but something niggled in the back of his mind (and the front of his chest) telling him that wasn't what he was seeing. Soon enough it became something of a game, a challenge, really, to spot the angel he knew in the human's features.

It was more entertaining than the movie, was what he told himself, anyway.

There was a lightness to her skin, dark and red-toned as it was, that

struck familiarity in the hunter. Nothing supernatural, though Dean had the distinct impression that it was the grace filling her human vessel that gave off that impression. A calm confidence that spoke of no doubts and no insecurities, something that simply seemed inhuman in a way (and which Dean knew not to be true, but which angels seemed so damn good at suppressing). There was a squareness to her jaw Dean was pretty sure didn't belong to Angela. It spoke of discipline and military and obedience, which he didn't figure was part of the Devil Lady's normal demeanor.

Not that he knew how a square jaw could possibly be a demeanor. The damn thing should have been genetics, but nope. Dean was pretty sure without Cas around, the angles of those cheekbones and that jaw would be way softer.

Friggin' angels, man.

He tried to think of differences he'd seen in Sam, both with Gadreel and Lucifer. He didn't like to think about the latter, but it was probably the most obvious change in his brother to go off of. Gadreel had been stiff, and Dean had written off the changes in his brother mostly as the angel unfamiliar with humanity and with what was possibly a bigger stick up his ass than even Cas had ever had. Looking back on it now, though, Dean wondered if the way Gadreel had ground his brother's jaw hadn't been a symptom of the angel himself, as he was fairly certain Cas was doing for Angela now. Lucifer possessing Cas had actually been similar, with the angel seeming far harder around the edges than normal.

It was an interesting realization that was utterly and completely ended when the hotel room door handle jiggled a millisecond before Sam swung the damn thing open with no further warning.

Dean was up and off and across the bed all in one go. He ended up going from laying to rolling to standing with far too much momentum in the small space between the second bed and the wall that separated the main room from the bathroom. He managed not to tumble over completely as one foot took half the thin comforter with him and he had to catch himself flat-palmed on the wall with a loud smack. All of which he covered completely and totally smoothly with a single hand on his hip and an award winning smile for the rest of the room that spoke of absolutely nothing wrong with this situation in the slightest.

Cas, still half-perched on the bed with her hand outstretched over a now empty space, just blinked up at him, a little stunned and clearly

confused. Sam, on the other hand, stood in the doorway with a look on his face that said 'What the hell?' to the max.

"Uh…." The younger Winchester's eyes went from his panting, disheveled brother oddly groping the motel wall and standing in a space about six inches wide with half the bed coverings dragged off, to the angel with her outstretched arm. A look of, perhaps not understanding but certainly amusement, crossed his face as hazel eyes resettled on his big brother. "Why are you breathing like you just ran a marathon?"

Dean balked, pulling his head back and letting go of the wall to stand normally. "You're one to talk."

Sam, who was actually breathing pretty acceptably for having just gone on an hour run, said as much with a bitchface (a little bit of #8, *"Did you seriously just say that?"* but mostly #12).

"Dude, I *was* running." The younger hunter glanced between the two again and some more of that little-brother-evil-glee lit his face. "What were you two doing?"

"Shut your mouth right now," Dean growled as he stalked around the bed, practically tripping over the comforter *again* as he navigated the small space. "We were watching TV."

"Uh-huh." Sam shut the door behind him, pulling his headphones off from around his neck and wrapping them around his iPod.

"Tell him, Cas," Dean demanded, gesturing towards the still confused angel who had at least lowered her arm by that point.

Castiel switched between Dean and Sam, who started peeling off his sneakers but was regarding the angel with some mix of enjoyment and encouragement.

"Dean was watching television," she began and the hunter in question gestured towards her with both arms like she had proved his point. Unfortunately for him, she was not done telling. "I was conferencing with the grace in his chest."

"Traitor!" Dean hissed, much to the worriment of Castiel, who could not quite tell what she had betrayed. But the hunter didn't seem all that mad, throwing himself down onto the end bed as Sam purposefully sent a look his way that he flat out ignored. He grabbed the remote and jacked the volume to the TV way up. Lucky for him,

Sam was way more interested in conversing about the technicalities of grace communing than the liquid-gold teasing material this mess absolutely was (especially as Cas held back nothing when it came to how much better skin-on-skin contact was for the process).

("Oh? It is, is it? How *much* skin contact, exactly?" That stupidly high pitch voice had been pointed right in his direction and Dean answered it with a single raised finger.)

He was sure he'd be hearing plenty about this in the future. Winchester's weren't exactly known for letting golden opportunities slide. In which case, Dean would promptly remind the kid of that time he tried to kiss Stacie Harrison at his eighth grade dance and ended up with a face full of punch. That'd teach him.

In the meantime, if Cas needed anymore *conferencing*, she could do it with her friggin' eyeballs and about thirty-nine and a half feet between them.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: While I've been struggling with this story, I've allowed the muse to wander a bit and get out some of the other stuff that's been distracting her. So keep an eye out over the next couple weeks for some new stories. They'll all be relatively short or oneshots, but I'm trying to line some of them up to sprinkle in when this story encounters a lengthy delay.

Up Next: We wrap this piddly little case up (and Cas finally shows that yes, having an angel on a hunt is actually handy) and finally, finally, finally land ourselves in actual-season-two-land. Thank the lord!

Chapter 58: Season 2: Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

-A/Ns: Thank you all again for your second round of patience. I'm still climbing my way out of this sucky low, but I'm getting there and have high hopes for the future. I know it sucks, but I honestly recommend maybe re-reading the last three or four chapters to kind of catch up with what's been going on. These chapters were never meant to be read with a month's span between them (and I am so very sorry it's turned out that way)

-Chapter Warnings: We are wrapping up our intermediate season 2.0 (soon to be on with Season 2.1!) with a little bit of a bang and hopefully some giggles. Cas is showing off, Sam's setting things on fire, Dean's being **a man** (snort). And that's just the first half (the second half involves human toes) ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 25

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

While Mrs. Alders was out at her Tuesday Bridge meetup, the Winchesters and their angel broke into her house, grabbed the necklace (and the urn, just to be thorough), and hightailed it out of there before any nosey neighbors got suspicious or had itchy-dialing fingers. They drove the urn to the nearest cemetery, for the purpose of a somewhat isolated location without a lot of visitors where they could burn a friggin' metal thing full of already burned granddaughter, and what they hoped was the only thing keeping her tied to this plane.

Dean would have preferred doing it at the park not three blocks from the old lady's house. He did *not* like a giant mound of ashes in an unsealed container just hanging out in his baby, not to mention the thing the homicidal bitch was probably tied to ('bitch' was a bit harsh; the girl's death certainly didn't sound pleasant. But she'd damn well mutilated the last guy in a way no man ever wants to be mutilated. So, yeah, Dean wasn't feeling too cordial about hosting an open

invitation for the man-mutilator to come party with more men who had men-things to be mutilated, and, oh yeah, they were currently trying to kill her themselves. Yeah. Nothing to possibly go wrong with that equation.)

Luckily for them, Sam's point of maybe not fighting a ghost in public place just because it was nearby (not to mention city by-laws about open flames) was backed up by the fact that no ghost tried to attack them in the Impala. Whether that was because they had an angel with them (Dean's theory), a woman with them (Sam's theory) or the fact that the car was fairly heavily warded (Castiel's silent observation which she did not offer aloud, mostly due to being somewhat confused as to why neither man listed it as a possibility. Surely Dean would know the warding on his own vehic- *Baby*) was not something the ghost clarified for them once she did show up to mutilate their man bits.

(She didn't actually try to mutilate any bits, man or woman, she just straight up tried to kill them, but Dean was a touch touchy about his man bits and also maybe paranoid about cases that could potentially concern them.)

Back in the car, Castiel was more focused on understanding human intricacies than the murderous rage of a spirit trapped on the earthly plane after an unpleasant death.

'*I still do not understand how a car can be female*,' Castiel returned internally as Angela reminded him Dean's vehicle was named Baby. He looked around the backseat of the car, down leather and stitching, across carpeting and metal, but could not find any distinguishing feminine features.

'*Don't worry about it. It's a guy thing.*'

Whatever sort of thing it was – be it a guy thing, a warding thing, a woman thing, or an angel thing – it ended the second they stepped out of the car in the quiet, isolated corner of the town's largest cemetery. Nicole Alder was on them like a rabbit on a salad before any of them could draw a weapon.

Lucky for them, and there was no debate about it this time; they had an angel on their side. Dean had been right. Cas was really handy in a fight. The angel tackled Sam out of the way of the oncoming firestorm of fury and bitterness. They hit the ground hard, but Sam was a hunter: back up on his feet with a roll and the pull of his firearm. He

got two shots in before Castiel took over.

"Burn the necklace!" she commanded over her shoulder, hand reached out to curl around the ghost's forehead. Nicole Alder cried out in rage and pain, striking out against the angel. Sam saw the hits land, but they didn't seem to be doing much damage.

It was impressive, actually, and Sam sort of got the mix of awe and reverence that sometimes crossed his brother's face whenever he'd talked about the celestial being. Of course, Sam had just thought it was a case of fan-worship. Dean had always been a closet fanboy (sometimes not so closeted). A badass taker-down-of-supernatural-things that was also on their side, let Dean teach him naughty words, watched all his favorite TV shows with him, *and* liked cheeseburgers almost as much as Dean himself? Yeah, Sam had chalked Dean's admiration of Castiel up to total fanboying.

Of course, the three days they'd spent with the angel so far since Castiel came into their lives were starting to make Sam think he might have been a little more off about the relationship between brother and angel than he'd originally imagined. The female vessel wasn't helping things, but Sam knew his brother well enough to have a hunch that Angela Garrett only had so much to do with it.

Still, back to the point at hand, the younger Winchester now understood the actual reverence a little better now, seeing the angel in action.

Dean was already digging into the trunk for mini-bonfire necessities while Sam continued to gawk as Cas fought off the ghost. The trunk slammed shut and Dean darted past him with a gas can and rag, finally shaking Sam out of it. He raced after him, sliding to his knees once they were a safe enough distance away from the Impala. Sam dug a lighter out of his pocket as Dean curled the rag into a dry patch of grass. As the older Winchester soaked the rag through with gas, Sam reached over and snatched a dried, dead bouquet from a grave and threw it on top, following it with the necklace that dangled from his finger.

Unfortunately for them, Nicole had been pretty smart in life, about to graduate as a physics major with plans to pursue a PhD in the subject. So, Dean figured, Sam had some hope of carrying over all that genius into his afterlife after all. Because Nicole picked up pretty damn quick that the angel would put herself directly in the ghost's way anytime she tried to stop the hunters who were trying to permanently stop her.

It took all of two failed attempts before the third was a fake out. Castiel placed herself predictably between the ghost and the Winchesters, only for Nicole to vanish rather than throw her power blast at the boys.

It left the angel's back wide open to attack as Nicole re-appeared behind her. Cold, angry hands fisted in Castiel's coat and flung the angel around and back with a power only years of supernatural anger was capable of creating.

Cas's grunt was enough to alert the two hunters, seconds before she went flying past them. Dean, stupidly, dropped the gas can and launched himself into her flightpath with her name on his lips. They both hit the ground and rolled right into a tombstone with an impressive thud. Sam didn't have time to worry, lighting the rag into a quickly consumed inferno. He shot back to his feet, firearm raised against the approaching phantom, who was seething with rage. She disappeared with the first shot.

The hunter stiffened as he felt her presence reappear behind him. But as he spun to shoot once more, the ghost of Nicole Alder faltered, hands raised for another game of toss-the-hunter. Her body flickered in and out, embers starting to light along her tattered clothing, and her rage consumed face faltered into something far younger.

Sam backed up as she burst into flames and disappeared entirely.

"Shit," Dean groused, sitting up from the base of the grave. His back hurt like hell; he'd have one heck of a bruise from hitting the side of the damn stone straight on. Cas was in his arms, the hunter having padded more of the angel's fall. Once Dean made eye contact with his brother, seeing for himself that Sam was okay, he turned his attention to his friend, who was quite literally in his lap. "You okay?"

Castiel climbed off of her charge unaffected, extending a hand to help him up. "I am unharmed. You should not have done that."

Dean shrugged a shoulder awkwardly, wincing as he climbed to his feet and his back twinged. "I saw an opening, and that tombstone could have hurt you as much as it hurt me."

"That is entirely untrue. I am an Angel of the Lord. No stone would damage me. Your decision to come to my aid was foolish." Castiel reached up with her standard two-finger touch and Dean let out a relieved breath as that familiar healing warmth flooded his back.

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm used to an angel that's a little less invincible, alright?"

Sam's eyebrows went up as Dean's tone got defensive. Paired with the obvious one-over Dean was giving Angel's body (clearly not taking the angel's word that she was fine), Sam easily enough put two and two together and came up with exasperation. Really. Dean was the one had told him that Cas was practically invincible. Bragged about it, pretty much.

Of course, that's when he had been *male*.

Dean caught the knowing look Sam was throwing his way (which, *screw that*) and shrugged, irritated that he'd tried to help and was getting flack for it. He grumbled under his breath, turning back to the angel only to find Cas was regarding him with narrowed, squinty eyes that were too damn familiar on a foreign face.

"You do not think I can protect myself in this vessel?"

The hunter leveled an immediate finger in her direction. "I didn't say that."

"You did not have to."

He bristled. "Quit reading my head, Cas!"

The angel just kept squinty-eyeing him and, all haughtily, replied, "I am not."

Dean snapped his mouth shut, realizing he'd all but admitted to thinking the angel was weaker cuz she was girl. Damnit, that's not what he meant and everyone here should friggin' know it. Friggin' know him!

"I don't think you're- it's not because you're- damnit, women aren't weak, alright? I mean, some of them need protection, but that doesn't mean-" The older Winchester let out a vocal, dangerous growl and wished the moment would just end. Why was this so hard? Sam might as well hand him a shovel for all that digging he was doing. He blew out a breath and squared his shoulders. "It's not about that, Cas. I *save* people, okay? *We* save people. I will always put myself between them and whatever's coming. You included!"

He was gesturing wildly by the end of it, but fuck it. As his words echoed into the silence of the midday graveyard and he finally

dropped his arms, Dean realized they were both still staring at him, but the mood had changed. Sam actually looked impressed, in that smug-little-brother-who's-smarter-than-you, but still. And Cas just tilted her head, a thoughtful moue replacing the earlier irritation.

Then Cas was stepping into his personal space, putting her hand on his arm, right over a mark that wasn't there, and staring at him in some sort of amazement that absolutely did not travel south. On a male Cas, that admiration had looked so damn serious it was awkward. Real easy to clear his throat, pat the guy on the back, and move on. On Angela, it was the kind of look he usually got in a dark bar when he was on a damn good streak and he knew he was getting lucky that night.

Shit.

He added it to the list of things to talk to Cas about never ever doing again.

"The capacity for human compassion continues to amaze me. You are a good man, Dean Winchester." The angel offered the smallest of smiles, something experimental that she didn't quite get right, but it was close. Dean swallowed, face flushing in the embarrassment of this situation and the audience it just had to have (because, of course it did). "While I do not need your protection, I am honored by the concern for my wellbeing. You care."

"Uh…" Dean cleared his throat, looking down at the hand still gripping his bicep if only to ignore the angel staring at him like he'd just saved the friggin world. God. *Awkward.* "Sure. If you, uh, wanna make it all girly."

Beside him, Sam snorted and Dean shot him a glare. They stood there until it was clear Cas wasn't going to move, and Dean finally took her hand, patted it inelegantly, released it, and told her, "Good talk."

Sam was still choking back a laugh by the time they made it to the Impala and he had three new bruises from Dean's sharp elbow straight to his ribs.

-o-o-o-

They were just opening the doors of the Impala when Cas turned to them like she was about to leave and Dean immediately tensed up.

"I have an… errand to run?" she surprised them by saying – well, sort

of asking, like she wasn't sure that was the right phrase – but her eyes were locked on Sam. Understanding (and relief? What was up with that) flickered across his features, causing Dean to frown in his brother's direction. When he gave her an encouraging nod, probably over the turn of phrase, she continued, "I will return before you go to sleep tonight."

At the same time, Dean asked, "What errand?" but she was already gone. Annoyed (and confused, not that he'd admit it), the older Winchester turned to Sam, suspicion painting over the annoyance. His brother knew something, darnit. "What errand!"

"I don't know." Sam climbed into the car. Dean followed. It wasn't a lie. Sure, Sam had a hunch what the errand was about, but it's not like he knew what Cas had gone off to do. Dean was glaring at him now, all squinty-eyed himself. Sam rolled his eyes. "Did you want to go get lunch or not?"

"You're buying," his brother answered, all pouty and grumpy. He stuck the key into Baby's ignition and started her up. "And there better be pie."

-o-o-o-

They grabbed lunch in town which, along with the benefit of damn decent pie (the town was worth saving after all, it turned out), gave them the opportunity to stick around, make sure the ghost was really gone and nothing else was left to torment these people. The brothers mulled about for a way longer lunch than they usually took, but nothing turned up and it looked like the case was over and they could leave town.

Only they couldn't, because Cas was out running *errands*, didn't have a cell phone (Dean would be fixing that immediately) and had all but told them she'd be at the motel that night, which was the only place she knew to meet them.

True to her word, Cas showed back up right about the time they would have turned in for the night. 'Would have' being the key words, as Dean was too keyed up waiting for her return to possibly sleep (she wouldn't have gone back to Heaven, would she? What errand could possibly end up there?) and Sam was restless and exhausted to the point of either passing out where he stood or leaving for another night's run. Being afraid to sleep would do that to a guy.

The clatter of glass jars clinking together drowned out the sound of

wingbeats, and Dean sat up in surprise at the sudden noise, Sam spinning towards the small living area of the motel. Cas was standing beside the kitchenette table, almost a dozen jars of varying sizes and colors now on the cheap faux-wood surface. Dean hopped off the bed as Sam went over to investigate.

"What the hell's all this?" the older Winchester asked, his brother already examining some of the jars and the mystery contents. Looked like spell components. Small, dried flowers and grasses. A couple powders. Dean picked up a container of liquid and quickly put it back down. "Please tell me those aren't toes."

"They are not toes," Cas confirmed, and Dean let out a relieved breath. They sure looked like toes. "They are mushrooms. A rare species that grows only in the mountains of Japan."

Dean frowned over at her. "Is that where you were all day?"

Collecting Japanese fungus toes. Sure, why not. Sounded like something Cas would do.

She looked at the ingredients pointedly. "I was many places."

"What's it all for, Castiel?" Sam asked, far more reasonably, as he set down the jar of mushrooms soaked in a yellow-brown liquid. He couldn't help the scrunched up face, though. They really did look like human toes.

The angel dug two small, cloth pouches out of her coat pocket (and Dean internally congratulated himself on the purchase of the totally practical piece of tan clothing. Having pockets was *practical*) and handed one to each of the brothers. Dean could spot a hex bag from a mile away, and so he took the thing a hell of a lot more cautiously than this brother.

"Hex bags," Cas confirmed Dean's suspicions, and Sam's eyebrows shot up. It wasn't his first time running into them (witches, man. They were the worst), but he probably hadn't expected an angel to be handing him one. "They will disguise your presence from Azazel."

The look that crossed Sam's face was so damn relieved that Dean *almost* didn't round on him, an expectantly raised brow and bland expression (hiding a pissy expression) on his face. "Azazel?"

Sam seemed uncomfortable, but kept his gaze with a fierce determination of his own. "I told you he showed up in my dream."

"No," Dean countered immediately, the bland definitely giving way to pissed-the-hell-off as he waggled a finger at his brother. "You told me you had a bad dream, and you mentioned the name. You didn't tell me Azazel was visiting you in your damn head!"

Which, yeah, Dean had put together himself, thank you very much, but it wasn't the same thing and Sam knew it.

Dean turned away from his brother's mixed look of puppy-dog guilt and '*I'm not a child*' anger. He lifted the hex bag, which given the not-human-toes sitting on the table, he really didn't want to know the ingredients of. "This is awesome and all, Cas – real creative – but why don't you just zap us on the ribs with some Enochian like last time?"

Castiel tilted her head tellingly in his direction, and Dean knew that look. It was the annoyed look that said, so plainly he could *hear* it, *'Because I wasn't there last time, Dean*.' Or maybe that was future-Cas, speaking from his chest, which twitched behind his sternum. Dean wondered who that twinge was for; agreeing with Dean or defending his other self.

He could probably guess, and it wasn't the one he'd have liked it to be.

"That is a creative solution," Castiel answered, and despite Dean's internal going-ons, the angel didn't seem annoyed. If anything, she sounded thoughtful. Dean wondered if this Cas was impressed with her own – well, her future – ingenuity. "However, we should avoid anything that uses Enochian, else I would teach you several warding symbols that would be far more efficient than hex bags."

She gestured to the table now crammed with ingredients and Dean realized they were going to have to store all that stuff in the trunk and learn how to make the damn bags. Awesome.

"Why not?" Sam asked, though he was already tucking the hex bag into his pocket and Dean narrowed his eyes at the trust. Not that Sam shouldn't trust Cas but…they were *hex bags*, man. Witchcraft was never good. Carved ribs was a much better option, future X-ray needs and hospitals aside.

"Those will ward you from all creatures, angels included." She nodded toward the one Dean still held, and he looked down at it, begrudgingly impressed (very begrudgingly) at the strength of the thing. Hex bags didn't usually have a large range unless they were powerful or black magic. He knew Cas wouldn't give them something dark, though, so that meant the magic for these bags was old. "Heaven

is likely watching you, even now. If they investigate why you disappeared from their senses and see Enochian warding as the cause-"

"They'll know we've got a rogue angel helping us out," Dean finished, stomach sinking. Maybe it wouldn't be the first conclusion they'd jump to, but it would stir up way too much curiosity either way. He tucked the hex bag in his pocket with resignation. Witchcraft it was.

"Yes," Cas agreed. "Once they realize the source of the interference is a hex bag, they'll have no reason to be suspicious. It would not be uncommon for hunters to use such a solution when trying to hide from demons."

"The fact that it hides us from Heaven is just an accidental benefit," Sam offered with a wry smile, knowing it was anything but coincidental. Cas went for another smile, a little closer to hitting her mark that time. Then she was digging into her coat again, producing a small, thick, gold coin.

"The bags only disguise your presence; they are not protection. Finding a means to permanently guard your mind from intrusion would be… more complicated than we have time for, I'm afraid. But this will stop you from dreaming." Cas handed the coin over to Sam, who ran his thumb over the ancient medal and the crudely carved face on one side. "It is a Persian sleep coin, magicked to block the owner from experiencing any form of dreaming when asleep. You place it under your head; beneath your pillow would work, I imagine."

Sam flipped the coin over. It didn't look like anything special.

"Wait, it blocks all dreams?" Dean parroted, staring at the thing with a mixed expression. "Nightmares too?"

"All dreams," Cas confirmed. "It was originally created for a Persian King who suffered sleep terrors. He summoned all types of sorcerers and mages to his kingdom to find him a cure."

"…Is there more than one?" Dean asked, and there was a hint of hopefulness in his voice that had Sam sending him a look. They were lucky enough Cas had gone halfway across the world to fetch them this one. Dean glared defensively back at his brother. "What? I want one."

Castiel regarded her human charge with slightly narrowed eyes, trying to figure out if he was joking or serious, and if serious, just how serious. "Unfortunately, they are difficult to come by. I was lucky to

find this one."

"Yeah, yeah. Figures," Dean grumbled.

The angel turned back to Sam, considering the discussion closed on Dean getting a shiny no-nightmare coin of his own. "This is not a permanent solution. The human mind is powerful, and dreaming is an outlet for many things. You should not use the coin consecutively for too long, or you may lose your ability to dream altogether."

Sam looked immediately perturbed, but honestly, Dean could imagine worse things. The kid glanced down at the coin in his hand, before closing his fingers around it. Meeting the angel's gaze, he gave a determined nod. This would do for now. "Thank you, Cas."

"Of course. Your safety is paramount, Sam. I will work on a way to block your mind more permanently the next time I return."

Dean heard the conversation drawing closed a mile away and fidgeted, knowing what it meant. "You have to head back, then?"

Castiel nodded. "I have likely been gone longer than is safe, for now."

"Do you need help plugging your body back in at Bobby's?" Sam offered, a smile on his face. Cas just shook her head.

"I will manage, thank you."

They continued to stand there as the silence got awkward, with Sam expecting the angel to disappear with a beat of invisible wings, and Dean kind of dreading when that went down (he was still not so comfortable with the angel out of reach up in Heaven, especially an angel prone to panic attacks caused by being in heaven out of reach). Cas herself seemed hesitant, which only made Dean's worry turn into justified anger.

Then those blue eyes dropped to his chest and the hunter found that anger somewhere down near his toes with nothing more than mild annoyance filling its place. He rolled his eyes hard enough it hurt.

"Oh for the love of-" He let out an annoyed growl-sigh-noise-thing-a-majig and closed the distance between the two of them. Dean grabbed Cas's hand and hauled it up to his chest, refusing to actually think about it. He absolutely ignored the flip-flopping in his chest as the Cas behind his sternum flipped and flopped excitedly at the connection. And he absolutely, *absolutely*, ignored the raised eyebrows he could

feel Sam giving them just over his shoulder or the poorly disguised cough.

He supposed it was worth it for the brief peace that stole over Cas's face.

And *then* she was gone with a flap of invisible wings.

-o-o-o-

Sam was climbing into bed, tucking the coin beneath his pillow like a reverse-tooth-fairy trick, ridiculously relieved and looking forward to a good night's sleep, when Dean finally brought it up. Sam knew he would.

"You should have told me, Sammy."

The younger Winchester refused to tense. He'd known it was coming, and he didn't feel bad about how it had played out. Still, he didn't shrug, since he knew the nonchalance would just piss his brother off, and that's not what he wanted, either.

"Sorry," he offered, going for apologetic but pretty sure he missed. He probably hit somewhere in the snark range, given the words he chose to go with since he knew they'd knock his brother right off this train of thought. "I didn't want to interrupt your time with Cas, what with that crush you're working on."

Dean might have stayed angry (definitely was angry) if he wasn't too busy defending his honor as a man. "I do not- I don't- I don't have a *crush* on Cas!"

The sputtering was particularly convincing.

"Uh-huh."

"It's *not* a crush," Dean growled more fiercely. "This body is just… it's friggin' horny, alright?"

If Sam had been drinking that glass of water he'd just set down on the nightstand between the beds, he definitely would have choked on it. Well, better late than never for his big brother to finally have *that* realization.

"And Angela is- she's- she's *hot*, okay? With Cas's lost and not-quite-all-there look- It's not- *I'm* not- Just shut up."

Sam didn't even have to say anything. At that point, he was just trying not to laugh out loud. Dean, meanwhile, threw himself onto the bed, pulling the covers up with unnecessary force, and turned his back on his brother. He was still grumbling under his breath as silence settled over the room.

He could let it drop, Sam knew. He really, really could.

Instead, he sighed and fiddled with the corner of the thin comforter.

"I needed time, Dean." His brother might hear only an excuse, but for Sam it was the truth. "I was *scared*. Terrified. I don't know what's coming next, okay? I don't get that benefit; I haven't lived through this and know it'll all be okay. And you just telling me it will be- All I know is one wrong move and I-" he choked on the words, staring at his hands in his lap as he sat on the bed, those feelings of hopelessness once more overwhelming- "-I end the world."

Dean rolled back over, propping himself up on his elbow. "It's not that black and white, Sam. It isn't all on you."

The younger Winchester picked his head up and met his brother's gaze. He knew Dean was trying to help, to comfort, but that wasn't really the point. "But this part is. Right now. With the blood."

Dean couldn't tell him it wasn't, which *was* Sam's point. With a noise in the back of his throat – mostly frustration but also a decent helping of concession, the man from the future rolled onto his back and stared unhappily up at the ceiling.

"I get it. I can't say I know what exactly what you're going through but… I do get it, Sammy." He ran a hand down his face and tried to force all of the defeatist fear and just damn tiredness into resolve. It worked, sort of. Well enough, for now, for him to turn back onto his side to face his brother. "Still, we gotta figure out how to not do this." He waved his finger between them. "Secrets are gonna end badly for us, every time. And I know – I'm a hypocrite – but I'm trying too. We just gotta…figure it out."

Sam fell silent for a moment before stirring enough to lay down on the bed, still atop the covers. "How?"

Because Sam had needed that time. He hadn't been keeping a secret, he'd been…trying to process it so he could be in a place where he could even tell his brother to begin with.

It wasn't accusatory, just quiet. Still, it dug little claws in to Dean's heart all the same. He didn't like when he didn't have answers for his kid brother. It was worse with this version of his brother, because of the emphasis on *kid*. He'd never felt older and more like the protector he had always been charged with being. It was only time that would tell whether he did it better this time around or so much worse.

"I don't know," he admitted, quiet himself. "We've never been good at it. I guess we… I dunno, we gotta figure out how to be able to say stuff with no judgement. No criticism. And early on, cuz waiting only ever makes it worse, every damn time. So, you just… you tell me something because I need to hear it and that'll…that'll be it. No questions asked, and vice versa."

Easier said than done, he knew. He was thankful Sam didn't snort at the words outright. God knew, Dean wanted to himself. Like it could ever be that simple with them.

"Yeah." Sam's voice, still quiet, said as much, but he didn't outright call it out. He lolled his head to the side to meet Dean's eyes. "We can at least try it, right?"

Dean huffed, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah. Let's start with that."

-o-o-o-

Sam slept that night with Cas's coin underneath his pillow and he didn't dream, of Azazel or otherwise. He didn't dream any night going forward. They carried a hex bag each wherever they went, and always had spares in the trunk. Dean tucked one up into the wheel well of Baby, grumbling the entire time about witchcraft getting anywhere near his precious car (which Sam countered by pointing out the contents of their trunk, one item at a time until Dean conceded with a classic *'Shut up, Sam, I'm grumbling here'* and all was right with the world). The only reason he'd conceded to doing it at all was because it had been Sam's idea, and he was pretty sure the kid would have done it without his know-how if he'd said no. And that woulda just pissed him off, not to mention been a sort of secret, and they were trying *not* to do that. Dean figured part of that meant not backing Sam into the kind of corner where secrets were necessary. So there he was, putting a friggin witch's bag of voodoo all up in his Baby and desperately not thinking about the poor violation she was suffering.

Protection, Dean, Sam had countered and again, *Shut up, Sam, I'm*

bitching over here and you're gonna let me or so help me-

When he mentioned devil-trapping the car later that same day, Dean surprised him by just grinning rather than outright refusing to alter his precious car in any way. Nevermind the one spray-painted in the trunk (which had given Sam some hope that Dean might let put one in the cab), Dean just reached up and patted the roof of his car lovingly.

"What, you think I'd waste the perfect opportunity restoring her?"

Sam stared at the upholstery of the car's roof, the creamy beige that Dean had been able to mostly save from before the crash. He darted his eyes back to his older brother in disbelief. Dean just grinned.

"Carved one right into her frame. Put the headliner back on top." He moved his hand back to the wheel, looking damn pleased with himself. "Any demon shows up in this car, he ain't getting back out."

Which might prove troublesome later on with Crowley, but one in a million demons was decent odds to deal with. Plus, he never wanted that smarmy bastard anyway near Baby anyway, no matter how helpful he was on occasion or the weird I-sort-of-tolerate-you-and-sometimes-almost-even-like-you-but-also-hate-your-guts feeling he always got around the demon. Like he'd told himself when he was busy carving the trap on the underside of the roof: they'd burn or build that bridge when they got to it.

Sam just grinned, the expression one of obvious relief and Dean could tell he was thinking he shouldn't have doubted his amazing big brother. Sparing him the need to say it aloud, Dean said it for him and got a bitchface in return (and all was right with the world again).

-o-o-o-

Two days later, as Dean was coming back to the car with a bag full of burgers and rabbit food (and pie of course), his phone rang. He pulled it out of his jacket as he opened up the car door and tossed the food to Sam.

"Hello," he said as he climbed into Baby.

"So. Psychic, huh?"

Dean grinned immediately and couldn't help the laugh. "The clown show up?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this-" he could hear Ellen's amused disbelief, and it just made him grin more- "but yes, Dean, the killer clown showed up. Just like you said he would."

Oh yeah, there was definitely amusement in there.

Sam was giving him the kind of eyebrows that might as well have been poking him in the arm for answers by that point but he didn't bother giving any. The conversation was a short one, anyway.

"Sam and I are on our way."

He hit the end button and started the engine up. Sam was still staring expectantly.

"We're going to the roadhouse," he said by explanation and then turned that grin on his brother, cranked it up to shit-eating level just for kicks, and added, "We've got a killer clown on the loose."

The expression on his brother's face was totally worth it all over again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aaaaaand we are **officially** back in Season 2! FINALLY.

Delay Warning: I know, I know, this **suuuucks** because the story has been on delay for months now. Trust me, I know and I'm right there with you guys. But I need the time (and planned time, not "Work's too busy or my stupid brain chemicals are stupid") to build my stockpile of chapters back up. I can't keep doing this week by week; I'm a slow writer and feeling like I have to write every day puts me in rut-land immediately. Then it's demoralizing when I inevitably fail and I make you guys wait. So, yes, I know the delay is the absolute opposite of awesome sauce but I promise the wait will be worth it.

Up Next: Season 2.1 (or Season Two, Take Two) We have a quicky with a killer clown for poor Sammy to deal with (and Dean's gonna be no help at all), Gordan Walker is just around the corner, Andy Gallagher after that (that jedi-tricking bowl of awesomeness in a robe with his polar bear riding Viking queen of a van). Not to mention more Ellen and Jo, the mother-friggin Croatoan virus AND GABRIEL! I mean, he'll be a while but he's in the line up. Home run, hitter, that one.

Season 2 is gonna be fun, guys :D

Review: So no one really wants to review after being told there's *another* month delay coming, but please remember that I do much much much better with encouragement. If you've enjoyed the last 24 chapters of not-season-two-ness that have stressed me the mother-stressing stressor stressafied of all stressed outness (that's not even a full sentence, girl, let alone a thing), I would really really, really appreciate hearing it. For all you lurkers out there, this would be a good once-a-season time to review, kay? Kay.

And if you are excited for season 2, have requests or ideas about what you think is gonna happen, LEMME HEAR IT!

As always, thanks for sticking with me.

Chapter 59: Season 2: Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Thank you to everyone who took my April Fool's joke in good humor (and sorry to those it pissed off). We are officially back now, though! I have a mostly-healthy stockpile of chapters (missed my goal a little bit; Jo Harvelle is turning out to be one stubborn little lady to write) but the next two months, at least, should see weekly updates!

Sabiepig: I deleted the April Fools chapter, and your comment, before I responded to your question (because I'm a big ole dumb dumb). This story updates once a week on Sundays, so long as I have the chapter stockpile to do so. We switch to two weeks when I fall behind. Welcome to the story, btw! :)

Chapter Warnings: Did ya miss me? Did ya, did ya? Let's be honest, we all know you're here for my silly little ramble at the start of each chapter. Don't be shy, you can admit it; I'm a comic genius (**snort**) We're kicking off Season 2.1 right this time (apologies again for my no good dirty rotten April Fool's prank), with Rakshashas, carnivals, and family feuds unfolding! We've a killer clown (poor Samy), but first, there's nothing like an excuse to go see the Harvelles! Plus, Azazel's back on the playing field, he's brought his bouncing baby boy along, and we kick off the mystery portion of our program right away as Hell's wrench-in-the-works makes her first Season 2.1 appearance.

Here. We. Go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 26

(for real this time)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

They stopped at the Roadhouse first for intel. As impressive as Dean's future knowledge may seem to anyone else, he really didn't know

most details when it came down to it (who would, ten years later. Was it eleven now? He'd been in this time for almost a year now. Damn. He really didn't know how to feel about that.) Memory on cases tended to be pretty hit or miss for him. The big stuff was usually a given, but the snippets he recalled here and there seemed entirely random, and never felt liked the important stuff they could really use.

The town the carnival was in could be any one of a dozen – Dean wasn't even sure it was in the same state as the Roadhouse – and the name of the traveling company was utterly lost to him over the years. So really, they needed Ellen's information. Plus, it was an excellent excuse to see the Harvelles, something Dean would never get tired of being able to do.

"Tell me it's not really a *clown* killing these kids' parents," Ellen started with as she handed over the folder. The sharp red ink on the outside sparked a moment of déjà vu for the man from the future. He accepted it with an award winning grin Ellen just snorted at.

"Can't say for sure."

His answer was obviously bullshit, despite Dean trying to keep a straight face (Ellen and Sam's identically narrowed eyes gave his failure away pretty quickly). But he was having way too much fun to care.

The brothers didn't stay long; mother and daughter were getting the place ready to open for afternoon business and Sam and Dean didn't want to get in the way of their actual paying job. The four of them caught up briefly, with Ellen wanting to know how they were doing since their daddy's death and Jo curious about the hunts they'd been on in the two months since they'd last been at the Roadhouse.

"Asa was asking after you." Ellen changed the topic less than subtly as the two Winchesters started recapping what they'd been up to. Lately, she had taken a particular dislike to the overly eager gleam in her daughter's eyes when hunters started talking shop.

Dean straightened predictably, and Sam coughed something that sounded like *'man-crush'* into his hand.

Ellen managed to look unimpressed and endlessly amused all in one half-lidded stare. "He wanted to get ahold of you boys. You alright I pass him your number?"

Dean's grip on the table top turned knuckle-white with excitement.

"Yes!" he immediately responded, way too eagerly, and backpedaled almost as quickly. "I mean, yeah, sure, that's cool. You do that."

Jo snorted. "Smooth."

"Shut up," Dean snapped back. "Like you don't have his number on speed dial."

The bit of red that crawled up her neck was telling, but she rolled her eyes and her head with a huff anyway.

Ellen, however, was now regarding her with a look that screamed *'lecture incoming,'* complete with the patented mom-hand-on-the-hip. "Joanna Beth, he is way too old for you."

Now Jo was sending Dean a death glare, but he only grinned and leaned against the counter, body language clearly saying *'good luck snarking your way out of that one.*'

"We talk about *hunts*, mom. Relax."

Ellen eyed her daughter with a judgmental hum, expression possibly turning even sourer, but the woman let it be, turning to the Winchesters, instead. "You boys oughta head out. Catch the carnival before it closes for the night."

Dean tapped the rim of the folder against the counter with a nod. Right she was; they had almost an hour drive and the afternoon was getting on. Not to mention, Dean's plan kind of relied on their so-called 'clown' actually being around the carnival for them to take care of. He remembered the guy killed at night, but it wouldn't hurt to scope the area out and they definitely wanted to be there well ahead of his next planned kill. Dean handed the folder to Sam, who'd give him a reminder read-through while they drove (and fill himself in on things Dean either hadn't mentioned or didn't remember).

"I could go with you," Jo suddenly said, edging forward against the bar a little too tellingly, expression trying for nonchalant but missing. "If you guys need an extra hand?"

Dean opened his mouth to respond, Sam shooting him a questioning look, but Ellen beat them both.

"You have responsibilities here," she admonished, the look in her eye and the tone of her voice making it pretty clear this wasn't the first time they'd talked about this. It probably wasn't the first time they'd

talk about it *today*. Dean had been present for some of those 'talks' and they usually involved more screaming than talking.

"Mom-"

"No, Jo. You're not going and that's that." Ellen might as well have physically put her foot down, for the overwhelming sense of finality in her words. Jo, arms crossed and face reddening in anger, didn't look like she was going to accept that lying down. "I'm sure the Winchesters can handle it."

Sam and Dean exchanged an awkward glance. That was their cue to go. Dean used the folder to tap Jo on the shoulder as they slipped passed. He kept his voice low and apologetic as he said, "Next time," but he knew he would have found a way to keep Jo out of the hunt same as Ellen.

He knew better, though, when it came down to it. Jo was going to start hunting, and soon, no matter what he or her mother had to say about it.

-o-o-o-

The carnival was just like Dean remembered it. Noisy, filled with screaming kids and the smell of stale peanuts, greasy food, and old hay. He was not disappointed in the slightest that they wouldn't be hanging around this one for long.

"Okay, but it's not *really* a clown, right?" Sam asked, apparently continuing their conversation from the bar that Dean never had finished. When his older brother didn't answer again, he grabbed his arm, stopping him. The kid actually looked nervous and Dean was loving every second of it. "Tell me it's not actually a clown, Dean."

"Oh, it gets worse." The older Winchester offered a sympathetic smile. "The clown was abused as a kid. Never got enough hugs. The only way we were able to send him on was for you to give him one, giant, Samsquatch squeeze."

By the last word, Dean was barely even trying to keep a straight face and Sam glared at him with every fiber of his being. He didn't even manage fifteen seconds before he was cracking up.

"It's the blind guy with the throwing knives. He's a Rakshasa." Dean managed the words between full-hearted laughs, doubled over by his own shenanigans even as he waved in the Rakshasa's direction, tossing

daggers over by the fun house. "Man, your face!"

Sam looked stormy, at best, a forehead free of wrinkles screamed high danger levels. "That's not funny, Dean."

"'Course you'd think that; you didn't see your face."

-o-o-o-

When he'd remembered the clown case was up-and-coming, Dean hadn't actually known what flavor of monster the blind dude was. There were way too many years of hunts between then and now for that knowledge to stick around. But knowing he liked to play dress up, ate mommies and daddies, and could go invisible (yeah, like Dean was likely to forget that funhouse of friggin' horrors), was enough to get him started. There'd been something about bugs, too, which helped. Even if Dean didn't remember what exactly, it helped narrow things down once he'd gotten a list going of possible monsters that fit the bill.

Which was why he and Sam were now armed with brass daggers, waiting just outside the carnival grounds after hours to take down a supernatural knife-thrower who didn't know they were coming this time. Not aware of hunters in the area or any new faces around the carnival, the not-so-blind guy (dressed in Sam's worst nightmare) was easy to catch off his guard on the dirt road that lead away from the back gate. Dean managed not to tease his brother for the way he stiffened – and glanced at Dean no less than three nervous times – when the clown suddenly rounded the bend and they had a stare off in the middle of the road.

The Mexican stand-off was not very Mexican and not very standoffish. The Rakshasha charged before Dean had even gotten the dramatic music going in his head.

-o-o-o-

He couldn't stop the grin stretched across his face if he wanted to, and oh, Dean definitely didn't want to.

"Like a little girl," he giggled, probably for the fourth time in half as many minutes. Sam glared at him something fierce and definitely pissy over the top of the Impala. Dean just laughed louder, opening the driver side door and climbing in. "I've heard girls scream less like girls, Sam."

The struggle had been brief. The clown hadn't known who he was dealing with, clearly. Sam took an elbow to the face, Dean skirted a throwing knife by less than an inch, but it ended with a clown dead on the ground, dagger sticking out of his chest.

Sam's doing, which his brother figured was probably pretty cathodic for the coulrophobic kid. All in all, a clean, quick kill, case closed. They'd be in and out in under seven hours, and five of that had been waiting around for the Rakshasha to leave the carnival in search of his next meal.

Dean couldn't have been happier to book it back to his Baby and slide inside before anyone happened by a pile of polka-dotted fabric, ruffles, and a clown wig in middle of the road, sans a body. It looked like someone had taken out some anger management on a piece of nineteen-seventy's couch upholstery. Rakshasha's died weird, man. At least they didn't have to deal with burying a body. He supposed they could have taken the time to toss the clothes, but it's not like anyone was going to call the cops on some discarded carnival dress-up.

By the time they got to the car, Dean was practically whistling. Playing roadie last time had not been one of his fonder memories, and he was beyond happy to be leaving the carnival behind with its cloying smell of peanuts, old straw, and animal piss. Sam, face red and murder still in his eyes (which had Dean cackling yet, even if that murder was definitely aimed in his direction currently), didn't bother answering the last of his brother's taunts.

God, he hated clowns.

"Tell me that's the only one."

Dean raised his eyebrows as he revved his baby's engine, spun the Impala around, and pulled back out onto the main road. He knew what Sam was asking (the kid knew Rakshasha's were lone wolves) and wondered how best to put it.

"Last one for now, probably not forever. How do you feel about exploding rainbow glitter?"

-o-o-o-

The Roadhouse door closed behind them and Dean breathed in deep. Ah, peanuts, stale beer, and good old human piss. Home sweet home.

"Joanna Beth Harvelle, don't you walk away from your mother!"

Complete with family feuding.

Sam and Dean exchanged harried looks, barely over the threshold of the bar and considering sneaking back out before they'd been spotted. But it was late – late enough that the only customers of the bar were passed out drunk on its horizontal surfaces (Ash, pool table, what else was new) – and Dean had kind of been hoping to crash the night there rather than find a motel. In another lifetime, Ellen had offered spare beds to them before. He figured the offer probably stood across time.

Now both Winchesters were kinda wishing they'd called her from the road and let her know long-distance that the clown was toast and all was right in the world (or, as right as it ever was.)

"When are you gonna listen to me, Mom? I could have helped them today – I should have helped them today!" Jo spun back around and Dean winced, realizing just what this fight was about. Not that the fights between these two women were ever about anything else. Still, he'd kind of hoped. He'd heard enough of these in his previous life to know exactly where they led. "Better yet, I could have handled that hunt on my own!"

Ellen was fuming, and both men could see the fear fueling that anger, clear as day. "You want to go and get yourself killed on some dusty back road, you find a different roof over your head, young lady. I won't allow it under mine."

"Maybe I will!" Jo bit out in rapid-fire, snapping back at the finality of her mother's sharp words. "I'm not a child. I want to go, I'm gone."

"You want to go somewhere, why don't you try goin' back to school!"

Dean knew better than to get in the middle of this. He *did*. But still…

"I didn't *belong* there! I was the freak with a knife collection!"

"Ellen-"

Both Harvelle woman turned in surprise at the presence of the two hunters, having been a little preoccupied to notice their arrival. Ellen cleared her throat, wiping her hands on her bar apron and trying for a smile in their direction. Jo just crossed her arms over her chest angrily and made no such attempt to cover up her ire.

"Bad time, boys," Ellen bit out, clearly still pissed off, though the tilt at the corner of her mouth softened the blow.

"Yes, ma'am." Sam, ever the peacekeeper, placating hands raised up, one of them landing on Dean's shoulder. A clear nudge to leave this be.

Ellen's eyes lost a little more of their edge and she sighed. Forcing normalcy into her tone, she asked, "No more clown?"

Sam smiled weakly, trying to play along for their sake. "No more clown."

Dean, an expert on avoiding conversations he absolutely did not want to have, knew he should let this one go. But as he glanced over at that fiery young woman, his *friend*, full of passion and fury and *life*, he found that he just couldn't. "Ellen, she's gonna go off on her own, either way. It'd be a hell of a lot safer to have a home to come back to, someone ready to patch her up."

It was the wrong thing to say. Which Dean kind of knew – had definitely known – but there wasn't any other way to say it.

The older Harvelle woman's eyes shuttered into something dangerous, something mama-bearish that any halfway intelligent man with semi-decent survival instincts would know to run the hell away from. "Over my dead body," she bit out, and Dean flinched so violently Sam picked up on it right away. "And not to be rude, but you barely know us. This is a family matter; you got no business interfering."

It hurt. It hurt so damn bad, for so many reasons, in so many ways. Dean had that immediate sinking feeling he always got, particularly this past year, when he realized he'd made things worse again. And she was right. In this timeline, in this world, Ellen had known them for all of two months, and spoken to them only a handful of times.

The Dean Winchester that should be standing in front of her *didn't* know them. Which pretty much just sucked for the Dean Winchester actually standing there.

"Dean," Sam muttered beside him, hand dropping to his elbow and tugging at his jacket. An even stronger suggestion they should leave.

"Maybe you're right," the older Winchester choked out, doing his damnedest to sound normal. To sound like his insides weren't cement and crumbling into pieces somewhere down by his boots. "I'm sorry."

Sam tugged on his arm again and Dean went without a fight.

As they left, they heard Jo turn to her mother, arms crossed over her chest and a pointed look in her eye as she spat, "Nice."

-o-o-o-

It didn't take long for Sam to ask. Dean knew he would, and was already working on a response he didn't want to give but knew he owed. Unfortunately, his mouth wasn't on track with his brain and he ended up shaking his head when nothing came out.

"You can't keep doing this," Sam replied, but he didn't sound angry. He sounded tired, pitying. Angry would have been better. "I'm not trying to start a fight, Dean, but you gotta talk to someone. It doesn't have to be me, but *someone*."

When Dean didn't answer right away – that whole mouth-to-brain thing still putting up one hell of a fight – Sam continued. "I mean, yeah, it might actually help if you talk to me, so we can be on the same page..."

Which, fair point.

"It's not gonna happen this time." Oh, great, *now* his mouth had things to say. And they were the *wrong* things. "I won't let it, so why tell you about it?"

Sometimes, Dean really wondered where his tongue got the nerve to work without his say so. Sometimes, Dean also wanted to bash his head into the nearest solid, vertical surface. Had he not *just* agreed with himself that Sam deserved answers? Had he not, less than a week ago, told Sam they'd figure out how to stop keeping secrets?

"How are we supposed to stop it, if I don't even know what *it* is?"

Again, *point.*

Dean tightened his grip on Baby's leather as he harshly – too harshly – put the car into gear and pulled away from the Roadhouse. He prayed to no one (it wasn't something to bother Cas with, and no one else out there worth praying to) that Jo wouldn't do anything stupid because of what he'd said. That time would keep things the friggin' same in *their* favor for once.

"Jo starts hunting on her own, Ellen can't stop her. And later…" Dean let out a haggard sigh, running a hand down his face tiredly. It never failed to remind Sam of the extra decade weighing on his brother's

soul. "They go with us on a suicide mission. Pretty sure the only reason Ellen came was because she sure as hell couldn't stop Jo, and no way was she letting her go alone."

Just saying it caused his chest muscles to tighten. He rubbed absently at the aching warmth in his sternum, wondering if this one was all him or if Cas had just as unpleasant memories of that night. He'd been the one to spend most of the evening with the women. A drinking game, if Dean remembered right, and they'd nearly run Bobby's house dry trying to get the angel drunk.

God, his chest *ached*.

"We were gonna stop Lucifer from raising Death. Shoot him in the head with the Colt and kill the son of a bitch devil once and for all." He heard Sam's sharp inhale, an inhale of *hope*, and Dean's anger flared further. It wasn't *fair*, the shit that had happened, the shit that might happen, and his job to tell his kid brother all of it. "It doesn't work. Turns out, there are five things that gun can't kill."

Dean pulled onto the interstate, keeping his eyes on the road as he continued, anger and guilt and decade old grief eating at him. "Jo got nabbed by a hellhound. Ellen went out with her to buy us time. And it was all for *nothing."*

Talking about it now, even years later, felt just as damn painful as that day. Dean didn't think he'd ever said it out loud before.

"Dean…" Sam sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose as he tried to frame the never-ending mess that was time travel within his own reference of understanding. Hunting, he knew. Running away from home and a family that wanted a different life for you, those things he could start with. The rest of it – the lost friends and an apocalypse...– well, he supposed he'd have to get there eventually. "Look, just because you have knowledge and a new found talent for advice-"

"Hey!"

"-doesn't mean people will listen." Sam angled him with a pointed, but understanding look. "Sometimes people have to make mistakes for themselves, no matter who tells them how it will work out. No matter how right that person may be. Sometimes we have to learn the hard way in order to learn at all."

Dean silenced for a moment, before growling low in his throat. Sure, he could see his brother's point, but what a pain in the ass! What was

the point of time travel if people weren't going to let you change anything to start with? It was bad enough *Time* was working against him, his friends shouldn't be adding to the problem.

"Yeah, well, *we* know it's gonna happen this time," Dean said, loudly, clearing his throat before his brother could get anymore sentimental or comforting on him. Even if the comfort was appreciated (silently, of course). "So no matter if Jo goes off on her own, we won't take them on a suicide mission. No hellhounds, no bomb, Ellen and Jo keep breathing."

Beside him, his brother turned those pitying, puppy dog eyes back out the front window with a weak grimace, and Dean was grateful he didn't try and push it any further.

"Yeah." Sam's fingers were tight on the door handle, as white-knuckled and worried as Dean's own for a family he barely knew but really wanted to. "Yeah, we'll make sure of it."

-o-o-o-

The TV was on low in the motel room, a constant stream of character dialogue, commercials, and late night news casters that had been running straight for three weeks now. The steady noise didn't quite drown out the clacking of keys coming from the bed, where a laptop was spread out among piled blankets, scattered books, and yet another pair of mutilated jeans. Nor did it hide the jiggle of the lock and knob on the door before it opened on silent hinges.

The single occupant of the room – Sam's mystery woman and Hell's guest to an Apocalypse – didn't react as Azazel and another man filed into the room. The second was tall, broad chested in a tight black t-shirt, with dark blonde hair and cold eyes.

"Who's this?" She didn't bother looking up from the computer, continuing to type away. She didn't bother hiding her distaste, either.

"This here is Tom," Azazel answered as he crossed the room and set a plastic bag full of something rectangular and of decent weight down on the edge of the mattress. The woman spared it a glance, but nothing more. "My boy."

Tom smiled, all teeth and black eyes. She snorted.

"Demon." The word was like sludge along the bottom of a barrel. "What is it doing here?"

"He's here to babysit you." Azazel spared her a tight-lipped smile, holding a calming hand out to his side as his son got a little agitated with the creature's blatant disrespect. "And to get you anything you need."

Glowing green eyes finally flicked their way. "Need?"

"It's time to earn your keep." The demon's pale gaze dropped pointedly to the bag. "First task: reconnaissance."

The woman leaned over the top of her laptop to snag the plastic handles, pulling it towards her with a tight frown. "And the rest?"

"Will come in time."

She delved inside the plastic for only a moment, pulling out a paperback book quite unlike the others scattered throughout the room. It was smaller, for one, the print finer and cover more colorful. The frown tightened. "What is this?"

"It's called a book," Tom spoke for the first time, baring his teeth in what he probably thought was a smile. "You do know how to read, don't you? Or should we fetch you another professor?"

Her glare locked on his and the woman narrowed her eyes. "Only the bad words. Filth. Scum of the Earth. Petulant turd. I still require practice."

The demon just grinned.

"Tom will get you the rest when you've finished with those." Azazel nodded towards the bag and its remaining contents. There were four more books inside. "Read up. You'll be meeting Sam soon and I expect your performance to be perfect."

The yellow-eyed demon swept out of the room, leaving his child behind. Ignoring the remaining presence, the woman turned the book over in her hands, eyebrows raising at the two men illustrated on the cover. One of them was shirtless, long blonde hair blowing in a painted wind, as they stood in front of a black car.

Across the top, the title read, *'Supernatural'*.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chapter End Notes

Season 2.1:Okay, so maybe not the most exciting start, but the next seven chapters are pretty jam-packed, to say the least. (I'm actually pretty sure it's going to be the next fifteen - poor boys will not be getting a break anytime soon - I just haven't gotten that far yet :P And knowing me, my estimate is conservative, as always (verbose. as. fuck.))

Tom: There was a demon at the end of the first season that Azazel identified as his boy but Dean shot him with the Colt before he ever had a line. Weird thing was, the demon was named in the script (only non-speaking character to be so that I've seen). I thought… huh, I wonder if Tom had more of a story once upon a time, and it just got cut from the final edit. Well, I can work with that!

Welcome to the Island, Tom (aka replacement Meg)! Let's see how long he survives this time around :D

Up Next: A case of severed heads and cow mutilation strikes déjà vu gold for Dean, so the boys head for Montana. Too bad they aren't the only hunter to catch wind of the case, though…

Next chapter will be up on Sunday! Please review and remind me there's interest in this story, as it is what keeps me going :)

Chapter 60: Season 2: Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Ooookay guys. This is me, giving you all a courtesy heads-up: please remember that I do not do well with silence. Between the two sites, 1400 people get an e-mail that this story updates (which is... so, soooo damn cool) But when only one percent of those people review across both sites, my mind supplies aaaall sorts of reasons. Like...Okay, clearly the April Fools joke pissed you all off? The last chapter absolutely sucked? Then I end up making excuses for you, because that's my depression talking, not reality: it was an irregular posting day and a weekday to boot, maybe not everyone has gotten a chance to read it, maybe because I deleted a chapter and reposted it, the site didn't send out e-mails? I do *try* not to be the depressed-paranoid-slightly-manic mess of a human being that I actually am, but having so few readers willing to put in the effort of a simple comment when I spent a month and a half getting season 2.1 ready *isn't helping*

I will never hold this story hostage for reviews; I think that behavior absolutely sucks. But I will be fair and upfront with you guys: silence makes me think I've done poorly and is an immediate downer for me. I can not and do not write when I'm down. Basic equation is: without people telling me they enjoy this story, I just don't end up writing it. Without you guys supporting me, the story just wouldn't exist. I'm a people-pleaser and an attention whore, a lovely combination that means I only do shit if I can see it makes other people happy (which in turns leaves me puffing out chest feathers and preening like a damn peacock)

I know these sites do not let you "like" individual chapters, so you guys can seriously just write "like button pushed!" in a review now and then, and the message that you are out there enjoying will be received!

Those That Have Reviewed: I am sorry you keep having to read such things, but know they are not meant for you. And please do not apologize for not having reviewed every chapter or feel bad in the slightest. I do not expect a review every chapter; it is simply very hard to know so many people read this story and so few are willing to let me know my work is enjoyed. But those of you who have are, quite literally, the reason this story is still

going. And I mean tha, 100%. I am not a self motivated person. This story, this chapter, is for you guys.

Chapter Warnings: We've got severed heads and mutilated cows, Dean's now naming his Deja vu, and Time isn't giving the Winchester's even an inch. For extra measure, let's throw in a little Lilith and some more of Demon Tom being an ass because that, as we all know, is exactly what a demon named Tom would do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 27

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Impala door closed with the satisfying creak of well-loved metal, and Dean turned to look at court house in front of them. He gave Sam a wry look as they headed up white stone staircase of the mostly brick building that also housed the Sheriff's office.

"So two severed heads and a dozen cases of cow mutilation. And that sounded familiar?" Sam opened the front door, Dean entering first with a shrug.

"Not really much to go on. Could be half the cases we work, could be brand new. We'll just have to see." He'd told Sam as much that morning, as the kid read the newspaper aloud, circling potentials. The town had sounded familiar, and the particulars of the case not unfamiliar. It wasn't quite the sense of déjà vu he usually looked for when picking which direction to go next, but it was something. "Still think FBI would be faster."

"We don't need to go full-felony," Sam argued (not for the first time, likely not the last either), keeping his voice low as they passed the administrator's desk and headed for signs to the Sheriff. "Reporters raise fewer eyebrows and can get enough information to at least get us started."

Dean's brow pinched, that same not-unfamiliar tingling in his gut. He was starting to think of it as his spidey sense, only from the future. AKA: his timey sense. Sam had not been as amused, practically face-

palming in the front seat, stuck in the car with his brother who had taken fifteen solid minutes of excited rambling about déjà vu not being unlike a tingling supernatural sixth sense, before landing on '*timey sense'* of all things. God help him.

"Gentlemen," the sheriff greeted them with a nod after the front desk gal escorted them into his office. Sam responded in kind, introducing him and his brother as reporters from some newspaper, but Dean was too busy staring at the man's mustache.

It was… well, it was something.

"Oh, we've definitely been here before," he muttered into his brother's shoulder, body half turned away to keep his voice quiet. Sam nudged him back to front and center because, well, not exactly *subtle* there, Dean. The Sheriff was watching them with narrowed eyes.

"What newspaper did you say you worked for?"

"World Weekly-" Sam's arm across Dean's chest shut him right up.

"Weekly World News," his younger brother corrected, the *'Why me?'* bitchface going strong (an offshoot, subcategory of #6, *'Am I really related to you?'*). He gave the LEO a grimace of a smile. "He's new."

"And probably not long employed." Dean offered a hundred watt grin of his own. "Now, what can you tell us about the recent cow mutilation?"

-o-o-o-

"Well, he was friendly." They were climbing back into the Impala after getting all but kicked out of the Sheriff's office. "I always love when we – *we* – get lectured about how Satanism doesn't exist. Give it four years, buddy. You'll be singing a different tune!"

Sam ignored his brother shouting at the driver side window and the brick building beyond. He pulled up the case information they'd printed out that morning, staring at the autopsy report. "Coroner's office isn't far. Maybe we'll have more luck there."

"Yeah, yeah." Dean put the car into drive and pulled out onto the street. It took a second – about four minutes and three turns, actually – but eventually he realized Sam was staring at him. "What?"

"You said we've done this before?"

Dean shrugged one shoulder a little defensively. "Did you somehow miss the Sheriff's face caterpillar? Can't say we run into that every day. But hey, he's probably not the only Montana man with an impressive 'stache. And I'm not picking up anything major on the Timey Senses-"

"Don't call them that-"

"-so maybe, maybe not. Why?"

"Nothing," Sam returned lightly, going back to the paperwork. "It's just, I didn't give you the address for the coroner."

Dean slid the gear shift into park even as Sam said it. His brother blinked at him, the Impala idling outside the town morgue. The older Winchester leaned forward, staring up at the building sign through the windshield. "Whoa. Well…that's freaky."

"Little bit." Sam climbed out and Dean scrambled to follow.

"I'm telling you, Sam. Super powers!"

"Yup," Sam answered in that easy way that meant the little bitch was being sarcastic as hell. "If there ever comes the need to find dead people in Red Lodge, Montana, you're the man for the job."

Dean flipped him off as they entered the morgue.

-o-o-o-

"Son of a bitch." The man from the future (not that that fact was helping him much at the moment) pulled back from the severed head of a girl, propped in a plastic bin sitting on one of the autopsy tables. "She's a vamp."

Sam was giving the entire setup hazarded looks from the three feet away, a hand wrapped around his stomach and complexion a bit green around the gills. Honestly, Dean's comfort around a *severed head* was giving Sam just as much pause as the appendage itself. His brother had just shrugged at the first look sent his way. Ten years was a lot of cases with dead bodies and missing parts.

"That, uh, that changes things," Sam muttered, surprised, as he shuffled over a little cautiously. He took the tongue depressor out of

Dean's hand and lifted the girl's lip again to stare at the small, almost unnoticeable holes in her gums.

"You think?"

"Was the other vic a vampire too?" Sam set the depressor aside, expression thoughtful, the green fading from his face as curiosity and a case took over. One dead vamp could be a coincidence. But two meant a hunter, and twelve cases of cow mutilation meant a nest.

"Don't remember." Dean shook his head. They had no way of knowing, now. That body had been cremated well before they got to town.

Sam leaned against the edge of the table, watching his brother closely. "Those spider senses picking anything up yet?"

The phrasing may have been sarcastic, but the question itself wasn't.

"Yeah. Nothing good." Dean stared at the decapitated vampire as his stomach started stirring unhappily. This was familiar as hell, yet he still couldn't place it. He wished those twisting knots that spelled nothing but trouble would spell something more helpful so his brain could get on the same page as his déjà vu.

-o-o-o-

They hit up the local dive bar next to scout for unfriendly faces, or anyone who'd noticed something like that lately. They kept an eye out for the hunter variety, but Dean didn't spot anyone he knew, and hunters did know how to blend in when they wanted to. He didn't see anyone who stood out as a vamp, either. Not that those were that much easier to spot than hunters. The bartender offered up a couple suspects – hippies on a farm at the edge of town – after Sam offered him some monetary incentive.

Dean's déjà vu got worse.

"We've got company." Sam said it quietly, but Dean already knew. He'd already sensed the eyes on them as they left the bar. The feeling hadn't gone away, more than a block down the road.

The two brothers communicated in perfect silence, barely a physical sign of the conversation that passed between them. As they rounded a corner, they both broke into a run to make it to the next corner before whatever was following them caught up. Dean was expecting a vamp, so when Sam tackled Gordon Walker – the hunter drawing up short,

spinning around in search of his disappearing prey – Dean was taken completely by surprise.

Son of a bitch. No wonder he was having déjà vu.

"Show us your teeth!" Sam barked, shoving the hunter by the shoulder. His back hit the wall and Sam kept him there, arm pressed across his chest.

Dean was the one with the knife pressed to the hunter's throat, body acting on auto-pilot even while his brain froze up. But now he didn't know whether to pull back or finish the damn job. Gordon caused them a hell of a lot of trouble once upon a time, and ended up a hunt himself after trying to kill Sammy, who knew how many times. Trouble was an understatement, and Dean didn't take kindly to *anyone* who had it out for his brother, least of all this asshole.

Still, killing a hunter in cold blood wasn't a great idea, and it hadn't been so long ago for Dean that that kind of murderous bloodthirst sang through his veins like heroine. He wasn't eager to go back there. So he pulled away, sheathing the knife.

"He's not a vampire, Sammy. He's a hunter."

Gordon, arms raised and cool as a cucumber, fixed narrowed eyes on the older Winchester. "You know me? Cuz I don't know you."

Dean didn't answer right away, lip twitching with indecision. Knowing that any lie of who they were would only cause them more grief when Gordon actually found out, he said, "Dean Winchester. This's my brother, Sam."

Sam hesitated for a moment, glancing back at his brother with raised brows and getting an imperceptible nod in return, before he pulled off of the other hunter. Gordon huffed in disbelief, lowering his arms with a little chuckle. He straightened his jacket.

"Sam and Dean Winchester. Well, I'll be damned." He shook his head with a stronger chuckle. "You know, I met your old man once? Hell of a guy. Great hunter." Gordon lowered his head, eyes still locked on the two brothers. He probably meant it as consolation. All Dean saw was a threat. "I heard he passed. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, thanks." Dean cut him off before he could keep going, the dismissiveness in his tone standing out particularly strong to Sam, who was eyeing him warily. But Dean was utterly unimpressed with

anything this son of a bitch had to say, to hell with the fact that he actually came across like a decent guy. Dean knew he wasn't, and had been fooled by it once already. How he'd ever thought of Gordon Walker as anything but a creep, he sure as shit didn't know now. "You the one taking out the vamps in the area?"

He knew he was, but after all this time, the man from the future was more than competent at this game.

"Yep. Been here two weeks."

"Did you check out the Barker Barn?" Sam asked, still unsure of Dean's cold disposition, but they had a job to do all the same and he knew how to follow his brother's lead. He'd pry answers out of him later.

Meanwhile, it took quite a lot of restraint on Dean's part not to tell him to stop talking to Gordon entirely. That asshole shouldn't even know Sammy's name, let alone be talking to him. But it would be a hell of a lot more suspicious than just dismissiveness were Dean to call him out on it. So the older Winchester gritted his teeth and stayed quiet, trying to remember how this went the first time.

They had ended up in a bar together, Sam calling it quits while Dean and Gordon got all chummy. Bastard.

"It's a bust," Gordon answered, a wry smile in Sam's direction. "Just a bunch of hippie freaks. Though they could kill you with that patchouli smell alone."

Sam, frowning, glanced at Dean. He just shook his head as minimally as possible. Gordon was a damn good hunter, though, even if he was also the scum of humanity. So he picked up on the silent conversation between the brothers.

"Look, I got this one covered, fellas." Gordon gave them a toothy grin. "Don't get me wrong, it's a real pleasure meetin' you, but I've been on this thing over a year. I killed a fang back in Austin, tracked the nest all the way up here. I'll finish it."

"We could help," Sam offered even as Dean opened his mouth to tell him sure-fucking-thing, hope you go and get yourself killed there buddy. He closed his jaw tight enough to hear his teeth squeak in his skull. Damnit.

"Thanks, but, uh, I'm kind of a go-it-alone type of guy." Gordon was still smiling, despite the growing tension between the three.

"You know what?" Dean cut in quickly, before Sam could say anything more. Maybe a little too quickly – both Sam and Gordon seemed a little started by it – but screw it. He was ending this now. "So are we. You seem to have this handled."

He gave Sam a pointed look – smile tight and eyes telling him to shut-the-fuck-up-and-play-along. Sam frowned in response, but Dean could tell he'd follow the lead. So he turned back to Gordon with as friendly a smile as he could muster. "We'll leave you to it. Besides, I hear there's a Chupacabra two states over. Maybe we'll check that out instead."

Even as he said it, Dean thought, '*what?'* But that was about as much thought as he gave it. Wouldn't be the first time he'd spewed lines like he was reading a script his conscious mind didn't remember. The joys of re-living the same days over again a decade later.

"Uh, okay," Sam said a little uncertainly against the heavy silence suddenly between them. Gordon's eyes were locked on Dean, a tight frown making him look dangerous. Sam glanced back and forth between them, but he stuck his hand out in an attempt to salvage whatever this was. "It was nice meeting you. Good luck with the hunt."

"Yeah…" Gordon hesitated for a moment, eyes darting back to Dean again, before he smiled at Sammy and returned the hand shake. "You too. Have fun with that Chupacabra."

Dean grabbed Sam by the shoulder and nudged him back the way they came. He didn't bother with a farewell, hoping they never saw Gordon Walker again.

-o-o-o-

The vampire hunter watched both Winchesters walk away, continuing down the street they'd first been on when he'd followed them from the bar. He'd been expecting hunters, though to be honest vampires hadn't been ruled out either. He hadn't expected them to be the Winchester boys, though. Hadn't expected meeting them to feel so…off, either.

And what Dean had said there, at the end. Gordon had just been about to open his mouth and say the same damn thing. He'd meant it as a joke – what was a little pissing contest between hunters now, anyway? – but the older Winchester had said it first. And not just a random, tossed-on-the-wind insult. Dean had used the damn same words – *word for word* – that he'd had been about to say himself.

Gordon watched the two of them walk away, an uneasy feeling in his gut. He didn't know what the hell was going on, but he knew one thing for sure. He trusted his gut, and it sure as hell didn't trust the Winchesters.

-o-o-o-

As soon as they were back in the car, Sam was on him.

"What was that about? That was one of the few hunters we've ever met outside of Dad's contacts!" Sam sounded pissy, but Dean knew him better. He was more worried than anything else. "Why rush off? We could have helped him with the nest."

Dean was shaking his head before his brother was finished. "Not this one, Sammy. Gordon's bad news. We want nothing to do with him."

He glanced in the side mirror, looking for any signs that the hunter had followed them. He hadn't sensed anyone tailing them again, but he didn't trust Gordon Walker and he didn't trust Time as far as he could throw either of them (and considering one of them was a friggin' unattainable physics concept, that wasn't very friggin' far).

"We should get out of town tonight." And not stop at a motel like they'd been planning. Gordon could go and get himself killed by one of those vamps, for all Dean cared. Hell, he was half hoping for it. Would sure save them a lot of future pain. "Trust me on this one."

It was clear by the slant of Sam's eyes that he was going to need more explanation than that (and Dean would give it) but he didn't argue as he started up the car and pointed them away from Red Lodge, Montana.

-o-o-o-

It was later that night and two towns over, settling into a motel for the night, that Sam finally figured out why leaving Gordon Walker to his hunt bothered him so much.

"We can't always run."

Dean looked up at the words, delivered evenly. Sam wasn't looking for a fight, but he knew it could escalate into one easily enough, especially if they kept doing it.

"You said we let one of the vampires go last time. Because her nest

was only killing cows. If Gordon finishes the hunt, she's dead. That's on us; we should have stayed."

"Sam, she was a vamp." Dean held his hand up before Sam started talking over him. "I know things aren't always black and white, alright? She may not have deserved to *die*, but her nest was still calling a hell of a lot of attention to themselves. That's on them, not us."

"And the next time?" When the older Winchester just frowned, Sam continued, "The next time we're on a hunt you know ends badly, are we just going to keep running? Cas said we had to stay on the timeline-"

"Screw the damn timeline!" Dean was shaking his head. "Gordon tried to kill you in that timeline, damnit. Multiple times, and he got damn close to succeeding! That same timeline wants you dead, Sam, or did you forget? So no, I'm not putting you and Gordon Walker in the same *state* if I can help it. If Time wants to say the same, she's going to have to *work* for this one."

All good points, Sam could concede, but he had a point too. After all, what if that vampire they had saved went on to do something important? It could be something as minor as convincing one more vampire to go human-free. One more vampire they didn't face in the future. Maybe the vampire that finally took one of them down. Or someone they cared about. Or someone else vital to the future.

Time was a pond full of thousands of ripples. They couldn't afford to keep making more.

"We can't always run, Dean."

His brother sighed, scrubbing at his short hair. "I know, alright? We pick our battles. But this is one of them."

"Alright," Sam answered after a pause, yielding because he had every intention of keeping his brother to that compromise. It didn't sit right with him that they turned tail as soon as they knew a battle wouldn't go their way, and he had the feeling Dean wasn't planning on changing that strategy any time soon.

They were better men than that. Better hunters. If they were going to stop an apocalypse, they would have to be.

-o-o-o-

As luck would have it, Gordon Walker did not get killed by vampires that night. It had been one hell of a close call though. Close enough he'd even thought, for just the briefest of moments, maybe he should have taken Sam on his offer to team up. He'd shaken off the thought just as soon as the vampire who nearly took his head off was alleviated of his own.

He cleaned the rest of the nest out by dawn, burning the bodies and making sure none had escaped like in Austin. Then he packed up and left town, looking for his next hunt. A couple weeks of travel and killing eventually landed him close enough to the Roadhouse for a stop, and low and behold, it was poker night. He figured, sure, he could do with a little more cash on the side – the werewolf two states back and cost him a pretty penny in silver before he'd gone down.

They were several hands in, Gordon already on the up in both money and his companions' ire, when he casually dropped the Winchester name. It sparked a new round of conversation, a couple of the boys telling tall tales about run-ins with John. One man that Gordon didn't know well enough to trust stood up for him. Another muttered something dark that wasn't quite catchable.

"What about his boys?" Gordon asked, again keeping his tone carefree. "I met them a couple weeks back. They offered a team-up. Think I should have taken it?"

Anyone who knew Gordon Walker would have thought it a weird question. He didn't *do* team-ups. But these men didn't. Or had a drink too many in them to notice.

A couple more stories got passed around – rumors mostly. Only one of them had actually interacted with John's boys. He'd kept them pretty tucked away, was the overall consensus. It wasn't the kind of information Gordon was looking for and he'd just about called it a bust when someone new spoke up.

"Dean's psychic." The voice hadn't come from their table, and Gordon snapped a sharp gaze to the man sitting just behind them, nursing a drink of his own. He was pretty far gone already, hiccupping into the beer as he took another sip.

"Bullshit." Steve Wandell – the man who had spoken in John's defense – glanced at the others for support. "Dean Winchester ain't no psychic."

"Heard Ellen say it herself," the man grumbled defensively, glaring

their way. "Handed her a hunt – thing was confusing as shit – and she straight up called him 'bout it. He already knew all 'bout the damn thing. Couple hours later, Dean Winchester strolls in like he owns the place."

The poker table fell quiet as the men glanced at one another in shock.

"Well, shit," Ramsey Masters – a dunce of a man, but build like a brick shithouse – shook his head in disbelieve. "No wonder he hid those boys away. Bet John didn't want *that* getting out."

The conversation turned to the hypocrisy of a hunter like that having a psychic for a son, how that must have put John's boxers in one hell of a twist and that the boy was lucky to be alive at all. Gordon stopped listening. The others didn't even notice that he wasn't laughing along.

"I fold."

The vamp hunter pushed back from the table amid minor outcry. Sort of cheap to walk out when you had everyone's money, after all. He tossed a couple of bills back onto the pile, pocketing the rest. On his way out he offered Ellen a wave and Jo a wink which wasn't returned. It never was, but he didn't mind much.

He left the Roadhouse, tossing his keys in the air as he went, a whistle on his lips and Dean Winchester on his mind.

-o-o-o-

Lilith was pouring over maps of North America, more specifically the four potential Hell Gates located across the continent. Azazel was correct; Fossil Butte Cemetery was their best option. It was the most accessible, the best positioned for getting demons into hosts quickly and efficiently, and there were at least two dozen seals primed and ready in the United States. Not to mention the entrance of Lucifer's cage this century had lined up on the east coast of the country.

One of the States' hell gates was clearly the superior choice for their plan.

If Fossil Butte fell, the backup was the one in Arizona. It was still within the boundaries of the country, so they wouldn't need to worry about getting hundreds of possessed humans across borders. But it was a tricky one to open, with multiple factors needing to line up perfectly and the timing damn close. Lilith had her best people on it, but still

their success rested entirely on things outside their control.

The Canadian and Mexican Gates were the backups of their backups, and Hell's Princess was really hoping it didn't come to that. The gate in southern Wyoming would be *so much easier*. Which was probably why Samuel Colt had built a fucking hundred square mile devil's trap around it.

"I want forces on both backup gates, but put the larger contingent at Oaxaca." Her lieutenant shuffled the papers around at her command, writing a quick note down before he pulled out a detailed map of the Hell Gate located in southern Mexico.

"It's a long distance to travel, and that border will be harder to cross in mass without calling attention to ourselves," he commented blandly. Lilith didn't have a particular like or dislike of this soldier. He was good with the paperwork, fast to answer her commands and see her will done, and didn't seem terrified of her in the slightest. Which was probably what let him point out flaws in her plans without getting his head removed.

Useful, but it still pissed her off.

"The Slave River Gate may be closer, but it's in the middle of *nowhere*," she bit back, the challenge in her words more or less a reminder to him who was in charge. Not that he ever questioned it. Another thing that pissed her off. "We need available hosts. Line the men up for Oaxaca."

He jotted down another note in silence, gathered the maps in a shuffle, and peeled an entirely different paper off the top of the stack he'd been carrying when he entered the room. "The newest report from Azazel."

She took it harshly. That yellow eyed bastard hadn't checked in by blood for weeks now, and she was starting to take it personally. As she read the report, she went from being affronted to full fury.

"He's lost the Winchesters *again*?!"

Her lieutenant didn't even blink. He took the paper back. "Only the ability to track them. They appear to have warded themselves. Azazel has not been able to enter Sam Winchester's dreams in some time. It is unclear if he has found a way to ward his mind or is simply not sleeping."

"I *told* him he was pushing Sam too hard with the blood!" She let out a howl of rage, kicking at the base of the rock-formed table and scuffing her little white shoe. They should have sent in Ruby. She wouldn't have messed this up so royally. "Get me our best demon for tracking humans. We'll find them the old fashion way."

"So…" her man finally hesitated, raising a bland eyebrow. "I'll summon Crowley, then?"

The Princess let out another enraged shriek, but braced against the rock table rather than break the entire thing in two like she wanted. He had a point, even if she was loathe to admit it. God, she hated that bastard. There was just something so… slimy about him, even for a demon. And lazy. And entitled! But…he did have all the connections they needed and the time he spent topside as the King of the Crossroads (a title he had given *himself*)meant he was the best of those in high command to utilize human's ever developing technology.

"Yes, fine, whatever." She kicked the rock again for good measure. "And tell Azazel to move up his timetable. *Now*. I am done playing games with these hunters!"

Her lieutenant excused himself with a dip of his head and she went back to studying the gate just outside Gallup, Arizona. She was pretty sure the damn pagans had sealed that one up, if the level of tricks and riddles hiding the damn thing was any indication. Nuisances, the lot of them. But she had her best, the girl she'd been ready to set on Sam, hunting down the last of the Hopi gods and guardians, looking for an answer.

Another hour or so passed before Crowley was knocking on the smoldering stone entrance to their war room. She waved him in without even looking up.

"I need a way to track the Winchesters." As he opened his mouth, likely to deliver a rivetingly unhelpful and sarcastic comment, she clarified, "A human way."

"Have you tried microchipping them? It's all the rage with lost pets these days." He rolled on the balls of his feet, hands in his pockets and she considered breaking every last one of his fingers.

"A realistic option, Crowley. Now." Her snippiness never seemed to affect him much. Unlike her lieutenant, whose calm was unbreakable, Crowley just didn't seem to give a crap. It always rubbed her the wrong way. She wasn't stupid; the demon in front of her was

intelligent. One of the more intelligent among the High Command. He just didn't seem to care about applying it for anything more than irritating the rest of them.

She didn't trust that either. No demon was *passive*.

"Do you have a number we could track?" he asked instead, shrugging half-heartedly. "Cellphones have GPS nowadays. It's quite easy, if you have the right people in your pocket. We just need a number to call, love."

She chewed on the inside of her lip, annoyed. She didn't need the *obvious* answers. "We tried that; there are no numbers registered under their real names. They have to be using aliases. And we can't tap their friends' phones to wait for them to call. Most of them have warding on their landlines."

And no cellphones under their names, either. Damn paranoid, tax-evading hunters.

Crowley hummed, a thoughtful look crossing his face. Lilith raised her eyebrows at him and he gave her a tight lipped smile. "Hmm, I think I recall reading something in the prophet's work. Wasn't a number left in John Winchester's voicemail – one of the early books? You know, I believe there was..."

She hadn't gotten to read them herself – they had a hard enough time keeping their own paperwork from bursting into flames down here – but she'd personally slit the throats of the eleven demons she'd put on the task for missing that.

"It'll be a one-time shot, of course," Crowley continued. "Once they figure it out, Dean will surely change numbers."

"Do it," Lilith commanded with a nod. "Get Azazel the results."

He gave a mock little bow, and Lilith decided to put off ordering his assassination for at least another week. Damn demon always seemed to provide the right amount of information just when she was absolutely at her limit and would suffer him no longer. Slimy bastard probably did it on purpose.

-o-o-o-

The woman looked up from her book as Tom's cell phone rang. The demon pulled it out of his pocket with a taunting smile her way,

which she returned with a sneer. He flipped the thing open and pressed it to his ear.

"Hello?" His tone remained neutral, and the woman could not hear the other side of the conversation. So it was with some surprise that Tom lowered the device, said, "It's for you," and tossed it to her.

She caught it with a fumble, having to hastily drop the last of the *Supernatural* series, and practically snapping the device shut in the meanwhile. She shot him a glare, raising the phone to her ear, but there was nothing.

"Your sense of humor leaves so much to be desired." The woman snapped the phone shut and picked her book back up. She had no intention of returning the mobile device to the demon and far more interest in what happened with the reaper and the hospital.

"Oh, you have to dial first," he interrupted her reading again with a shark-toothed grin. "Don't you know how phones work?"

She glared at him, neither of them blinking since neither of them had the need, until she flipped the stupid thing back open. He was well aware she'd never actually used one before.

He smiled widely. "866-907-3235."

The number sounded vaguely familiar, which the woman found curious. She had no experience calling anyone (the phone in the motel had been conveniently disabled shortly before the Professor was brought in) and the only numbers she had heard since came from the television, and those were rare. Somehow, she doubted her babysitter was having her call one of those.

She pushed the buttons without taking her furious green eyes off of the demon, raising the phone to her ear. "And who am I calling?"

Tom didn't answer, but the owner of the number she dialed did. "Hello?"

The woman kept narrowed eyes on the smirking demon. "Hello."

"…Yeah? Who is this?" the man on the other end, suspicion now in his voice, sounded annoyed.

"Who's this?" she parroted blandly, still eyeing her keeper, who seemed content to lean back in the motel chair, crossing his arms

behind his head. She was pretty sure she had seen this conversation occur on television. It had been funny then.

"Look, lady, you called me."

"Did I?"

Tom chanced a glance at his watch.

"Yeah, you did. Now what the hell do you want?"

The demon watched the seconds tick by before he gave her a thumbs up and then swirled his pointer finger in the air. She was unfamiliar with the gesture, but got the gist.

"Must be a wrong number." She pulled the phone from her ear and pressed the end call. The woman tossed the phone back to the demon, unimpressed. "What was the purpose of that?"

"Oh, just finding a wayward sheep." He sat up from his relaxed position, looking down at the phone like he expected a call. Sure enough, a moment later it started ringing. He flipped it open without so much as looking at the number. "Got it? Great. We'll see you there."

He stood, stretched his arms over his head until his back gave a loud pop, and then bent over to the duffle bag at his feet that he had brought with him the day before. He pulled a new set of fabrics out along with a pair of ridiculous looking things that the woman could only assume were shoes, given their vague foot-like shape, if one ignored the six inch *spikes* protruding from the heel. She'd seen such nonsense on the television, and had wondered how the women (and that one man on that one very weird show she'd stumbled upon) had managed to walk in them.

"Get dressed, Princess." Tom tossed her the pile. "It's time to meet your Prince Charming."

Chapter End Notes

> **Dean's number**: I take anything mentioned in the show as being written in the books. Apparently, while I was not part of the fandom in those first two years, the number listed in John's voicemail for Dean was an actual number the show set up that you could call, which went to a voicemail of Dean telling John to call them if he got this. It was eventually disabled, but I thought that was pretty damn cool. Gotta love those guys, they always go

all out for the fans :D

High Heels Bit: Okay, so that last paragraph was supposed to have an additional line at the very end about actresses in high heels, but I had to remove it due to chronology. However, I loved the line so much (and it gives more info about our mystery woman) that I think you all should get to have it anyway:

"One actress had even run in a pair, chased by a large, lizard-like beast that apparently represented a dinosaur (if she had correctly understood the plot) but looked nothing like the actual creatures she'd once seen roam the earth."

I was so excited to put it in there because that seen in Jurassic World cracked me up and also because feathered dinosaurs for the win! But I *couldn't* because that movie didn't release until 2015. I actually didn't catch that until my third read through :P

P.S. Since we're talking about chronology (and mistakes), a reviewer brought attention long long ago (and I've been so bad about getting back to people) to my use of Twilight jokes. S/He was correct that the movies did not come out until 2008 but by 2006 the books were in full swing and gaining mass popularity. So I figured it was fairly safe to keep using those jokes, as I can only imagine vampire hunters (Dean particularly) would find the idea of sexualized teenage sparkly vampires worth laughing about.

Keep keeping me on my toes, guys! I get stuff wrong all the time (and barely catch most of it last minute. Looking at you and those terrifying red heels, Bryce Howard!)

P.P.S. I've kind of been assuming that you all either enjoy my little A/N rants and behind-the-scenes tidbits or just skip them if they're not your thing. But maaaybe someone should tell me if they're annoying, because I can also cut them out. As if the A/N rambles at the start of each chapter weren't hint enough, I am a *little bit* of a chatterbox. (Just a little ;P)

Reviews: "Like button pushed!" There, you can even copy and paste it now :P Come on, guys, Gordon Walker thinks Dean is the psychic this time around! That means he's gonna try and kill HIM, not Sam, and Dean has no idea it's coming!!! Yell at me about it! I've got chest feathers that need preening! XD

Chapter 61: Season 2: Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Whelp, I feel both vindicated and like a jerk. I appreciate those who piped up in regards to my request for comments/like buttons! I also knew (I really, really did, in the part of my brain that isn't lying to me all the time) that there were probably reasons for the silence. Good reasons, even. The best reason, though, didn't occur to me at all. I'm sorry for getting cranky at you guys for not reviewing when a decent chunk of you were busy re-reading the story . That's, uh, that's a pretty damn good reason. My bad, y'all.

Keep "pushing" that like button now and then, please! :D

Chapter References: If you do not recall the unofficial deal/ truce/"I'll scratch your back, you give me a hand job" partnership the boys entered into with Crowley, refresher course can be found in chapter **51. Season 2: Chapter 18**. All you really need to remember from it is that last bit, though ;D

Chapter Warnings: The boys are drinking beer and playing pool while Hell's making its first, second, and third counter play, and Crowley's lining himself up for a hand job. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 28

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The bar was noisy for a Thursday night, but being one of only a handful of bars in town – a college town, mid-summer, no less – and certainly the dive-iest of those establishments, meant there was almost always a particular clientele available for drinking and billiards. And tonight, Dean and Sam were taking advantage of that.

The older Winchester slid back into his chair with two pints and a grin from ear to ear.

"Did you get anything other than the bartender's number?" Sam, droll as always, asked with a sardonic eyebrow. Dean pffted.

"I'll have you know, I'm a professional." And he *was*. A thirty-something professional in a twenty-something body that still occasionally (more than occasionally) thought it was a teens-something body. Seriously, he'd had to crank one out that morning. Even late twenty-something was *ridiculous*. So he waved the napkin in front of his brother's face, the bartender's number written in fresh blue ink. "I got her number *professionally*."

"In case she 'remembers anything useful'?" Sam's tone said pretty clearly what he thought of that, and Dean pfft'ed again.

"You're no fun." He leaned forward into the table, chest coming close to the foam-topped glasses of beer. "You remember fun, Sammy? It's that thing you do, with girls?"

"That's sex, Dean."

"They're synonyms." The older Winchester looked personally offended, pushing his brother's drink across the table to him.

Sam rolled his eyes, taking his beer and casting eyes around the bar again far too nervously for Dean's taste. "You remember why we're actually here?"

It was the older Winchester's turn roll his eyes, but he supposed Sammy had a point. Despite the cute (and promisingly loose) bartender, they were out on a Thursday night indulging in alcohol and (maybe) women, and for once the reason wasn't a celebration of a hunt well done.

-o-o-o-

-Twelve Hours Earlier-

The knock on the motel room door was not exactly expected, but it wasn't a surprise either. It was late enough for housekeeping to start making rounds and Dean had made a pretty pointed comment to the manager on their way in last night that their towel quality left much to be desired. Like, four inches of coverage and about a half inch of thickness.

The face that greeted Dean when he opened the door, absentmindedly rubbing at his chest as he did so, was a surprise.

"Morning, Squirrel. Where's Moose?"

Well, at least that explained the aching sternum.

Sam, fresh out of the shower with only a towel around his waist, nearly dropped his toothbrush from his mouth as he came out of the bathroom in time to see Dean standing in front of the open door with none other than the King of the Crossroads smiling way too charmingly on their stoop at nine in the morning.

"Ah. There he is. And he comes with a view."

Sam definitely, *definitely*, didn't blush. The demon, however, grinned that much wider, and Sam's forehead did that *'Danger, warning, abort, abort!'* bit where it smoothed completely out and brown eyes turned murderous. But his cheeks were still dotted that lovely shade of red and the King of the Crossroads wagered, eh, *worth it*.

"Crowley?" Dean asked incredulously, like he thought maybe his eyes were tricking him. As Sam hastily went for a clean set of clothes, Dean leaned out into the corridor, looking left and right like he expected to find Ashton Kutcher and a camera crew. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The demon, after checking the floor and ceiling for any tricksy devils traps, invited himself into the room. With an annoyed look and a sweepingly sarcastic gesture, Dean closed the door behind him.

"You ask for my number, but you don't even call. Really, Dean, I'm insulted." Crowley eyed the heavily fish-themed décor of their most recent crash pad as Dean crossed his arms over his still-aching chest, thoroughly unimpressed. Not like Crowley had actually *given* them a number to call. (Not that Dean would have called, anyway.)

"Well, this is homey." The demon turned to face them, hands in his pockets. "Azazel is looking for you."

"Tell us something we don't know," Dean said as Sam also replied, "Because we went off grid."

"Oh, but it does come with such nice surround sound." Crowley raised a hand to tap his ear mockingly before strolling about the small room, poking at this and that. It was hard to say which brother rolled his eyes harder. Ignoring them both, the demon settled at the little kitchenette, where Dean's cell phone and their duffel of weapons lay open on the table. The demon felt both hunters tense behind him, so

close to so many things that could kill them easily. It was Crowley's turn to roll his eyes – though he did enjoy their oh-so-delectable fear and distrust – and he reached out to tap a finger loudly on the phone casing. "Not off grid enough, it would seem."

He gave them a pointed look and Dean frowned, brain turning over as Crowley's hint found home base.

"Shit," he grumbled, and Sam sent him a questioning look. "That woman who called. The 'wrong number'?"

Dean remembered thinking it was weird. He hadn't recognized the number or the voice, which had been slightly accented. An odd one Dean couldn't place. Something vaguely Jewish, but like middle-eastern, old-time Hebrew Jewish, not Larry David with his putz and his schmucks and his bald-headed American Jew glory. Nothing worth reporting to Sam, especially once Dean decided the whole thing was weird but not outlandish. He'd written it off as nothing more and the brothers had gone on with their day.

The hunter now turned to Crowley. Realization dawned on Sam's face as the older Winchester asked, a little miffed, "That was one of yours?"

The King of the Crossroads shrugged. "Azazel's, not mine. I'm just the messenger. Speaking of, I am going to have to give him something, so..." Crowley mockingly spread his arms in a regal, sweeping gesture. "I'm here as a courtesy heads up. This is me, scratching your back, boys."

Sam grimaced as he recalled the rest of the saying Crowley had mutilated that night at the crossroads. The demon just grinned, all smarmy. He swiped Dean's phone off the table, punching a couple of the keys before tossing it to its owner.

"I'll call when I want that return favor."

Crowley sent a wink Sam's way, enjoying as the brunette definitely didn'tblush again. Dean caught the phone with yet another unimpressed glare (Crowley had been right, he was going to see that look a lot now that they were 'partners') and glanced down at the device. The demon had entered his number under the name *'The King'*. Dean rolled his eyes yet again, but Crowley was already gone.

Sam eyed his brother and the phone in his hand like it might detonate. If Crowley was telling the truth – and what could he possibly gain

from lying about this? – then Azazel would be on his way shortly, and that meant nothing good for them. For Sam. "What do you want to do?"

The man from the future stared down at the small screen for a minute, long enough for it to darken, before he tightened his fingers around the plastic. His brother's lecture about running away was still pretty fresh in his mind. "We trap the room. Leave the phone here, spend the day on the hunt, like we would if we didn't know. Tonight we'll waste time at a bar."

And when they came back, maybe they'd have a yellow eyed bastard caught in their snare.

-o-o-o-

-Present-

Dean eyed his moody brother before he leaned back in his seat, using it as a convenient move to scan the crowd around them. No one seemed particularly suspicious. No one watching them. Dean had hoped Azazel – or whatever flunky he sent after them now that Meg had eaten a bullet – would either fall into their trap at the motel or realize they weren't home and wait for them there. But, he supposed, one of the reasons they'd kept to strictly public places today was in case they were followed. The college town wasn't huge, and while it might not have been easy to find any one random person among the several thousand living here, hunters weren't all that hard to locate when they were on a hunt.

Court houses, public libraries, cemeteries, morgues, the cheap motels. And bars.

Still, no one stood out, and Dean didn't see any point in wasting the evening just because demons *might* be on their tail again. He wished he could get Sam to loosen up a little, though. Kid was wound tighter than a girdle on a Baptist minister's wife at an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast. And yeah, alright, he had some fair reasons to be that high-strung. But Dean also knew from experience that stressing about the shit-storm perpetually about to rain down on them didn't change when or where that raincloud dumped.

Besides, they were supposed to be playing innocent, here. Acting normal. Blending in. Sitting there, externally brooding and internally panicking wasn't exactly the ticket.

"I'm gonna go make some cash," Dean announced, grabbing his beer and standing up from the table. Sam eyed him like he was crazy. "Next rounds on you. And try to relax, will you? You look more suspicious than anyone else in here! Fidgeting like a tween who forgot his fake."

Sam watched, mildly insulted and trying to stop his anxious movements, as Dean lumbered off to the billiards table. He watched the first game, his brother setting the stage as the out-of-towner well on his way to being drunk. Sam idly traced the logo on his pint glass and worked on not glancing around the bar every ten seconds. Dean was right; a demon would be crazy enough to approach them in this public a space.

But the younger Winchester didn't trust Azazel to be *sane*, either.

Realizing he was doing nothing but warming the beer, Sam finished it in a single chug – it was more Dean's flavor profile anyway and not particularly strong – and headed for the bar for something that might take the edge off. He wasn't a fan of that page in his brother's book, but he couldn't seem to lose the nervous twitch of his fingers or the way his gaze jerked to every loud sound in the crowded bar. Maybe a little liquid courage would help him do as Dean said and *relax*.

He waited at the bar for his drink – something stronger than Dean's pick but nothing to lose his wits over in case there was a demon waiting for them back at the motel – when he realized the guy next to him was staring. Sam glanced over, but there was nothing particularly remarkable (or suspicious) about the blonde. Except maybe his choice in strappingly tight black t-shirts. Sam gave him a grimace (the kind of smile that said *'stop smiling at me before I punch you'*) and angled away from him none-too-subtly. He felt the guy's gaze on him another moment longer, long enough for Sam to consider muttering *'Christo'* under his breath just to be sure, but then the bartender returned with his drink and he, thankfully, left the bar and Mr-I-Wear-Shirts-Two-Sizes-Too-Small behind.

Only to crash right into someone. Sam winced at the sound of breaking glass and the cold slosh of a drink splashing over his hands.

"Shit!”

He looked down at the person whom he'd crashed into (who had crashed into him?) and had to look a lot further down than he anticipated.

"Shit, I am *so* sorry."

It was a woman, and she was *short*. Well, everyone was short compared to Sam, as his brother reminded him often. But she was particularly short, top of her blonde head not quite making his shoulder as she swapped the broken cocktail glass in her hand for the napkin that had been wrapped around it. Sam didn't even realize he was bleeding until she'd taken his free hand and started dabbing at the small cut just above his thumb. Her drink must not have been particularly strong – the alcohol dripping off his fingers didn't even sting.

"Shit," she swore again.

Sam couldn't help but laugh. Her fingers were warm on his, almost tingling, actually, and the hunter felt tension ease out of his shoulders and away from his mind like a handful of water he couldn't hold onto. As she dabbed at the cut, he received a glare – probably for laughing – but there was no heat in it, and it made him grin wider.

She had blue eyes to go with her blonde hair, and the immediate reminder of Jess threatened Sam's smile. The love of his life had glared at him like that, too. Only, she'd done it from about six inches higher.

The woman's grip still tingled and he laughed again, the painful thoughts drifting away like the rest of that handful of water. He felt lighter than he had in days. Too light to question it, actually. Maybe he'd grabbed a stronger beer than he'd thought.

"It's alright." He set his glass back down on the bar behind him, ignoring Mr. Tight Shirt, who was watching their commotion. Sam took the broken glass out of her hand and set it on the bar as well, even as she kept the napkin pressed to his injured one. "No harm."

"You're bleeding. I think that counts as at least some level of harm."

She had an accent; it was subtle, but Sam was used to picking up things about people quickly. Yiddish, maybe, though he was hardly an expert ear. It was unique, whatever it was.

The woman pulled the napkin away, examining the cut which had already slowed to a sluggish smear. She seemed to think about it for a moment before she relinquished his hand. "I suppose you'll live."

"I sure hope so." Sam chuckled, reaching back for his beer and shaking the last of her spilled drink off his fingers, ignoring the cut. It was minor – practically nothing – after all. "Can I get you a replacement?"

"Shouldn't I be buying you a drink?" The sass in her tone was nothing short of *adorable*, as was the way she crossed her arms over her chest, stance wide like all five feet, two inches of her were ready to fight him on it. The hunter had a feeling she'd kick his ass if he voiced as much, though. He also entertained the thought she might even succeed.

Short, but *fierce*, Sam noted with a grin.

"Mine didn't spill," he countered teasingly, raising the glass in a toast. It wasn't until he was taking a sip that he realized, with a mental jolt, he was flirting. That was what people did, in bars, at night, when they randomly bumped into each other, wasn't it? It was with a second jolt Sam realized he didn't feel nearly as bad about that as he thought he would.

He shouldn't though, should he? He wasn't cheating on Jess because she wasn't waiting on him. Because he wasn't coming back. And there was nothing wrong with a little flirting. It's not like he had any intention of turning this into something more. Just…enjoying himself, was all. Loosening up, like Dean said.

Plus, it was a good distraction from his current worries, which…didn't seem so worrisome right at that moment. Maybe his brother had been right; he just needed to relax. A distraction to get his mind off what he couldn't do anything about.

An… aesthetically pleasing distraction, he wasn't too shy to admit. She was cute: stout and curvy, in a tight black skirt and a sequined top that dipped low on a modest chest. Sam actually thought she looked uncomfortable in the shirt, like maybe it itched. He sympathized, even if he found it amusing. He particularly liked the pair of sneakers on her feet and what looked like some sketchily drawn eyeliner on her features which she'd tried to rub off instead of fix. Like she'd given up getting ready for the night halfway through the process. He could appreciate that in a girl.

"I'm Sam," he introduced himself, sticking out his "injured" hand.

The woman had a firm grip that matched her eyes and stance, but soft skin, and opened her mouth. Whatever she said in reply, however, was lost in the din as billiard balls smacked loudly into one another with a sharp break. Dean's triumphant cry of success – among a racket of anger – blocked out just about any other sound in the bar. Sam looked over at the pool table, where his brother was wearing the grin that usually got him punched or thrown out of places like this. More often

than not with a wad of cash in his pocket.

The younger Winchester shook his head and turned back to the woman in front of him, trying to decipher what he'd made out through the noise. "Sorry, did you say 'Stephanie'?"

The corner of her mouth crooked up at him like he'd missed the inside of a particularly good joke. Before he could ask what that laugh might be, she said, "Call me Steph."

He nodded and glanced over his shoulder at the bar, Mr. Tight shirt no longer paying them any attention and the bartender off at the other end. Her broken glass had been taken away. "Are you sure I can't get you something?"

That smile turned more genuine. "No, but thanks. I was on my way out when I bumped into you. I should get going, actually. It was nice to meet you, Sam."

"Yeah, you too, Steph." Realizing that was that, with Stephanie already turning towards the door, Sam started forward a step and awkwardly tacked on, "Maybe I'll see you again? Uh, around town, I mean?"

'Jesus, just ask for her number, ya wuss!'

God, he was bad at this. He was really bad at this if his inner Dean was the one giving him advice. Granted, he hadn't had to deal with flirting in years. As is brother would tell anyone who would listen, he'd never been that great at it to start with.

She laughed and now he was certain she was making fun of him. "Maybe you will."

Still, he didn't really mind as she winked at him playfully and headed for the door. His hand was still tingling and he couldn't help the grin, despite his obvious fumble and overall awkwardness. Ah well, she'd been nice enough to meet. A good distraction, however temporary. He watched her disappear amid the bar crowd, then headed back to his table, drink in hand and worries temporarily forgotten in lieu of blonde hair, blue eyes, and a wicked smirk.

-o-o-o-

As Sam Winchester worked his way back through the establishment, the woman watched from the far end of the bar, path to the front door abandoned as she tracked the boy's progress. She glanced down at the

cocktail napkin still in her hand, dotted red with his blood. False blue eyes glowed green for only a moment as she lifted the paper to her lips and sucked on the still fresh life force.

-o-o-o-

Dean got back to their table not long after Sam, neither bruised nor thrown out for once, with a fresh wad of cash in his hand. "Barely even had to shark them!" he announced gleefully, stealing Sam's beer and taking a hearty sip, much to his brother's protest. "Locals were over confident all on their own."

The older Winchester paused in sliding the glass back Sam's way, eyes narrowed on the kid. He had a goofy grin on his face and, even as he shook his head, he glanced over his shoulder towards the bar. Dean's eyebrows climbed towards his hair.

"I know that look. Did you get her number?" He scanned the place immediately, looking for whatever hottie got that stupid smile back on his brother's face. Sam just glared and Dean scrunched up his nose in defense. "What? Come one, are you gonna be celibate the rest of your life? It's been, like, ten months!"

"Eight and a half, Dean."

Green eyes narrowed as he eyed his brother up and down. "How are you even still alive?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Excuse me for not getting over the love of my life on a schedule more convenient for you."

Dean baulked, but it was mostly for show. He didn't bother digging back at his brother. Truth was, he may be twenty-seven years old again, but in actually, he was pushing the big 4-0 and he knew it. Even damn fine at thirty-eight and plenty capable of gettin' some (and unashamed to own it), Dean really hadn't gone after women like he used to. Not since Lisa.

'Yeah,' he thought, watching his brother with more understanding than he cared to admit. *'I feel you, kid.'*

Of course, that didn't stop him from beaming the trademark Dean Winchester, 100-watt, I-am-your-older-brother-and-I-live-to-tease you smile. "So, did you get the standard seven, or did she give you a little five-digit action behind the bar?"

Ultimately, Sam decided his brother was missing a little bruising after all.

-o-o-o-

When the back door of the bar opened, the older man leaning against the side paneling in his worn jeans and farmer's flannel looked up from idly picking his finger nails. His eyes slitted yellow as a blonde haired, blue-eyed woman exited the bar, reaching up to silver charm hanging around her neck as she spotted him. Azazel pushed off the side of the bar with an expectant grin. "So what do you think? Some grade-A material right there, no?"

She yanked the necklace off, little silver charm dangling in the street light. Blonde hair bled into black, pale skin darkened to brown, and pretty blue eyes were overcome by an angry, glowing green. The woman chucked the jewelry at the demon, who caught it with a lazy smile, looking at the clever little thing.

"His blood has something foul in it." She crossed her arms over her chest, glare full of an unknown accusation.

Azazel pocketed the necklace. "Is it going to be a problem?"

Her eyes narrowed further, but his expression gave nothing away. "No. He is compatible."

"Great." Azazel started up a whistle as he turned his back to the bar and started across the parking lot.

"You realize this is not how it is done." The demon paused at the acerbic words, looking over his shoulder at the woman, her stance wide, hands fisted. "The ritual has never been performed on an adult."

Azazel turned fully around now, regarded her with a cant of his head, before he strolled almost nonchalantly into her personal space.

"Are you saying you can't do it?" His eyes flashed yellow as he loomed over her. "Because if you can't hold up your end of the bargain..."

"I am saying," she ground out between clenched teeth, "it has never been done before."

Azazel raised his hand and, were they human, it might be easy to misinterpret his intentions. A passerby might think he was readying to slap her. Instead, the demon twisted his wrist in an elegant little swirl

and the thin gold chain from the motel reformed, this time around her neck, a length of slack dipping between them to connect to his wrist in a delicate little loop.

Those green eyes glowed fiercely, but she did not retaliate.

"I am sure I don't need to remind you of our deal, Princess." The demon lowered his hand, the little chain jingling. "You do as I say, you stay topside. If not, you got back into your hole."

"You going to drag me back yourself, *demon*?" She spat the word at him, fists tightening. Not that he had anything to fear from so mundane a weapon, or, indeed, any weapon she possessed. But, then, he hadn't sought her out for a weapon.

"Oh, I won't need to. A well placed rumor here, a little whisper there. I'm sure news of your freedom would reach those pesky uncles of yours in no time at all."

She might have hid it well, but Azazel was good at recognizing fear, and the woman reeked of it, soaked in fury as it was. Finally, she finally looked away. "I can do it."

"Great!" Azazel turned and started across the parking lot once more. Behind him, the woman frowned and did not move.

"Am I not binding him tonight?"

The demon didn't pause this time, already impatient as it was, and popped the last consonant as he answered, "Nope!"

"Why not?"

Azazel let out an aggravated and dramatized sigh. He stopped once more and turned back to the infuriating woman, though he maintained the space between them this time. More often than not when dealing with her, the demon wished he could strangle the creature to death. If he approached her now, the temptation might just be too strong.

They should have raised one of her siblings. If only Lilith had known where any of them had been buried instead.

"I don't believe questions were included in our deal."

Green eyes narrowed, that fear that had been so sweetly pungent

moments before now cleverly hidden behind ferocity. She closed the distance between them, coming within his space, this time. He could appreciate the gall.

"Neither was my silence."

With that, she pushed past him and away from the bar, leading the way. Azazel grinned something feral, and decided maybe, just this once, he could strangle her after all. It's not like she'd die from it. The demon followed almost lazily until he'd caught up (his current host had significantly longer legs). He grabbed her by the elbow and then they were no longer outside.

He deposited her on the motel bed, enjoying the way she yelped as she nearly bounced clean off. Azazel unwound the chain from his wrist, securing it around the foot of the nightstand once more. With another wave, it disappeared from her neck and reformed around her ankle.

"Task number two is to watch the Winchesters. *From afar*." Picking the last of the *Supernatural* books off the bed, he tossed it into her lap just as she resettled on the mattress. He waggled a pointer finger at her. "No getting close, and no binding."

"How am I supposed to do that without the bond?" she spat back, tossing the book onto the covers. "They're *hunters,* and I am not invisible. They're going to notice."

Azazel just grinned, all teeth. "I'm sure you'll figure something out."

With that, he turned and headed for the door, reveling in the fury radiating off of her. He supposed if he couldn't kill her, he could at least infuriate her as much as she did him. He left the motel room to something between a growl and a shriek from the creature, who scooped up the book and chucked it at after him. The *Supernatural* novel hit the back of the door as it closed behind him.

The woman sunk back onto the bed, crossing her arms and cursing the demon aloud in every language that she knew. It took a good long minute. She knew many languages. As she finally simmered, green eyes drifted down to the book, bent open and laying haphazardly in front of the door.

Huh, she thought, staring at the innocuous little thing. There was an idea.

-o-o-o-

The ringing coming from his jacket was hard to hear over the din of the bar, but Tom could feel it vibrating where his coat hung on the back of the bar seat. The demon set down the cocktail glass he was admiring, broken and jagged from the hit it had taken earlier that evening. Blood still stained one side, drying from where it had pierced Sam Winchester's skin. Tom grinned at it as he pulled out the phone, placing it to his ear without checking the number. Only one person had it, after all.

"Father."

"Tail the Winchesters." Azazel's voice was tinny through the speaker, particularly difficult to hear amid the noises around him, especially if one was human. But Tom was not. The demon glanced over his shoulder, spying the brothers at their table across the bar. "Don't engage and don't get caught. We're too close to the finish line to drag anyone's ass back out'a Hell. You get exorcised, you get left."

"It won't be a problem; I tagged their car. I can follow them from the motel."

"Unless they find the tracker." Azazel's voice was cold, unimpressed. "Do not underestimate them. Your sister made that mistake."

"I'm not her." Tom picked up the glass, tilting it and watching the now-matte blood change colors in the dim light. "And I have Sam Winchester's blood."

He could hear his father's grin and the pride in his voice. Finally. "That's my boy."

Tom hung up the call and finished his drink. He grabbed his coat, threw it on over the too-tight black t-shirt his vessel had chosen the day Tom had chosen him, and left the bar just behind the Winchesters, careful to keep his distance.

-o-o-o-

They got back to the motel close to eleven. The brothers were careful, expecting an ambush, but none presented. It was eerily quiet: entirely too still. The door to their room had been opened, the thin wire Dean placed between the door and the frame as he'd closed it that morning was now on the ground, but there was no demon inside. Either Azazel hadn't entered, or he'd used a human flunky to investigate the room.

Nothing was out of place, and if their wire trap hadn't shown that someone had, at the very least, opened the door, Dean would be lulled into a false sense of security by how damn untouched the room was. But he wasn't that naïve anymore.

They took the chip out of his phone, broke it in two and chucked the whole thing. Then the boys packed, loaded up the Impala, and left town. They'd call another hunter from the road to finish the case there.

As they drove away, they were careful to make sure they weren't being followed.

-o-o-o-

A rough thirty-two hours later, Chuck Shurley trudged tiredly to his front door way too early in the morning to answer a persistent knocking. He was expecting his mail lady, who always had a sharp, rapping knock, about as demanding and patient as the rest of her. He was not, however, expecting to open his front door to an equally severe looking woman whom he had never seen before in his life. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a business card in one hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Shurley, my name is Stephanie. Your publisher sent me."

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Hehehe, I'm so excited about this, guys. Not only is so much stuff happening - stuff that has been planned for two friggin' years now - but this story needed more Chuck in it ;D

Up Next: Chuck and 'Stephanie' have a chat, we finally get to learn our mystery lady's real name, and God is not a happy camper about it. Meanwhile, Sam and Dean pull one over on Tom, unaware he's ready to pull one right back, as they head for Guthrie, Oklahoma to investigate a couple of suspicious suicides.

Chapter 62: Season 2: Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: We're posting early! That's right, bitches, it's a holiday weekend, I had plenty of time to get this chapter edited, and I am too excited about it to wait until Sunday. Happy Easter Present to us!

Reviews: your comments last chapter were AWESOME. Someone got awfully close to guessing what our mystery lady might be, for starters :D Btw, about that; I'm really happy you guys are taking stabs and guesses (and no stress if you aren't/don't have one). It helps me gauge how I'm doing with the hints and the like. Also, I should tell you that you're not actually *supposed* to be able to guess what she is. I am doing that on purpose, in case any of you are getting frustrated or thinking you all should be able to come up with this answer. It is definitely meant to be a dangled-on-a-string type of mystery. Second, someone straight up asked why the bitch hadn't been smote by an archangel yet, showing up on Chuck's door like that (okay, so, I'm paraphrasing, but that's totally the tone I heard in my head). To which I say, yesssssss. The answer to that incredibly legitimate and relevant question is in this chapter, it just so happens ;)

Speaking Of: Welcome to the second of two-plot-twists-that-makes-this-author-incredibly-nervous! The first was Fem!Cas, but it's this one I spent more time debating. I knew I was turning Cas female as soon as I realized I couldn't keep Jimmy as a vessel; it just sucked knowing I'd lose some people to that choice. But this one I could have avoided and deliberately chose not to. See, I usually don't do OCs of any kind, good or evil. (Angela was actually an accident. I never planned for her to be a character, she just sort of…kept happening.) I think my dislike stems from so many being poorly written or unnecessary to the story, and I project my dislike of them onto all readers, convincing myself no one wants or likes to read OCs. Now, I know that's not actually true, and additionally, I am 90% positive I can write a good character who's properly integrated into a story, but… I don't know, the stigma just remained. It took months of debating before I decided, fuck it, I think I've got a cool character on my hands and I want to share that with you. Plus, you know, it's Supernatural, so… I can always just kill off a female character

unexpectedly and on absolutely no one's request!

(Looking at you, there, Charlie. And Jo. And Ellen. Eileen. Kaia. God damn. Okay, forget my nervousness, this show needs more women who don't die on us, damnit!)

((You stay *the hell* away from Jody Mills, Supernatural Writers, or I will *knife* you!))

(((Disclaimer: All death threats made by the entity known as "the author" or while under the alias "Silence" or "no good dirty rotten" are entirely works of fiction, arguably intended as 'jokes' made by an unfortunate fangirl suffering delusions of comedic genius)))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 29

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Tom swung his legs back and forth like an unattended child, reading off the information they'd gathered so far. "Carver Edlund's real name is Chuck Shurley. Here's his address and number, as well as the info we have on his Publisher. She's a waste of time though; you're going to have to weasel your way in on your own."

The woman looked up with a frown, even as she accepted several notecards the demon handed her. "This would be far easier if we put someone else in her place. Can one of you hell spawn not simply possess her?"

"Gee, thanks, Sherlock. We hadn't thought of that," Tom deadpanned before rolling his eyes. "Not only is Ms. Siege warded, her entire office is as well. Turns out-" he picked up one of the *Supernatural* books and tossed it her way, voice dripping with derision- "she's a fan. A *paranoid* fan. Sending in a human agent got us nowhere. Apparently Mr. *Edlund* is 'very private,' so you're on your own."

She set the book aside and finished pulling on the blazer he had brought her that morning. Tom regarded her with something between skepticism and disdain. Heavily leaning more towards the latter.

"You can *lie*, right?"

The look she leveled his way was an insulted one, and he showed off his pearly whites in response.

"To Chuck Shurley?" She grabbed the small silver charm off the motel dresser and slipped it around her neck. Black hair became blonde, green became blue, and suddenly standing in the room was a fairly professional looking, Caucasian woman. "Surely, I can."

The demon groaned. "Don't do that. Ever again."

She rolled her shoulder and fingered the charm around her neck, glancing at it in the mirror attached to the dresser. "Do you know which of the Archangels guards the prophet?"

Tom raised an eyebrow at her in the reflection. "Does it matter?"

"If it is Gabriel or Raphael, this warding may be enough. They were never particularly observant."

"And if it's Michael?"

She settled the necklace back against her skin. "My chances of getting through the day not smote by lightning significantly decrease."

Tom regarded her with a curious look on his face. "Could he do it?"

"Smite me? He's an archangel."

"Kill you."

The woman paused, meeting the demon's gaze in the mirror, the narrow slant of her eyes clearly wondering why he asked. The silence passed between them, heavy and challenging and unbroken, before she turned away from the mirror, the question going unanswered. She crossed back to the bed where she sat and reached down to put on the sneakers she had worn to the bar.

"Ah-ah-ah! Making you look presentable was a pain in the ass; you are not ruining my hard work." Tom jumped down from the kitchenette table, reaching beneath it for a shoebox that he tossed her way. The glare she threw right back once she opened the lid was nothing short of what he'd already prepared for. "You're wearing them."

She pulled out the pair of high heels. "I already told you, I can't walk in them."

"They're *pumps*. Anyone could walk in them," Tom argued back,

having absolutely no clue why his father had wasted breath warning him not to underestimate her. Or why they needed her at all, actually. Up until and including this very moment, she had been nothing but a useless thorn in their sides.

As she violently threw the box onto the bed and started tearing the rolled up balls of paper out of the toes, Tom dug into his jacket pocket. "Last thing: ID and business cards. Sam already thinks your name is Stephanie, so we went with that. Can't exactly use your real one; it's a bit dated, even for the 'Apple' and 'Chandelier' freaks today."

The woman didn't understand half of what came out of his mouth but, then again, this demon did delight in reminding her that everything she knew came from a television set or the internet. She hobbled over to him, one foot already strapped into the 'pump',and ripped the small, plastic identification card out of his hand. It had a photo of her – or the version the warded necklace provided – and the surname the demon had chosen.

The one he'd said would be a perfect fit.

Once she read it, she immediately chucked the thing back at his forehead and hobbled off to put her other ridiculous shoe on.

-o-o-o-

When Chuck opened his front door that morning, clad in not much but a coffee-stained t-shirt, a robe, and a pair of boxers two days old, he was expecting his harried mailwoman with another batch of mis-delivered packages or letters lacking the correct stampage. He and his mail lady didn't get on very well. Their feud was one of suburban legend, to go down in the songs of fishwives everywhere. Or so Chuck let himself believe every time he had to face the tired, overpowering woman who reminded him more of a large toad preparing to swallow him whole than a human being with a sucky job and three difficult children at home.

He was not expecting to open the door to a woman that was most definitely not his mail lady, although she appeared to be equally unimpressed with him. She stood in a stiff suit and heels that brought her maybe to Chuck's nose, bun of crisp blonde hair on the top of her head as strict as the blue-eyed glare she leveled at him. She might have been stunning in a natural sort of way – completely out of his league, he admitted easily – if it wasn't for the blatant expression of distaste plastered on her face and the way she looked like she wanted

to climb out of that blazer and blouse combo, possibly to set it on fire to the soundtrack of something Hans Zimmer would write.

Basically, there was not an inch of this woman that did not intimidate the hell out of the poor man whose stoop she chose to grace that morning.

But there was a moment – a single solitary second amid Chuck's initial surprise, then panic, followed by the flush of heat that slickened his palms and the edges of his hairline, wrapping up with potentially epileptic nervousness, before ending, damn near anti-climatically, with well-learned resignation – when Chuck Shurley was not Chuck Shurley anymore. For just that moment, something far older stood in the doorway and stared at the thing on his front step, introducing herself. This ancient being had a penetrating gaze older than time itself, and his face, which looked shockingly similar to Chuck Shurley's, was caught between genuine surprise and terrible anger.

Then the moment was gone, and it was just a human writer, lonely alcoholic, and despondent prophet once more standing in his open door, staring at the woman as he tried not to confuse his tongue with his brain and his brain with his tongue. The source of his tongue-tied brain saw none of this, busy digging into her black and silver embossed purse that seemed about as ill-fitting to her as the outfit. She pulled out a business card.

"Good morning, Mr. Shurley. My name is Stephanie." She held out the card with the brusque efficiency of someone serving a subpoena. Chuck swallowed heavily. He took the card after almost fumbling it twice. "I'm an editorial assistant, here to help you with your newest '*Supernatural*' novel. Your publisher sent me."

He stared at the paper in his hand, having not heard much past 'good morning,' since his focus was primary on untangling the jumbled communication line between his neurons and his lips. Chuck blinked at the embossed words running neatly across the card, and his mouth finally took over where his brain was failing him.

"Wait, you're serious?" He glanced back up at the woman with an incredulous look. "Your name is really Stephanie Meyer?"

The tight lip smile she sent him was anything but friendly. "I didn't pick it."

"Uh…" Chuck chuckled weakly, before realizing that she was not laughing along. "Yeah, that's…that's unfortunate. Especially in this

industry."

"I'm aware. Someone out there thinks they're very funny."

"Um…" The writer blinked, feeling entirely left out of a joke that he was also pretty sure he didn't want in on. "Right…uh, well, come on in. My- my publisher sent you?"

He stepped to the side so she could enter his house, closing the front door behind her. Chuck gestured nervously for her to follow as he led the way into his living room. She only tripped once on her way, glaring down at her shoes in a manner that made Chuck infinitely grateful he was not them. Once in the room, he had to quickly toss several articles of dirty laundry off the couch, belatedly noticing the numerous half-drunk liquor bottles and takeout boxes scattered on just about every other surface in the room.

God, he really needed to get a life. Preferably a better, less embarrassing one.

Luckily for him, Ms. Meyer didn't seem to care. She set aside a dirty sock that he'd missed and settled herself onto the couch easily enough. "She didn't tell you? Hold on, I have her number here. We can give her a call."

The woman was back to digging through that awful purse and Chuck waved her off, not wanting to be a nuisance by not believing her. It's not like there was any other reason a beautiful woman would sit in his ramshackle house and put up with him at eight in the morning.

"Oh, no, that's okay. I know I'm a bit behind schedule." He looked around awkwardly for a second chair, but entertaining company wasn't exactly a common occurrence for him. "The, uh, the new book just isn't…er, writing itself like the others."

Clumsily, Chuck started to clear a space on the coffee table, scattering empty Red Bull cans and liquor bottles and hastily stacking dishes to the side until he had room enough to perch awkwardly on the edge. He tucked his hands in his lap, then beneath his thighs, then back in his lap, twiddled his thumbs together and hoped he wasn't making a complete fool of himself. He was fairly certain that, too, was a fool's hope.

"Well, that's what I'm here for." The woman attempted a smile, her tone not unkind, but somehow neither seemed right on her. "Keep you on track, read your rough drafts and provide feedback, motivation:

whatever you need."

"Right, that, uh… that sounds… good." Chuck rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "So, um, you've read them, then?"

"The books?" The woman seemed thrown by the question. "Oh, I've read a couple. They're…good."

She barely got the word out without chocking on it and any semblance of patience God had left, hiding behind Chuck's nervousness, was gone. He rolled His eyes and Chuck was no longer Chuck.

"Okay, that's enough." God snapped His fingers and the woman went limp against the back of the couch. He scooted forward on the coffee table, His knees bumping hers, but His expression remained deadly serious. "What are you doing here?"

Her fingers curled slowly against the cushions and the woman blinked heavily. She was fighting it; He could feel her struggle not to answer. God sighed heavily, stood, and crossed the small space between them.

"You really are his child, aren't you?" He sat down beside her, one hand settling on her forearm, the other waving over her head and body. She went completely boneless against the couch, held upright only by his presence beside her. Blue eyes flickered green despite the spell cleverly wrapped in her necklace, both so blank they seemed nearly lifeless.

"Who raised you from the pit?"

Her mouth moved reflexively. "The demon Azazel."

"And how did he find you?"

"The demon Lilith."

God almost rolled His eyes, a bit of Chuck unintentionally bleeding through. "And how did *she* find you?"

"I don't know."

He was hardly satisfied by that answer, but the current line of questioning sure didn't seem to be getting them anywhere. So God switched tactics. "Why are you here?"

Hell wasn't supposed to know of the existence of the Prophet yet, at

least not as a writer. Certainly not as someone they were bold enough to approach, considering the archangel guarding him twenty-four-seven. The multiple break-ins over the past several months had not gone unnoticed by God, even if they had by Chuck. Lucky for both of them, Chuck had accidentally misfiled the first drafts of the story, still suffering from his first-ever brainstorming migraine. Hell's house invader – a clever human thief one of the crossroads demons likely had on a string – walked away with a USB full of an impressive, if not pitiable, porn collection labeled 'Supernatural Stories'.

The Winchester Gospels, meanwhile, sat pretty and safe in the untouched 'porn' folder on Chuck's desktop. Given Dean was one of the main characters, Chuck had found his initial misfiling amusing and hadn't bothered correcting it.

"Answer the question," God nudged her arm. "Why are you here?"

"To follow Sam Winchester."

Chuck's eyebrows went up, and for a moment He forgot to be God. He was genuinely surprised for a second time that morning, which simply didn't happen to all-knowing beings very often, you know.
"Wait, *this* is Hell's backup plan? Dean's changing things left and right, and *you* are their answer?"

He laughed and looked away in amazement, before He really started to think over it. The woman didn't respond, either not having an answer or His spell giving her a pass since He wasn't actually expecting one. Chuck leaned back, putting His arm across the back of the couch. "Well, that could backfire spectacularly. For either party."

They sat in silence, the woman slumped beside Him while God stared off at nothing in particular, chewing on His lip (a pure Chuck thing that He'd accidentally picked up over the last thirty years or so). His eyes slid sideways to the plot twist currently sitting on his couch.

"I do kind of want to see that…"

But He didn't want the scales to tip from where they sat now, either. Despite Dean Winchester's misgivings, He *was* doing what He could to help. God sat up and turned back towards Hell's little home wrecker, contemplating what to do. He could send her back to that hole Azazel dug her out of, add a couple extra layers of warding to make sure no one ever freed her again, and be done with it. Or He could wait it out, see how Time decided to deal with the new player on their board.

His gaze slid down to her hands, where her fingers started curling again. A futile but stubborn-headed fight against His will. Truly, she was her father's creation.

God knew what He probably *should* do, but He hadn't yet decided what He was going to do. So He settled a hand over those twitching fingers, stilling the movement, and asked a question He did not anticipate liking the answer to.

"Tell me; what are *you* going to do, *Persephone*?"

He could feel the struggle in her voice, the ache in every not-muscle she didn't actually possess. All just clever spell work and artistic talent. The woman – Persephone – turned her head, barely visible panic in those heavily glazed eyes that met His own.

"Who…*are*….you?"

-o-o-o-

"-and then I was thinking maybe not a witch, but a demon. Ultimately I decided, why not both! And I'll name her Ruby. Get it?"

Persephone blinked, taking a deep breath as if she hadn't in quite some time. She'd been… she'd been thinking… of what?

"Ms. Meyer?"

She blinked again and looked up to the face of Chuck Shurley, seated on the coffee table across from her, fidgeting nervously.

"Sorry, I'm probably boring you to death."

"No." Persephone sat up straighter, clearing her throat and hoping it cleared the cobwebs from her mind as well. She'd been thinking something, only moments ago… angry about something, maybe? She cleared her throat again and shook her head. "Not at all, Mr. Shurley. I assure you, it takes much more than boredom to kill me."

"Chuck."

"I'm sorry?"

The author cleared his own throat a little nervously. "You can call me Chuck."

"Steph," she conceded as well with a smile that was definitely the least

intimidating thing she'd done so far. "Now, Chuck, what were you saying?"

"I was just…talking about Sam?"

"Oh." A smile lit her face again and the tension she hadn't even known was in the room bled out of it. She folded her hands in her lap. "Then please, continue."

Chuck smiled shyly back, and if there was something a little older in his eye – a little dangerous and a little mischievous – the woman didn't seem to notice.

-o-o-o-

The following morning when 'Stephanie' showed up at his door again (still way too early, even for a god), the blazer-blouse combo remained but she was wearing a far more comfortable-looking pair of jeans. The third time, her hair was down and there were sneakers on her feet. By the fourth, Chuck was starting to feel a lot less intimidated around the intimidating woman.

-o-o-o-

"Son of a bitch." Dean let out a low growl as he all but fell on his ass getting the tracker loose from Baby's under carriage. He glared at the small device, little green light blinking cheerfully from the small square of technology and just pissing himself off all the more. He tossed the thing up to his brother. "You were right."

Sam looked down at the small thing as he caught it, honestly surprised that it was nothing more than your average, human tracking device. He didn't know what he'd been expecting (something supernatural, or a maybe normal device adapted using something supernatural?) but it was mundane after all.

"Coming here was a good call," he said, offering Dean a hand up off the dusty ground. Bobby, standing next to them, had his arms crossed over his chest and an unhappy look on his face. The younger Winchester gave him a grateful look for the home base he seemed always willing to provide, however grumpily. "Demons already know how often we stop here. Good a place as any to 'lose' a tracking device."

Bobby just harrumphed, but it wasn't like he was unused to Winchesters bringing crap down on his house.

"I don't know, man," Dean countered, taking the blinking thing back from the younger Winchester, tossing it in his palm. "This is getting out of hand. Tracing our phones, breaking into the motel room, *tagging* my *car*? They're getting too aggressive. I don't like it."

Bobby snorted, calling both brothers' attention. He uncrossed his arms. "What did you expect? It ain't like demons woke up one morning and thought, let's mess with the Winchesters today. This is the apocalypse we're talking about, ya idjits! That takes planning, years of it. And here you come along, a kink in the blueprints they probably ironed every wrinkle out of a century ago, and now they can't find you boys on top of it all? Of *course* they're getting aggressive."

Dean bristled under the accusations, although he knew Bobby didn't mean a single one of them like that. "Well, what are we supposed to do about it? Let them find us? Find Sam? We *can't*, Bobby. So how do we stop them? How do we fix this?"

The older hunter shrugged, eyes wide in that apologetic way they took on whenever his boys asked questions he didn't have the answers to. "I don't think you can. Other than-"

"-sticking to the damn timeline." Dean clenched his fist around the stupid tracker, tilting his head back to stare at the sky and curse out God one more time. It was practically a habit by now. "I know."

"So…" Sam glanced between the two of them. "A case, then?"

His brother sighed, dropping his head back down. "Yeah, a case." At least until they figured out what the hell to do about Hell. "Whatdya got?"

Bobby shrugged one shoulder. "There's been a couple suicides in Guthrie. Weird-ass stuff. Was in the paper this morning."

"Guthrie it is," Dean said with about as much enthusiasm as a heart attack. He dropped the small tracker into the dust, lifting his boot to crush it when Sam took an aborted step forward, arm raised hastily to stop his brother.

"Wait," he said and Dean did. "I have a better idea."

-o-o-o-

Sam darted between trucks, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible (which meant it was really more a stroll among the trucks but,

whatever). The boys had stopped at the first gas station outside of Souix Falls that was large enough to fit their needs. Namely, filled with truckers on the long haul across country.

The young Winchester pulled up short, stepping out of the way of a passing trucker. He nodded to the man, going for his innocent-civilian-out-for-a-stroll-in-the-parking-lot smile. The man gave him a weird look, but dipped his ball-capped head in return before disappearing into the general store attached to the pumps.

Sam pushed on until he spotted an eighteen wheeler with North Carolina plates and a logo for *'Transcontinental Shipments*' printed on the side. Perfect. It was probably headed for the coast, and still had a ways to go yet. With any luck, the driver was on his way out for delivery, which meant he would not only continue on for another half of the country, but turn around and drive back, as well.

Casting a furtive look around the truck stop, Sam leaned over and slapped the tracker on the inside of the cab's front wheel well. The little green light blinked away in the dark arch, unnoticeable once he straightened back up. Task complete, the hunter glanced around again, making sure he hadn't been noticed, before hustling it back to where the Impala was parked.

-o-o-o-

"Alright, tell me about this hunt we're walking into," Dean said from the driver's seat, hand digging around in a bag of Doritos placed between the two. No reason not to pick up some road-tripping supplies when stopping to plant a tracker on some poor, unsuspecting trucker. They were on their way to Guthrie now, hopefully without a demonic tail, where a line-up of apparent suicides had the local newspapers speculating the crap out of conspiracy theories.

"There've been three deaths so far, two of them suicides, one homicide. Bobby was right, though, they are weird." Sam shuffled papers in the passenger seat, having forgone his laptop since they would be on the road for a while and even his hackery wasn't up to task for creating magical wi-fi signals out of thin air. "The first was a Dr. Jennings. Walked into a gun shop, shot the owner with a turkey rifle and then turned it himself."

"A real life Private Pyle. Great."

"Yeah, well, this wasn't some tormented war vet," Sam countered. "The doc has no priors, no history of violence or suicidal tendencies, and

the town seems genuinely rattled. By all accounts, he was a 'nice guy.'"

"Yeah, a 'nice guy' who walked into a gun shop and shot up the customers. Next."

Sam spared his brother a reproachful look, but continued on regardless. "Holly Beckett, also ruled a suicide. The second one in a ten block radius, which is probably what made the local newspaper decide it was a story. No criminal record, no known symptoms of depression, same as the doctor. She was single, forty-one, and two days ago pulled up to a gas station and… *set* herself on fire."

Dean's eyebrows rose and he glanced Sam's way in surprise. The younger brother's first thought was, *'yeah, Bobby warned us they were weird*,' but as that same brow plummeted into a frown Sam recognized, he paused, brain stuttering for a second.

"Wait, does that- is this a case we worked?"

The frown deepened, and Dean rubbed at his chest absently. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Sam didn't see how a woman covering herself in gasoline and using the cigarette lighter from her own car as an incendiary could possibly come with any *maybes.* When Dean's frown persisted but no explanation was forthcoming, Sam hesitated, and then asked, "…Timey Senses acting up?"

Dean actually laughed and dropped his arm from his chest, never having noticed he was rubbing at it in the first place. "Ha! I knew I'd get you to call it that. Admit it. It's a cool name."

"It is absolutely not a cool name." Sam shook his head, but leveled his brother with a more solemn follow-up look. "Seriously, man, what's going on?"

The frown came back, but Dean at least answered this time. "I, uh… it sounds familiar. Real familiar. As in, I remember being at the gas station."

Sam pursed his lips, but didn't find that particularly troubling. At least, not their normal level of troubling. He looked down at the picture of Holly Beckett staring up at him and caught a glimpse of the passing interstate signage out of his periphery. They wouldn't get into Guthrie until the early hours of the morning, but they weren't that far out, either. "Uh, well, we're on our way, and it's only a couple hours out-"

"No, I mean, I was there right after she went up; whole place still smelled like burnt flesh." Dean wrinkled his nose, wringing one hand on the steering wheel. "That article's from yesterday, which means last time we were there already. I mean, maybe it was a different case and I'm just confusing the two, but…"

He couldn't actually recall the events surrounding him being at the gas station. He remembered phoning Sam, though, and asking why the hell his vision hadn't given them more heads up. Sammy hadn't had a vision about any of this, though. They were just following some newspaper leads, this time around.

"But," Sam picked up where he'd left off, "how many people set themselves on fire at a gas station."

"Exactly." Dean rubbed at his chest again, the familiar tightness stretching across his pecs a fairly common occurrence these days. Usually when a demon was about or things weren't going their way. And there certainly wasn't a demon anywhere near them right now. "I don't know, man. If I was there first time around, then our timing's off. And that's never a good thing."

It didn't take a genius, or a psychic, or even a man from the future, to know where both their minds immediately went. Straight to Max Miller and the mess they'd gotten into – and everything it had cost them – right after they showed up on a hunt where things hadn't been lining up.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: So. Friggin'. Excited! Like, excited enough I'm having trouble waiting a full week to post chapters :D From here on out, no one in this little tale is getting a break anytime soon. Our poor Season 2.1 has to make up in action and plot-forwarding what 2.0 had in chatter and development. So. Friggin'. Excited.

Stephanie Meyer: I honestly couldn't help myself. Her name was always going to be 'Stephanie' because what else would you hear if you misheard "Persephone" said in a crowded bar? And her going to Chuck as someone in the publishing industry? Ha! Yeah, her last name was a given from the start. Tom's an asshole XD

God before Chuck: So, the scarily observant of you might be wondering "why did she bother capitalizing all of those He's and

His's when she didn't do that for the conversation between Dean and God?" Okay, honestly if you actually picked up on that, you're really freaky and I'm definitely looking at you funny, but also I appreciate you :D Anyhoo, head-cannon here is that God can slip back into his Old Testament self/habits. And when He's back to being that Old Testament dick, before He took a sabbatical and learned to play the guitar, He gets capitalized pronouns :P

Persephone: Bring on the slew of "huh, wasn't really expecting that" peppered among the "…who?" and some spattering of "Uh, wait a sec, Silence, that's not- I mean it doesn't quite…well, *some* liberties, I suppose, but still mostly…no?" Of which, to all, I reply: "hehehe };-] " Would I be a no good dirty rotten author any other way? I think not.

Fun Fact #82: The human thief Hell sent in to Chuck's Publisher's office and into his house to steal his files? Totally Bella.

Up Next: As you might have guessed right along with the boys, things are not going down as they should in Guthrie, Oklahoma. Baby's getting driven off the road, Weber's an insane asshole (okay, no change there), Andy's in some major trouble, Dean's remembering just why they call him a Jedi but lamenting the fact he's a piss-poor communicator, Sam's all sorts of confused and freaked out (okay, so no real change to any of these things, actually...), and Yellow Eyes is all up in a different pair of brothers, for once.

Chapter 63: Season 2: Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I just want you to know how much I love you guys. What did I want to do after seeing Endgame today? Nothing but read Avengers fanfiction aaaaaaall night long. What did I do instead? Edited this chapter because you all deserve a weekend that not only starts with Endgame but also comes with a chapter update. That's real love right there (and humility and modesty too, if you didn't pick up on that ;)

Reviews: I think even if you all hadn't offered up some of the damn best, most amazing, heart-warming, chest-feather-puffing comments I've ever received, I'd still love you all enough to forfeit Avengers fanfiction for a night. But, just so you all know, that like button might be broke form how hard you all pushed it. I'm running out of chest-feathers, I preened so hard (...why did that sound dirty?)

Jokes aside, thank you, guys. I really, really appreciate the love :)

Original Timeline Reference: In general, I don't spend a lot of time in this story describing how episodes went originally, but this particular chapter/episode is more barren of first-time clues than usual. You'll get a bare bones synopsis of the original episode (2.05 Simon Said) somewhere in this chapter, but that's pretty much it. Can you still read/understand/enjoy without more in-depth memory/knowledge? I think so (although I'm not exactly an objective source, here…) Still, it's not a bad idea to refresh your memory for the full effect (reading a synopsis online should be enough if you don't have time for or access to an episode re-watch)

If you're too lazy to do that (no judgement, I feel you, you are my people) or I've turned you into too much of a junkie to even for a second postpone your weekly intake of time travel hijinks… just remember that Andy Gallagher can control people with his voice and he tends to ask them to give him things, like half-drank coffees and Impalas.

Chapter Warnings: Andy's asking for things. Like half-drank coffees and Impalas. He's also not where he's supposed to be, but, then again, who has been lately?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 30

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

It was well past dark when they got to Guthrie, Oklahoma. They were still in the outskirts, cruising with the windows down in the warm summer night air, the town just starting to populate the black around them with scattered porch lights and yellow-lit windows. Guthrie had a decent sized population, at least in relation to many of the towns hunters passed through, but the road was empty and the night quiet. The oncoming headlights were the first Dean had seen in a while.

They were also swerving.

"What the hell-" Dean's grumble turned into a shout of surprise as the oncoming car didn't stay in its oncoming lane. He cursed, yanking Baby to the right, barely missing the swerving vehicle as it flew past. It was a van, and Dean's eyes went wide as a Viking queen – sword in hand, mounted on a polar bear – flashed past.

Son of a bitch.

"I know that van!" he exclaimed, more out of surprise than on purpose. Dean slammed on the breaks and his brother lurched in the passenger seat, grabbing onto the dash.

From behind came a loud crunch of metal and a heavy thud. Dean flipped half in his seat to look out the back window, Sammy doing the same. The van had swerved off the side of the road, likely an overcorrection from nearly crashing into them. There was a minor drainage ditch between the road and the tree line, where the van had come to an unfortunate stop. Steam was rising from the bent hood, the entire front of the car crunched in around the trunk of a tree.

Dean threw Baby into reverse, spinning the wheel until he'd cleared enough room to pull a u-urn. They crept up on the van, slowly because Dean sure didn't remember this ever happening. While his brain was telling him the owner of that van was a friendly, that sure as hell didn't mean the current driver was. Sam kept glancing between the vehicle, so far silent in the night, and his brother.

The van door creaked open loudly, bent as it was on its hinges, and swung closed a time and a half before the driver got it all the way open. It was a kid – an unassuming man maybe Sam's age – in a robe and jeans and a t-shirt, short brown hair a complete mess. He looked like he ought to be stumbling out of bed, not an auto crash (which might actually explain the crash in the first place). The man staggered out onto the road, clearly dazed, a line of blood running down the side of his face.

"Yeah, yeah!" Dean exclaimed suddenly with a smile that seemed completely inappropriate given the circumstances. Sam's eyebrows went up as his brother brought the car to a stop a half dozen feet from the crashed van. The driver spotted them, and Dean turned to his brother even as the kid lurched their way. "It's the Star Wars guy!"

Sam just stared at his brother incredulously.

"It's the- you know-" Dean waved two fingers in the air, "'-these are not the droids you're looking for' guy! Crap, what was his name?"

Sam's bitchface (a variant of #1: *'You're not making any sense, Dean'*) didn't let up, clearly failing to decipher what the hell his brother was trying to say. Dean's hand was already on the door to get out and help – Sammy a little more cautious about the whole situation – when the man from the future suddenly remembered just *why* it was they called this kid the Star Wars guy.

Oh no.

Baby!

Dean turned to his brother, suddenly wide-eyed and Sam straightened, forehead smoothing out at the one-eighty in his brother's eyes. Not to mention the desperate tone as he suddenly pleaded, "Don't let him take the Impala."

Sam blinked and went immediately into alert mode, the man approaching now a threat and not a friend. But he didn't have time to get out more than a confused, "What?" before Andy was on them. The kid hit the driver side of the vehicle, fingers curling around the window frame.

"Get out."

"Okay." Dean smiled, nodded, and then was getting out of the car.

"What the hell- Dean!" Sam scrambled for his brother, but Dean was already out, holding the door open for the bleeding kid to clamber inside. Dean shut the door for him, still smiling a tight, goofy grin.

"You too," the kid aimed at Sam, barely even paying attention to him and Sam thought *'who the hell does this guy think he is'* as he drew his gun.

"Yeah, I don't think so."

That was finally enough to grab Andy's attention, and he all but threw himself against the driver side door at the sight of the gun. His arms flailed, hands raised in a meager and futile shield. Blood dripped into his too-wide eyes from that cut on his forehead.

"What the hell! I said get out of the car!" His gaze bounced between the gun to the man behind it, clear panic on his face. "Drop the gun! Why aren't you putting it down?!"

Sam's arm didn't move an inch and his expression remained deadly. He glanced at Dean, who was busy babbling to the kid to calm down, it's fine, they're the good guys.

"Yeah," Sam said past a tight jaw to the kid still pressed against the door, clearly expecting him to obey vocal commands alone. The hunter didn't need much more than that and the Star Wars reference to clue in to what this man could do. "I don't seem to be listening. Now who the hell are you?"

"Me?" Andy flinched back, glancing frantically between the two brothers. "Who the hell are you guys?"

"We're hunters," Dean answered and Sam stared up at him. "We kill monsters – bad ones – and we're going to start and stop the apocalypse-"

"Dean!" Sam's bark did nothing for his brother, who still had that tight smile stretched across his face, nodding his head like he understood. "*Stop*."

"I'm trying," Dean answered through teeth clenched in that placating grin.

Andy was staring at him too, wide-eyed, and that was when he spotted Dean's gun, tucked in his jeans. Dean caught his gaze and glanced down right at the same time as he realized where this was

going.

"Wait, kid, you don't want to-"

"Draw your gun and shoot yourself if he shoots me."

Sam cried out as Dean immediately drew his gun and put it to his head, hammer drawn back. The younger Winchester jerked forward viciously, the barrel of his own gun less than a foot away from the kid, who had nowhere else to scramble to. The gun shook in Sam's death grip and he wanted to shoot the man so much more now.

"Sam, don't," Dean immediately snapped, and that was pretty ridiculous, with him standing there, gun to his head. "Come on, man, don't do this. You were cool the first time we met."

"I've never met you!" Andy sounded hysteric. "Now stop lying! Who are you?"

"I'm Dean Winchester. I'm from the future."

"Dean, *shut up*."

"I said tell the truth!"

"I can't, Sammy, and I am, kid. I'm from the future. 'Bout ten years. Well, nine now. An angel sent me back to save the world."

Andy just stared at him, and Sam wondered if his powers would last past his death. He couldn't risk if they did, couldn't risk Dean shooting himself.

"It's the truth," he spat out instead, drawing the kid's attention back into the car. "Now get that gun away from my brother."

"You first!"

"Come on, guys," Dean practically whined, both smile and gun still in place. "We've gotten off on the wrong foot, here. Look, I'm Dean, this is my brother, Sam. We're here to help."

Andy faltered, glancing back up at the older Winchester as something he said finally seemed to get through. He glanced back at the man holding the gun on him. "Sam… Winchester?"

The brothers exchanged looks.

"Yeah."

Andy hesitated another moment, then obviously made some sort of decision. "Put the gun down, Sam."

Sam gave him a look that clearly said, *'Do I look stupid to you?*' but Andy merely returned it.

"It's okay, Sammy. Put the gun away."

The younger Winchester turned the same damn look on his brother, but eventually squared his jaw and lowered the weapon, very clearly re-engaging the safety. When the gun was set pointedly on the seat between them, closer to Andy than it was to Sam, the kid hesitated for only another half second before he angled his head over his shoulder to look at Dean.

"Put yours away, too."

"Safety on," Sam growled, but Dean didn't need the additional command. He re-engaged it all on his own, tucking the gun back into his waistline.

"Now, um…" Andy swallowed nervously, looking between the brothers. When he spoke, his voice sounded ever so slightly different, missing a timber that had been there previously. "Who are you two and *what* is going on?"

-o-o-o-

They left Andy's van behind; the thing was totaled and it wasn't like they had time to call a tow. Andy was covered in blood and, it turned out, it wasn't all his.

"He killed her," he whispered from the back seat of the Impala, most of the story already out but this part clearly the hardest for him yet.

"Your brother?" Dean was in the front seat, driving them into town, but not to the county Andy had lived, where the suicides had been. Where a man named Ansem Weebs had changed his name, gotten a job in a coffee shop, befriended the manager, Tracy, and the local customer, Andy, and eventually used his new life to kill a doctor who delivered a set of twins twenty-three years ago, murder their biological mother, and finish it up with the girlfriend who stood in the way.

"I didn't know I had a brother," Andy mumbled, staring numbly at his hands in his lap. He huffed. "An evil twin. What do ya know? He didn't even have a goatee."

Sam glanced over at his own brother, but Dean could only offer a helpless shrug. They'd gotten there in time to save Andy's girl last time, though it still hadn't exactly been a happy ending.

"I killed him."

Both brothers looked at the kid in the backseat as the quiet confession turned to silence.

"He said a yellow-eyed man was going to reward him. Reward *us.* All we had to do was take out everyone else." Andy blinked tears from his eyes, wiping at them with bloody hands that didn't do much but make more mess. "He was- he was crazy. Said we could do it together. Be- be *kings*." He laughed, the sound hysterical and not remotely funny. "Some yellow-eyed freak came to my evil twin in a dream and convinced him to go on a murder spree."

Neither brother knew what to say to that. To that nightmare that sounded to made up even for television. And Andy was trapped in it, stuck living it.

"The man to get, he said-" The kid stopped, swallowing as he clenched his hands in his lap. He finally looked up, meeting their eyes, Sam's directly and then Dean's through the rearview mirror. "The man to get was Sam Winchester."

The Winchesters exchanged wide-eyed looks. Well shit. That's definitely not what had happened last time.

"He killed her," Andy whispered again, head back down. He was clearly in shock. "He killed her and I couldn't- I couldn't save- Oh god, she's dead. She's dead and I killed him."

Dean pulled into the first motel they came to, making sure to park in the back where there were less guests and even less working lights. Sam got them a room and they got the bloodied kid into the motel under the cover of darkness.

"I'll get him cleaned up," Dean said, putting the keys into his brother's hand. "Why don't you go check out the crime scene."

Sam nodded, hearing the unspoken words. He was going in to town to

see if there was any way to salvage this for Andy, to let him keep his life as though he hadn't witnessed a homicide, committed one himself, and then ran. So the younger Winchester climbed back into the Impala and headed to the coffee shop where the kid said it had all gone down.

-o-o-o-

Andy came out of the shower with skin an irritated red from the heat, but he still felt numb. Everything tingled, but not the pleasant way. He sat on the bed in a pair of sweatpants that weren't his and were way too big for him, a band t-shirt he didn't know, and his maroon robe, still damp from his attempts to wash the blood out. He didn't know why, but getting it out, keeping one thing that was his from a life he knew was over, mattered. His hair was wet, dripping down his neck, and his forehead hurt, but Dean had assured him he didn't need stitches or a hospital. Just a few butterfly bandages, a couple Advil, and a fifth of rot-gut whiskey he downed greedily.

"What am I going to do?" He stared at the paper cup in his hands. He didn't feel the heat of the alcohol yet – had never been much of a drinker, really – and wondered if he should take more. "Tracy is- and I- I *killed* someone."

"Come with us."

Andy's head snapped up to the man – the *hunter* – leaning against the dresser-turned-tv-stand across from him. He looked serious.

"Look, you're a good kid and this is a…a shitty set of circumstances. We'll help. You're already running; we can teach you how to stay off the radar. Get you set up someplace new, if you want it." Dean uncrossed his arms and shrugged one shoulder. "Or, you can stick with us. We're planning on putting a bullet between those yellow eyes. You're more than welcome to be a part of that."

"I'm not a killer."

Only, god, yes he *was*.

"Nah, and you don't need to be," Dean agreed, a little smirk in the corner of his mouth that had Andy thinking, huh…maybe this guy was telling the truth. Maybe this guy really did know him, because with the ease that Dean agreed with his protest, Andy almost believed it himself. "But you are in danger, and me and my brother? We can help."

He looked down at the cup in his hands and didn't respond. Andy didn't have an answer, so he didn't bother trying to give one. Dean didn't ask, instead he just pushed off the dresser, grabbed the liquor bottle, and refilled his empty cup.

-o-o-o-

Sam was back before sunup. It was no good. The cops were already looking for Andy, and the evidence was stacked pretty strong against him. Two dead – at least one a homicide – with Andy's blood at the scene, a witness who placed him there, and both him and his easily-recognized van now missing? Even if he turned himself in immediately and claimed self-defense, the DA would use his running as a sign of guilt. It might not be an open-and-shut case, but it would be a hell of a battle, with no guarantee that Andy would walk away a free man.

Neither brother really factored in that he could talk his way out of anything, but Andy didn't much feel like talking about that. He was pretty sure if he turned himself in, the first words out of his mouth would be that he did it. He'd murdered someone – his own *brother* – and he'd gotten his girlfriend – not his girlfriend, not anymore, not ever again – killed.

"It's okay," he said, still a little numb, but the alcohol was starting to warm his bones, if only just a little. "I was already running."

And he had been. His life was over, and he'd known it. He'd had no clue where he was going, only that he couldn't stay. Tracy was dead and- and there wasn't anything left for him in that town anyway. Before, he hadn't thought he'd needed much. But it turned out, he'd needed Tracy. He wished he'd figured that out sooner.

"I'll go with you," he added, looking up at the brothers. He didn't know them, but they seemed like good people, and they were offering him something he couldn't figure out for himself yet. "If that's still okay."

"Sure thing," Dean supplied, and if Sam was surprised by it, he hid it well behind sympathetic brown eyes. Maybe the two had already talked about it. Andy hadn't exactly been 'present' for the past several hours.

"I don't- I don't know what I'm doing." He didn't know if he said it because it was the truth, or as some sort of warning to the two that they were taking in a stray. An honest-to-god, lost and homeless stray. Andy had always been a bit of a wanderer. Bum, was usually the word

people used, but it had never bothered him. It had been mostly true, after all, and he'd been happy with it.

Sam smiled, and Andy got the feeling the man knew exactly why he'd said it. "We'll figure it out."

"Until then, you're with us. It'll be awesome having a Jedi on the team." Dean grinned, but Sam must have caught Andy's hesitation and worry.

"You don't have to hunt," he added quickly, and the kid relaxed a fraction.

"'Course not," Dean agreed, though there was something in his voice that suggested he thought otherwise, even if he didn't say anything aloud. "You can just get us out of speeding tickets and we'll call it even."

Sam was shaking his head again and Dean winked over in Andy's direction. Even though there really was nothing remotely happy about it, Andy found himself smiling weakly back. Dean grabbed his jacket and duffle, tossing them onto the thin carpet. He grunted as he laid down.

"Next time, though, we're getting two rooms."

Sam shared a look with Andy that made him feel, ironically, like a brother. As the younger Winchester settled onto the other bed, Andy thought about offering the one he was sitting on. But Dean was already rolling onto his side, complaining to Sam to turn out the lights, and telling Andy to get some shut eye.

So he did. He didn't get any sleep, not with Tracy's tear-stained, shocked face replaying through his mind on a never ending loop, but he did close his eyes and at least pretend.

-o-o-o-

"So you get death premonitions?" Andy leaned over the front seat of the Impala, elbows brushing either brother as he hunched forward from the back seat. He was looking at Sam primarily, but kept switching between the two, especially as the conversation turned more and more incredulous. "That's impossible."

Beside him, Dean snorted. "Says the Star Wars guy."

Andy shrugged, cuz, hey, fair point, and added, "Dude, that sucks."

Sam gave him a look that Dean had called (earlier that morning) the patented 'Bitchface.' Dean, apparently, had a whole list of them, labeled and everything. Andy wished he could un-dead Weber just to tell him *'this is what being brothers is about, you asshole!'*

"I mean, like, when I got my mind thing? It was a gift. You know, it was like- it was like I won the lotto!" Andy, halfway through a chuckle, suddenly trailed off and the car got quiet. Yeah, it had been a gift. A gift that led right into a nightmare. He slid off the front seat and slumped in the back. "Guess what they say about winning the lotto is true."

"What's that?" Dean asked, though it was clear he couldn't decide if staying quiet would have been better.

They'd left early that morning, having Andy keep low in the back seat of the Impala as they headed out of town the opposite way they'd come in. They didn't run into any trouble, and Andy honestly didn't know what he'd been expecting. Road blocks maybe. Search dogs.

But it wasn't like he was on the FBI most wanted. Just a small town murderer. That was him, now.

He stared out the window, farther from home then he'd ever been before, and unlikely to ever go back. "You know. Be careful what you wish for, and all that."

The brothers exchanged looks, unsure how exactly to help someone grieving the loss of a loved one at the hands of their own flesh and blood. Crazy flesh and blood, maybe, but still kin. Kin that they'd then turned around and murdered. Dean gave Sam a pointed look – he was the one with all the feelings, after all – which Sam returned with a bitchface (#3 but it morphed into #9 midway).

Before the more feely of the two Winchesters could say anything, however, Andy cleared his throat and moved on. "Hey, you didn't get one of your visions about…?"

"No," Sam answered quickly, so the kid wouldn't have to finish that sentence. "We heard about the suicides on the news and came looking for a case."

"Because you hunt monsters." Andy still didn't sound like he believed them. But, then again, he could control people with his voice, he had

an evil twin, and Sam saw dead people. So, really, what did Andy know?

Sam was staring at Dean, who hadn't had a comeback right away, and Andy realized the older Winchester was frowning. Sam nudged him.

"Nothing." Dean shook his head but Sam could tell he wanted to rub at his chest. Though, he was starting to think anytime Dean managed to refrain, the urge was more out of habit than necessity. "Just, last time we did this, you had visions."

"I did?"

Andy frowned, pushing himself into the front space once more, elbows over the back of the seat. "Wait, last time? Is this- hang on, you were *serious*? I thought you were *joking*!"

Dean ignored their tag-along for the moment, and wondered aloud if the coin Cas gave Sam was blocking his visions as well. Sam frowned.

"I haven't had any while I'm awake, either," he reasoned, but looked less than confident. It wasn't exactly scientific theory they were working with, here. Dean hadn't been able to confirm whether Azazel was directly responsible for every vision or not, at least not with any future knowledge, and the brothers could only speculate at best since the incident with Max Miller. "Not since I got off the demon blood."

"Whoa, *demon blood*?!"

"Don't worry," Dean said over Andy's growing concern (probably starting to panic about what exactly he'd signed himself up for), "you don't need them."

Sam seemed less confident – especially considering his visions were arguably integral to the timeline and they were supposed to be sticking to that – but they were interrupted by the kid, who had pushed himself so far into the front seat that he was going to cause an accident soon if they didn't start listening to him.

"Guys, can we slow down and rewind for a sec?"

"Get back and buckle up, you idiot," Dean snipped, but Andy did not such thing, just staring at him with wide eyes and no lack of disbelief.

"You were kidding back there, right? Yesterday? When I probably had a concussion and was bleeding all over the place and that's why you

were able to lie? Because- because you're not *really* from the future. That would be- heh- that would be *insane*." When neither brother said anything more, Sam looking a little guilty and Dean keeping an unnecessary level of focus on the road, Andy added a little hysterically and definitely loud enough to make Dean wince, "You're from the future?!"

-o-o-o-

Andy sat, kind of like a statue, in the back seat, staring through the windshield. He'd been that way for the last five minutes, and it was honestly starting to get a little worrying.

"The apocalypse," he finally spoke, though it didn't come with much movement. "*The* apocalypse. Holy crap."

Dean huffed something out that wasn't pretty, but thankfully it wasn't really audible either. Sam turned to tuck his elbow over the back of the seat and tried to offer a reassuring look. It wasn't all that reassuring.

"I know it's a lot," Sam offered, going for gentle and Andy's eyes slid over to him, looking no less freaked out than a second ago. "And I'd say you don't have to be a part of it, but-"

"But you are," Dean cut in, ignoring the sharp way Sam looked at him for it. No use playing soft ball with the kid. "And it sucks, but we'll get you through it." As if realizing what he'd said – which wasn't technically untrue if you counted intent being stronger than all that destiny crap, but still – Dean locked eyes with the kid in the rear view mirror and added, "We're gonna stop it this time."

Andy chewed on the inside of his cheek. It wasn't that he didn't believe Dean (okay, he didn't exactly believe Dean…) but this was the freakin' end of the world they were talking about here! "I… I don't know if I'm- If I can…handle that, guys. I'm just- I'm just a *normal* guy, okay? With- with mind control powers, I'll give you that, but I didn't sign up for any of this!"

Sam's smile, while weak, was understanding, because of course it was. He was an understanding guy who sounded even deeper up shit creek than Andy was. At least *he* had awesome mind powers. Sam just saw people die all the time and was apparently doomed to escort *Lucifer* to the end of the world.

"We know, Andy, and you don't have to be up for it, alright?" He

turned back around, leaning against his own seat. "You want out, tell us. It's true that you're a part of this, and you may not be able to avoid it but…" Sam glanced at Dean, a silent conversation Andy had no hope of interpreting. "It doesn't mean you have to go running head first into it, either."

The kid from Guthrie, Oklahoma just swallowed heavily in the back seat, completely lost as to how his life had spiraled so out of control so quickly. He was in a world of pain he knew nothing about. But, there were two people currently with him who at least knew the rules of that brave new world, and were promising to teach him. If he wanted it.

"Yeah," he breathed out, leaning back against the seat and tipping his head up to stare at the beige ceiling. He didn't have a better option right now, and Andy had always been more of a go-with-the-flow kind of guy. He turned his head and watched the world pass by the window. "Yeah, alright."

-o-o-o-

That night they stopped at another hotel. Dean got his two rooms, as requested, and rock-paper-scissored with his brother for the single. He lost. The older man was still grumbling when Andy asked if he got to play the winner, then. Both brothers just stared at him, before glancing at each other and sort of shrugging out a 'that's fair.'

He kicked Sam's ass, and got a room all to himself. Go him.

Despite his best attempts not to, it wasn't all that long before Andy was asleep on his single queen mattress in a rundown motel that hadn't seen renovation since it was built in the sixties. He hadn't meant to sleep, desperately wanted not to, and had been avoiding it for well beyond his limit, now. Honestly, he hadn't thought sleep would even come, not without a little help from Mary Jane. He hadn't slept without her assistance since he was a tweener. As it turned out, though, a near forty-eight hours of no sleep on top emotional trauma the likes he'd never experienced before was, apparently, where his body drew the line, with or without MJ.

The silence of the motel, mostly empty except for the occasional thump or shuffle of the brothers next door or a guy two doors down who sounded like he'd snuck a stray cat into the room with him, lacked the necessary distraction to stay awake. Soon enough, Andy was pulled into a desperately needed, albeit terribly unwanted, sleep.

And with sleep came the dreams he feared.

"Well, well, well," a man with yellow eyes was clapping as he emerged from the shadows of Tracy's kitchen. He seemed heedless of the growing puddle of blood beneath his feet. "Looks like I put my money on the wrong brother."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I loved Andy. I always wanted more of him in the show (so…uh…look guys, I fixed it!)

Update on Cas: For those of you missing Cas (I'm seeing an increasing number of reviews about the lack of him/her…) hang in there. He's gonna keep popping back up. We haven't even gotten to what Uriel is up to in Heaven, which is also coming this season. I promise, as 2.1 comes to a massive head, you'll get plenty of your favorite angel (whump. I mean, *cough* what? I didn't say anything, you're hearing – er…reading? – things.)

Up Next: Andy relives the worst night of his life to an audience of one (yellow-eyed demon), in which evil twins are evil (facial hair or no facial hair). Meanwhile, the Winchesters learn that it's not just hunters who wake up swinging, and Andy is strongly reconsidering that that whole atheism thing when the boys get an impromptu visitor.

Chapter 64: Season 2: Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Figured we could post a little early again this week (it was supposed to be earlier but I got distracted watching the first Avengers...). I've been relegated to standing around my house for the second weekend in a row with nothing to do but write standing up while I stare longingly at the couch, or any chair in general, really. Back issues are so stuuuupid.

(It's actually my piriformis, which is beneath your glute, so, literally, what a pain in the ass. Talk about being the butt of my own joke. God, tight asses, am I right? Okay, I swear, that's the last dad pun, and this was probably waaay too much information for you all XD)

Extra long chapter this time (to make up for the dad jokes) I know the last, like, ten chapters have been on the shorter side of out normal range, so an extra long one to finally balance it out :P

Chapter Warnings: Andy's getting his dream power on and oh boy is he wishing he wasn't, evil twins are *evil*, angels and demons are popping by for chats, and oh, yeah, Andy watches way too much trashy tv (and maybe ships it?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 31

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Tracy called him on the phone that night. Andy didn't own a cell – he always just asked one off of someone when he needed to – but it wasn't all that hard to get a hold of him. Just call the pizza joint he parked his van outside of most nights (they had the best pie in town, man, and were always willing to give him dinner on the house anytime he asked). Mike was one of the delivery guys and just so happened to also be Andy's primary supplier of the good stuff (he actually had four different guys around town he went to for pot; even the lowest-key of dealers got kinda squirmy pretty quickly if they

thought you were scamming them, mind powers or not. So Andy had taken to alternating). Mike knocked on the side of the van around nine, one medium pan-crust peperoni, banana peppers, and pineapple smelling like Heaven in his hands. Andy's favorite. Mike handed over the pie, a couple grams, and the message that Tracy was looking for him.

Man, did Andy live the good life, or what?

He got to Tracy's shop a little after eleven. She didn't call him much anymore, not since he'd pretty much put the grand canyon of emotional distance between them. He hadn't *meant* to, not really. He just…didn't want to end up controlling her, not even by accident. And it would be accidental, of course; Andy would never use his power on Tracy any other way. But, he hadn't always had the best control, especially early on when they'd first started and he spent several months just *freaking out*. Even once he'd mastered them, Andy knew better than to think control was anything more than a matter of will, and he'd never exactly been good at the self-discipline category.

He didn't want to hurt her, and Andy sort of knew that, eventually, if he stuck around, he would.

"Trace?" The little door above the shop jingled as he slipped inside. It was way too late for customers; the coffee shop would have closed up hours ago. But he knew Tracy often stayed late to prep for the next day or have some peace away from an apartment sometimes noisy with her roommate's late night habits.

"I'm back here, Andy." Her voice came from the kitchen, but he frowned at the slight shake in it. She sounded like she'd been crying.

"You okay?" He hurried towards the back, rounding the counter and slipping into the kitchen only to pull up short. Tracy was sitting in one of the chairs beside the counter, in nothing but a slip, one of the straps falling off her shoulder. She'd definitely been crying, and she wasn't alone.

"Weber," Andy said cautiously, glancing between the two. Weber was sitting on the counter just beside Tracy, and he had a very large kitchen knife laying across his lap. Oh god, this was one of those new-guy-in-town-is-actually-a-serial-killer sort of things, wasn't it? Weber always had come on way too friendly.

"Hey, bro."

Tracy hiccupped, a single tear slipping free but she fought back any other noise, her face tinging red with the effort. Andy got a very, very bad feeling in his gut.

"What's going on? Tracy, you okay?"

She started to shake her head, not moving from the chair and Andy wondered why she wasn't just getting up and moving to him. Probably for the same reason he wasn't crossing the room to her. Weber's big damn knife.

"Now, now, Trace, don't be like that. Tell him how happy you are." Andy couldn't help the cant of his head as he stared at the man he barely knew with growing dread. The way he'd said that last bit- it had been different. It had been…familiar.

"I-I'm s-so happy, Andy." Tracy stumbled over the words, hiccupping again. Her hands were shaking and Andy eye's widened in realization of what was happening.

"How-" He turned back to Weber. "How are you-"

Weber smiled. He freaking *smiled*, like Tracy wasn't sitting there in nothing but her underwear practically sobbing while he held a knife in his hands. "Surprised that there's someone else like you?"

He hopped off the counter and Andy took a step back, eyeing that blade. But Weber didn't turn it on Tracy. He seemed, for the most part, to be ignoring her, his eyes only on Andy. "Now ask me why I'm like you."

It wasn't a command, not like he'd given Tracy and not like Andy had given a hundred people in the last year alone.

"Why…"

"Why, what, Andy? You gotta be specific, man."

That sarcastic tone, that smug little smirk, like all of this was a game, was enough to spark something in him. Andy realized he was angry. Angry enough to focus, to eye that knife with more than just worry. "Why are you like me?"

"Because we're brothers!" Weber cast his hands out, blade getting dangerously close to Trace, who flinched at the wild movement. Andy twitched forward, but Weber didn't notice. He dropped his arms, a

manic grin on his face. "Aren't you going to say something, bro?"

"I don't-" Andy blinked, then closed his eyes and shook his head. "I don't have a brother."

"Don't say that." The tip of the knife was suddenly aimed in his direction, and Weber jabbed it forward with each word. "Don't."

Andy raised his hands, his pulse rapid. "Okay, just- just calm down, alright? I- what do you mean, we're brothers?"

"I mean we're brothers!" Weber practically screamed it, face red, before he calmed back down. He lowered the knife and took a deep breath. God, Andy though. He's crazy. "Our *mother*," the word was spat like a curse, "gave us up. And that doctor helped with the adoption. He split us up!"

He was shaking with rage, and that scared Andy, but not enough to stop the words from going through. "Doctor- wait… are you… are you talking about Dr. Jennings?"

"Yes!" Weber was getting animated again, waiving that knife around. "He split us up, bro. He ruined our lives. So I killed him."

"You-" Andy couldn't breathe. Forget the fact that he had a *brother*, that brother had just claimed to be a *murderer*. Dr. Jenning's death had hit Andy hard, hard enough to go running back to Tracy, even after he'd told himself she was better off away from him. Weber had been there, he kinda remembered, but he hadn't been paying attention to anyone but Tracy. "You killed…"

"Had him take that useless piece of shit in the sports shop with him. Our father, or so Mom thought. The whore didn't even know for sure."

This went so beyond not being able to breathe. Andy just flat out couldn't *understand*. But his subconscious and his mouth seemed to be doing a hell of a lot better than his brain. "What- our father… our *mother*?"

"I killed her too." A maniacal grin spread across his face as he leaned leisurely against the counter, crossing his legs at the ankle, like they were having a freakin' family reunion and it was just another evening in the whatever-their-last-name-would-be household. "Lit her up like a bonfire. Well, she did the hard part. All I had to do was give her a little nudge."

"Oh my god…" Andy remembered hearing about the woman who had set herself on fire at a gas station just down the road from here. But he hadn't- he didn't know anything about her. And he'd been pretty torn up about Dr. Jennings already. "You killed them. You- *why*?"

Weber frowned again, that agitation coming back. "Because they *split us up*, Andy. They ruined our lives!"

"So you *killed* them?!" It was Andy's turn to throw his arms up, staring wide-eyed at this clearly unstable man claiming to be his brother. Andy even believed him, but that didn't make him any less *crazy*. "Weber, you don't just *kill* people!"

His brother's hand tightened around the hilt of the knife, and Andy backed off, realizing this was not the kind of person – the kind of situation – he wanted to push.

"Look…just, let Tracy go, okay, man?" He glanced at his friend, who was shaking in her chair but hadn't moved. Hadn't even tried to get away. Weber must have told her to stay put. "She doesn't have anything to do with this. This is- this is fam-family stuff, yeah?"

Weber eyed him, like he was trying to decide if he was telling the truth. Finally, the wacko settled again, leaning back against the counter. "I didn't want it to be like this, Andy. If it had been up to me, she'd have thrown herself off the dam and you'd never even know she was gone."

Tracy sobbed, and Weber snapped at her. "What did I tell you about crying?"

"Stop!" Andy raised his hands, both furious and terrified all at one. "Don't talk to her like that. Please. Just let her go."

"It wasn't supposed to go like this," Weber said instead, almost pleadingly, like he wanted Andy to understand. Only Andy really, really didn't. "I would have gotten them all out of the way, it could have just been us, and you wouldn't have known. But he wouldn't let me! He said you needed to be strong, too."

"He?"

"The yellow-eyed man."

Andy couldn't help it. He knew he shouldn't, knew whatever this was, it was balanced on a knife's edge (literally). But this guy was *crazy*.

"You're- you're insane."

Weber's eyes darkened, and he pushed off the counter. Andy took a step back. "No. I'm *not.* He came to me in a dream. He came to me a dozen times! He said I had to prove myself. He said if we wanted to win, *we* had to prove ourselves. And this is how."

He grabbed the blade of the knife and flipped it around, holding the hilt out to Andy, who stared at it, dumbfounded.

"Kill her, Andy. You don't need her. All you need is me."

His eye snapped to his brother's, and it was official. He was *insane*. "Wh-what?"

"Come on, man. You gotta do this."

"No!"

"She's garbage!" Weber gestured to Tracy with his free hand and she flinched violently. Andy clenched his fists, hating the fear in her eyes, the red of her cheeks and the drying tracks from her tears. "They all are, man! We can push them, we can make them do whatever we want! We don't *need any* of them!"

And just shook his head, well and truly stunned. "You- you can't be this stupid."

Weber pulled up short, obviously not expecting that as one of the multitude of responses Andy could have gone with.

"You find out you have a brother and you- you-" Andy shook his head again. "You call them up! You go for a drink! You don't *kill people!"*

"I know it's all wrong, but don't be mad at me, okay?" Weber shrugged helplessly, a pleading look on his face that Andy wanted to punch right off. "I've wanted to tell you for so long, bro. But he didn't let me."

"The yellow-eyed man." His brother nodded and Andy just shook. "Weber, you sound *crazy*."

"I'm not crazy!" he yelled back, furious. Then something smoothed out on his face, and Andy knew he'd lost him. Weber shook the knife, a clear indication for Andy to take it. "And I'm not waiting anymore. Take it, Andy, or she'll do it for you. Won't you Trace?"

Beside him, Tracy nodded, fresh tears spilling down as she gasped for

air.

With a painful swallow, Andy reached out and took the knife. He tried, one more time, to reason with a madman, stalling desperately for time. "She isn't part of this. Please, please just…just let her go, Weber. B-bro. Please."

For a moment, Weber only stared at him and Andy thought, maybe. Maybe he'd gotten through.

"No," his brother said, voice as serious as he'd ever heard the man he barely knew. But there was a smile on his face. It was almost a sympathetic one. It just made Andy sick to his stomach. "I know you better than that, man. You'll never be with me while she's in the way."

"Stop it," Andy commanded, voice deepening, pulling from that power deep inside of him that he'd always felt but honest-to-God ignored whenever it really mattered. He pointed the tip of the knife at his brother, hand shaking, but prepared to use it.

Weber's smile turned bitter, not surprised in the least. And he didn't listen. "Our powers don't work on each other, Andy."

Andy sagged, knife falling to his side. "Please, Weber, this is *insane*. I'm not going to kill her, she's my friend!"

His twin's smile faded into something a lot darker. "Fine. Tracy, do it."

"No!" Andy screamed as she didn't hesitate, opening the drawer closest to her and pulling out a second knife. She raised it to plunge into her own gut and Andy threw his hands out. "Tracy, *stop*. Stop it!"

Her arms shook, knife poised out in front of her, but she didn't move. She *listened*. Her whole body trembled with exertion, her cheeks grew red and puffy, and Andy strained with everything he was as he waited for the balance to tip.

"Put it down, Trace."

"Heh." Webber pushed off the counter, that sympathetic smile slapped back on his face. Tracy didn't put the knife down, but her arms shook harder. "Not bad, bro. But I'm stronger than you. I've been practicing."

He turned his head to look straight at Tracy, something evil in his eye that contorted his whole face. She couldn't help but stare at him, eyes widening. His mouth never moved, he didn't say *a word*, but Tracy's

lip trembled, she sobbed, and her arm twitched.

"Weber, don't-!"

Tracy cried out as she thrust the knife down. Andy stumbled back, red splashed everywhere as she pulled the blade out and plunged it back in, again, and again, and again. She was screaming.

"No!" He ran forward, catching her as she slumped in the chair, the two of them falling to the ground. There was blood everywhere- oh god, there was so much *blood.* Tracy was still trying to raise and lower the knife in an ever-weakening and ashen hand. Andy grabbed onto her wrist, pinning it to her side. It wasn't hard; she didn't have much left in her. "Tracy, Tracy, oh god, stay with me. Please! You're gonna be okay. I'm gonna- I'm gonna get help."

Her lips were moving, but nothing came out, and Andy cupped her cheek with shaking, bloody fingers.

"I can teach you, Andy," Weber was saying, standing over them as he watched the light fade from Tacy's eyes. "I'll teach you how to be strong. We'll do it together, we'll take everyone else out. We'll start with Sam Winchester. He's the one to get, the yellow-eyed man said so. He won't stand a chance against us, bro."

Andy lowered Tracy, his friend, his *love*, to the ground. Her eyes were still wide with terror but lifeless now. He reached up and closed them, leaving behind streaks of red on her pale, pale skin. He sat there, on his knees, covered in her blood, and couldn't understand what just happened.

"You're insane," he whispered, and reached out to take the knife from Tracy's limp hand. He stood, turned to his brother, and said it again, anger taking over. "You're *insane*."

Weber eyed the knife with a flicker of worry, but smiled that sympathetic smile again. Andy was going to cut it off his face, this time. "I'm your brother, Andy. Family. You're not gonna hurt me. Besides, I told you; I'm stronger than you."

Maybe that was true, but he sure as hell wasn't stronger than a knife.

By the time Andy came back to himself, he was still screaming, over and over and over. Like Tracy had been before she went silent forever. His throat was raw and he had even more blood on him. Weber was dead, knife sticking clear out of his chest, and Andy couldn't stop

shaking.

He had to run. He knew he had to run. Tracy was dead because of him and he couldn't stay here.

Andy sunk to the floor, suddenly alone in the all-consuming dark. The smell of blood was thick. It was all around him. On him, on his skin, in his mouth. He could feel it on his hands, slick and warm, and oh god, he was going to be sick.

The sound of someone clapping snapped his head up so fast, Andy got dizzy and had to breathe through the spell. But he stumbled to his feet as soon as he could, back in the coffee shop as the darkness retreated. There was still blood everywhere, but Tracy… Tracy was gone. No body. No Weber. Just puddles and puddles of red.

What was happening? Was he losing his mind?

"Well, well, well." Andy startled, fumbling back as a man stepped from the shadows of the kitchen door, a grin stretched across his face and pale, yellow eyes staring him down. Oh, god, he had gone crazy. As crazy as Weber. "Looks like I put my money on the wrong brother."

"Who- what-" He stumbled back another couple steps, keeping distance between him and the man who couldn't be here, who couldn't even be real. This couldn't be real, he thought, the part of him that was fascinated with philosophy and thought and mind trying desperately to kick into gear over the panic and fear. "This- this isn't real."

"Nope," the man said, popping that last syllable. "Well, murdering your own brother after he killed your girlfriend was. But this is just a bad memory. Gotta tell you, kid, that was something else."

"He- he wasn't my brother," Andy managed to get out, but really, that was hardly the important part. "I- it was- it was self-defense."

Why was he explaining himself to a delusion?

"Regardless." The yellow-eyed man came to a stop at the closest puddle of blood, looking down at it with an analytical eye and absolutely no emotion. "I could use that fratricidal nature, tiger."

"Use… what?" God, Andy really wanted to run, to wake up and find none of this was real. But he knew that it was, at least parts of it. Maybe not the man in front of him, but the blood on the floor. That

part was real, no matter how much he wished it wasn't.

The yellow-eyed man leaned against the counter where Weber had, only moments ago. He even crossed his ankles, folded his arms over his chest. Another family reunion. Andy was shaking again. "There's a war coming, kiddo. Didn't your brother tell you? I need soldiers, and you're showing real promise."

"You're- you're not real."

"Not in here, no." The man shrugged one shoulder, and Andy wanted to shake him. To tell him that this, all of this, was *terrible*, and he ought to be as messed up as Andy. But that seemed like a really bad idea, and Andy just wanted to wake up.

Weber had said this man came to him in a dream. Which meant he was dreaming.

"I need to wake up," he mumbled, and slapped himself across the face as hard as he could. God, it stung. Tracy's blood was smeared across his cheek now. The yellow-eyed man laughed.

"You've got spunk, kid. Way more potential than I pegged you for." He pushed off the counter with a wide smile. Like a shark, Andy thought. "All we gotta do is toughen you up."

Andy scrambled backwards until he hit the kitchen wall. He had to wake up *now*.

"Andy!"

His head snapped to the side as someone called his name. It didn't sound like it was coming from the shop. Maybe outside? The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"Andy, man, wake up!"

He heard it again, from the other side now. A different voice, but one he placed a little faster. "Dean?"

The man – Azazel, he remembered now – was suddenly in front of him and Andy caught his breath, flattening his body against the wall. Those pale yellow eyes regarded him carefully, *suspiciously*, and he found himself swallowing past the lump of fear in his throat.

"Someone calling you, kiddo?" Yellow Eyes tilted his head to the side,

as if he was listening, and Andy was suddenly terrified that he would hear it too.

"Nope. N-Not at all. You know, I-I, uh, I should really go now."

Cold fingers wrapped around his jaw and cheek like a snake strike, and Andy cried out instinctually, flinching away with nowhere to go. The demon was close enough for Andy to feel hot breath on his skin.

This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real.

"Tell me, Tiger, where are you right now?"

-o-o-o-

He woke up screaming and, apparently, swinging.

Sam took one right to the face. Dean was lucky enough that when the kid came to yelling *'Get off me!'* his powers meant Dean was halfway across the room before he could stop himself. Which is probably how Sam took one right in the face. But they got him lucid pretty quickly, even if he couldn't catch his breath for several minutes and ending up emptying his stomach just as soon as he had enough air to do it. Lucky for him, bad nights were a Winchester standard. Dean had already been ready with a bucket.

The ice bucket, it turned out, because they were in a motel, far, far away from Tracy's coffee shop.

"You were having a nightmare," Sam offered when Andy's chest and stomach had stopped heaving.

"No kidding," he gasped out, wiping his mouth with the wet washcloth Dean offered. He wondered if they'd heard him, given how raw his throat felt, or just stumbled on in when they'd come to collect him since it was, apparently, morning. Funny, it didn't feel like he'd slept a wink. "Some nightmare. No wonder Weber lost it."

Sam frowned, glancing over at his brother worriedly, but they didn't push. They apparently had an unspoken rule, and Andy didn't know if he was thankful for that or not.

-o-o-o-

Andy got in the shower while the boys got the Impala packed up. He'd actually been in the shower for over fifteen minutes already and Sam

and Dean were just stalling by that point, but neither had any plans to call him out on it. That nightmare had looked like a bad one, and with what the kid had just gone through? There were horror movies with happier endings.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Dean angled his head at Sam's question. His brother was leaning against the driver's side door while the older Winchester did some putzing under the hood. Just checking up on his Baby while they had the time. "I'm not against it, but he doesn't know the first thing about hunting. Or this life. You really thinking dragging him along is the right call?"

Dean wiped his hands on his jeans and closed the hood. "No," he answered honestly, "but he's a part of it now, whether he likes it or not. He wants to opt out, that's fine. We'll get him setup somewhere, teach him the basics of staying safe. But it's not gonna save him, and we both know it."

Sam stared down at the ground, moose-brow furled morosely. "Was he part of the battle royale?"

The older Winchester came around the side of the car and propped himself up a foot or so from Sam. He cleared his throat, eyes off to the side, watching the cars pass by on the main road. "I don't know. I wasn't there and after…. There was enough going on that we never really talked about it."

Because he'd been dead, Sam thought. Yeah, that would have kept him pretty occupied, he figured.

"You never told me names," Dean continued, crossing his legs at the ankle and leaning back against his beloved car, arms crossed. Trying to keep it casual, despite the somber topic. "But you said it was all of Azazel's kids, spread out over weeks. And only one got to walk away. So yeah, pretty sure old Yellow Eyes isn't gonna let Andy out of this one."

Sam kicked at a loose pebble, watching it scatter. "His best bet is with us."

Dean shrugged, but it was obviously the same conclusion he'd already come to. "Azazel nabs either of you, Cold Oak is the first place I'm heading. We'll only get there faster if we know he's missing."

Honestly, Dean hadn't yet come up with a plan to avoid that scenario entirely, though it was on his mind almost every day now. Sam's death

date was most of a year away, but he didn't trust Hell to stick to the schedule anymore. They sure as hell hadn't with Dad.

So, Plan B was to head to Cold Oak if Sam went missing. Andy too, now that he was with them. If he chose to stay, of course. But Dean needed a plan A. He and Bobby were already working on one, though at the moment he sure hoped the gruff old hunter was doing better at it than him.

"Alright," Sam conceded, though it hadn't ever been an argument or even a debate. He didn't mind Andy joining them, though it would be weird to have a third person who wasn't Cas (it was still pretty weird when it was Cas). "We'll keep him safe. He doesn't have to hunt if he doesn't want to, though."

"Sure," Dean agreed, because making someone hunt, or even feel like they had to be part of the life with no other choice, was not something he ever planned to force on anyone. He'd grown up like that – seen what it did to someone like Sam, saw what it could have done to Ben, what it did do to Claire – and had promised he'd never be like his own dad. He'd never do that to anyone. "Although, it would be pretty handy, having a Jedi on the team."

Sam just pulled a mild bitchface and pushed off the car. He headed back into the room. Dean thought maybe the water had shut off by then. He couldn't hear it, but then again, he hadn't really been able to hear it running, either.

The truth was, Dean had another reason for wanting Andy along, even though it went against the timeline, and Cas would probably lecture the crap out of him once they found out (Bobby too, most likely). Last time, they hadn't exactly done right by the kid. Andy hadn't done anything wrong, hadn't asked for what happened to him or his powers, and hadn't even misused them. The Winchesters just hadn't been in a great position to take on a passenger, and they'd had no clue what they were leaving him behind to face alone. At the time, they knew he'd have to figure his life out, and the best they could do to help him there was offer a number to call if he needed them.

But now Dean did know what was coming, and he couldn't just leave Andy on his own, at the mercy of Azazel, to eventually be thrown into a fight for his life with no warning and no training. No, they could do better by him this time. What was the point of time-travel, of having to relive all of this crap all over again, if he couldn't do it better?

Plus, it really, really wouldn't hurt to have a Jedi on their side.

-o-o-o-

"So, you wanna talk about it?"

They were back in the car and Dean was driving again. Hunting was actually a lot more driving than the title suggested. They were headed to a town outside Nashville. Apparently, there'd been reports of ghost activity around the area, and some woman named Ellen tipped them off about it. One hunter had already tackled the case and gotten himself laid up with a broken leg and a nasty concussion for his trouble, so she was calling in the cavalry.

"No," Andy answered, maybe a little too quickly and a little too grumpy. Dean's voice had been light, if somewhat forced, and Andy didn't think either of them would push the issue. Even if they probably should. He cleared his throat from the back seat, wrapped his arms around himself and pressed his knees against the seat in front of him. "Maybe later?"

These guys were just trying to help. And if that dream had been real, if that man really was a demon showing up in his dreams to try and… what? Talk him into being a murdering psychopath like Weber? Well…if that was his goal, Andy should definitely tell the Winchesters about it.

Just, how did he do it without bringing up all the rest of it? He didn't want to think about it, didn't want to be dreaming about it. Didn't want to be sleeping at all.

"Ball's in your court, kid," Dean answered easily enough, and that was that.

-o-o-o-

Less than an hour down the road, Andy was playing around with how to bring it up.

'So, you know that yellow-eyed guy you mentioned? The demon?'

No, too casual.

'Azazel visited me last night.'

Okay, too far in the other direction. And sounded like a bad Jesus

Freak promo. Only, well, this was apparently the opposite of divine intervention.

'So, a yellow-eyed demon walks into a coffee shop…'

"Hello, Dean. Sam."

Andy screamed.

The younger Winchester, who was driving for once, almost crashed the car into oncoming traffic at the sudden fourth presence in the back seat. Andy kicked at the figure who had freaking *appeared out of nowhere*, shoving himself across the seat and into the door. She – and it was a woman, despite the deep, gravelly voice – didn't even move. Her head turned like a god damn owl to take him in with a curious blink and a head tilt.

Dean, who had a lot more experience with randomly appearing angels in the back seat of the Impala, jerked his head over his shoulder to glare at their new guest as Sam managed to correct the car and not kill them all. They pulled over, vehicles blasting past them, horns blaring. "Jesus, Cas, give us some warning or something! Do we need to get you a bell?"

The woman (and how the *hell* was everyone so calm?!) turned stiffly to the hunter in the passenger seat, a little frown pulling at her eyebrows. "Bobby Singer made a similar threat. What would be the purpose of wearing such an instrument?"

"Who *are* you?!" Andy didn't mean to use his power – or sound quite so hysterical – but he was *freaking the hell out* back here! Did no one else care that a woman had just popped into existence in their car?!

The lady looked his way again, tilting her head to the side. Like a bird. A bird with big blue eyes that didn't blink nearly as often as they should. "Interesting. You are one of the children infected with demon blood."

Andy sputtered, mind both terrified and blown. Jeez, how many people was he going to run into that his powers didn't work on?

"Your abilities would have to be much stronger to affect me," the woman said, as if reading his mind.

In the driver's seat, Sam's eyebrows went up and he turned to look at the angel directly, now that they were safely pulled over, engine off.

"They could affect you?"

"In theory," Cas answered, and Andy was still trying to get further away than was physically possible in the muscle car. "If you were to ingest the amount of demon blood you were drinking at the peak of Dean's notes, then yes. I believe you could contend with a lower angel."

Not that Andy understood half that (and god, the half he did understand he really wished he didn't. When had his life gotten so out of control?) but Sam blanched whiter than rice, and Andy found himself wishing he understood none of it. Or wasn't in the car at all. Or part of this *insane* duo. Well, hell, *trio* now.

Was it too late to back out?

"I'm sorry, who the hell *are* you?!"

-o-o-o-

"Angels. *Angels*." Andy was pacing at the gas station they'd pulled over at. Sam was filling up the tank and Dean had dragged Cas into the store for refreshments and microwaved burritos (*'People practice, Cas. You need it.'*) Andy spun on Sam. "*Angels* are real, you guys have one on speed dial, and you didn't think to mention *that*?!"

Sam just shrugged apologetically. He was pretty sure Dean had mentioned it about the same time he'd mentioned being from the future. Not that Andy had been in any shape to hear – let alone process or believe – any of that.

"If it makes you feel better, I'm still getting used to it too."

"No, that doesn't make me feel better! It makes me feel worse!" Andy grabbed at his head. "Jesus, I'm an *atheist!*"

Sam winced, offering a sympathetic smile. "Dean was, too. Uh… actually, pretty sure he still is."

"He has an angel as a best friend, and you're telling me he doesn't believe in God?"

"Erm…" Sam just shrugged again. "Pretty sure knowing something exists and believing in it are two very different things for my brother."

"You're so *not* helping." Andy groaned, and the thunk of his head

hitting the roof of the Impala was not nearly as soothing as he needed it to be. "You all are crazy. And now I'm crazy too."

Sam patted him awkwardly on the shoulder and put the nozzle back on the pump.

"Welcome to the club."

-o-o-o-

They got back in the car, Dean driving this time, and resumed their trek for a Tennessean ghost. Andy was in the back seat with a freaking *angel*, who he couldn't stop staring at.

"You look human." He didn't mean to blurt it out, but, well, he'd never been great with holding back even before he got magical powers of speech added on top.

Castiel regarded him without offense. "I am possessing a human vessel. Angels can operate on Earth without one, but few humans can view our true form or hear our voice without taking damage."

"The prophets." Andy nodded absently; that made sense. But he caught the surprised looks the Winchesters sent his way. "What? I grew up in the Bible belt, guys. Sunday school was less optional than actual school."

And also the leading factor of a twelve-year-old Andy deciding a lack of belief was more morally defensible than false belief used only to justify self-interest. The pastor at the church his father dragged him to every Sunday had looked at him long and hard when he'd announced it (loudly) the last time he'd ever gone to service. The man of God bent down, put a hand on his shoulder, told him to believe what was in his heart, and had he ever heard of a philosopher named Marcus Aurelius.

"Um…I'm *twelve*," an overly confident and often contemptuous child had answered back. It would be several years before he learned that arrogance and intelligence hand-in-hand usually landed him in the dumpster behind the school gym. At the time, the pastor just laughed.

"You should look into him," he'd said with a wink. "I think he's right up your alley."

Turned out, the pastor hadn't been wrong. Though, personally, Andy preferred turn-of-the-century German philosophers, more of late.

"You are correct," Cas stated, continuing their conversation as if the Winchesters had not interrupted. "The prophets were, indeed, unique individuals able to perceive an angel's true form. I would have thought Sam and Dean, with their destinies, would also be among such men. But Dean has assured me they are not."

"You almost blew out my ear drums the first time we met, Cas." It was not the only time Dean had said as much, though it was news to Andy. "We're sticking with vessels this time."

"Angela is a devout woman," Cas continued, blue eyes still locked on the man sitting beside her, who was kind of enjoying the way she didn't rise to any of Dean's goading but flat-out ignored him instead. It looked like it was ruffling his feathers, so to speak. Andy would have to remember that. "She offered her body in service against the coming apocalypse."

"Uh-huh." Andy frowned, looking at the woman, then the brothers. Dean didn't seem to care so much that their angel buddy was possessing a human, Sam at least looked regretful. Andy figured he didn't have any right to judge someone else's sacrifices, particularly as he was known for not giving people that choice to begin with. At least, not for the last year.

Tracy's pale, blood smeared face flashed across his mind and he flinched, pushing the thought back as quickly and viciously as it had come forward.

"So, you sticking around, Cas?" Dean raised his eyes to the mirror and the angel in the backseat. Subtle change of topic: check. Although Andy could admit he was grateful for it, and for Dean's tact. "We got a ghost in Nashville needs re-deadification."

"That's not a word," Sam and Andy answered at the same time.

"Oh god, now there's two of you," the older hunter groaned. "Don't make me turn this car around, cuz I will."

"That would make reaching Nashville difficult indeed."

Andy stared at the woman in the backseat with him. Huh. Angels with sarcasm, whadya know. Dean, meanwhile, was glaring at her in the mirror.

"Don't make me add you to the list of reasons Cas." He looked back at the road, seemed to think better of it, and was back to glaring at the

mirror again. "And don't play dumb, I know devil lady's in there feeding you all this."

"Would 'angel lady' not be a more apt name?" Cas asked, even as Andy tried to figure out who Dean was talking about. But after a pause, Dean muttering that no, absolutely not, that would not be a 'more apt' name, Castiel added, "Angela prefers 'Dragon Lady.'"

The older Winchester rolled his eyes hard enough Andy might have warned him about them getting stuck that way, but he was too busy staring at Cas with wide eyes.

"Wait," he blurted out unintentionally for the second time in less than ten minutes, "there's a *person* in there?!"

-o-o-o-

Dragon Lady, indeed.

Once Cas and Angela were done lecturing him (my god, he was getting lectured by an *angel*), Andy sort of just sat, stunned in the backseat. Not that they'd really lectured him. Well, Cas had *sort of* lectured him, but it hadn't been like a mom lecture (and the parts of it that had were definitely coming from Angela). No, it had been more of the droning monologue variety, the subject matter being the subtle but numerously intricate differences of the conscious mind versus the unconscious mind, delivered by a professor who only spoke in monotone to a class of mostly asleep students at eight in the morning. Andy hadn't really done the whole college thing, but he was pretty sure Cas just summed the entire experience up for him in seven and a half minutes.

Angela interjected every so often. Andy could tell, because Castiel would use air quotes anytime she did. An angel with sarcasm *and* air quotes. Good God, maybe he'd been missing out on this whole religion thing, after all.

The short answer, delivered after the long answer, was no, Cas could not stay long or join them for the hunt. She was merely checking in while she had the time to do so. Dean tried to hide his disappointment, but Andy picked up on it easily enough (he wasn't exactly good at hiding it, after all), and glanced between the two of them. Cas seemed aware of it as well, though took careful steps to avoid addressing it.

Good god.

An angel and a human with- with- was that unresolved sexual tension Andy spotted?

Oh, this kept getting better and better (and less and less believable). Well, okay, one-sided sexual tension, as far as Andy could tell. Cas's face didn't really, uh, give away much. Or move. Like *at all*. But Dean's sure did. That might even make it better. Very teenage drama, very *One Tree Hill*. They even had a pair of brothers and everything.

(He had *not* watched that show voluntarily. It was just one of Tracy's favorites, and she'd dragged him to her house every day after school. In no way ever, on pain of death, would he own up to watching it even after he stopped going over to her house. Nope, no way, you couldn't make him, no amount of money, fine, alright, okay it was a guilty pleasure. Happy? Now shut up.)

Oh yeah, he thought, glancing back and forth between hunter and angel. He'd *definitely* been missing out on this whole religion thing.

"How's it going up there?" Sam turned in the passenger seat, side-tracking Andy's thoughts.

"Up where?" he wondered aloud, though he already could tell no one was going to answer him.

"Better. It is…comforting to have an ally."

Andy frowned, wondering what they were talking about.

"Yeah, you said you'd spoken to one of your brothers about… everything. That's, uh, going okay?" Sam glanced over at Dean, who was suddenly tight-lipped and ignoring the conversation like it was an Olympic sport.

Andy frowned further as the plot of their teenage drama thickened. Love triangle perhaps? Those were always big on that caliber of crap television. Sam had mentioned a brother, though. Incest was probably a bit much. Family drama, of course, was always a solid go-to. Possible bad guy, then, getting in the way? Unlikely, he supposed, since a brother to Cas meant another angel.

At least Andy knew what they were talking about now. Which probably meant 'up there' was Heaven. Yeah, he should have figured that one out sooner. Again, *atheist*. He wasn't used to thinking about things like Heaven as actual locations one could visit. Or worry about.

Speaking of, why, exactly, were the Winchesters worried about Heaven? Shouldn't Paradise come with, you know, *no worries*?

"Yes," Cas answered the brunet, a tiny smile just in the corner of her mouth. Andy thought it look a little out of place: unpracticed, maybe. "It is going well, Sam, you needn't worry."

The younger Winchester settled back in the front seat, easy as that. Even Dean seemed to relax a fraction, although Andy suspected that had more to do with the conversation moving on than Castiel's reassurances. Still, he sat in the back and watched the three of them interact, forming his own theories (which, albeit, probably had a touch too much trash TV influencing them), since no one seemed very willing to discuss the realities of his – or their – situation with him.

-o-o-o-

Cas rode with them for another hour before announcing, rather abruptly and in the middle of Sam and Dean bickering about what constituted good music (*'I'm just saying, maybe, just* once*, we could listen to something recorded* this *century, Dean'*), that she needed to return.

"Yeah, alright. Thanks for checking in," Dean said, somewhat grumpily. He really didn't seem too happy about Cas taking back off for Heaven, which was ringing all sorts of alarm bells for Andy. But, then again, that could just be the teenage love angst talking (who was he kidding, he'd watched *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* all on his own, no female influence needed. They were *addictive*, okay? Plus, the girls were hot. And Sam kind of reminded him of this one character…)

"Good luck, Cas," Sam added, and *again*, Andy wanted to know why an angel needed luck in Heaven.

Castiel leaned forward ever so slightly, then paused, before a little chime like a clerk's desk bell went off inside the car.

"What the hell-"

The angel was gone, leaving Andy staring wide-eyed at the now empty space beside him.

"Damnit, Cas, not when you *leave*!" Dean shouted up at the ceiling. "When you *show up*!"

Andy wondered, vaguely, if an angel could hear human criticism from

Heaven. Sure didn't seem to stop Dean.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: This is a classic example of how I can never write just one chapter of something. It's always three chapters. Oh, the Andy Episode? Three chapters. Jo episode? Three chapters. Croatoan? Okay, let's not even get into that one. This mother friggin' season's gonna end up being sixty chapters at this rate!

Andy Shipping It: I swear, there will be characters in this story that do not ship Destiel. It's not my fault Bobby and Andy are just the first ones to witness it. Jo won't ship it! Or Ellen, or Ash, or Charl- okay, no, Charlie will totally ship it. Uh... I mean...she will, if, we, er, *cough* get to Season 7. Yup. Totally smooth exit on that one.

Up Next: Andy gets his first taste of a real hunt. Upon further introspection, he decides he's a superhero (because he has a cape), quickly realizes that capes are a terrible idea when his tries to murder him, and ends up telling Sam about his late night visitor after Dean decides rock-paper-scissors is a game for children (I swear this all actually happens, I'm not writing drunk)

Chapter 65: Season 2: Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I wrote this chapter months ago, so the Avengers reference in it seemed totally innocuous at the time, a bit of fun, you know? Now, of course, it just sounds like I'm still stuck on Endgame… Not that I'm not, or, like, going to see it again this weekend, or anything… XD

Reviews: You all continue to be fantastic and I really really really appreciate it! For the guests reviewing on ff dot net without a login, some of you have been asking fantastic questions or just leaving really wonderful reviews. Please know that I would love to reply to your comments, answer your curiosities, and thank you personally. If that is something you're interested in, please PM me or leave me some sort of contact or something. Whatever works best for you!

Chapter Warnings: Andy's taking advice from Edna Mode, Dean's getting to play with just his absolute favorite of supernatural beasties, and Sam's in a sharing mood. Bring on the capes, coins, and just a sprinkle of silliness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 32

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The mist was thick, almost fog really, and it hung low in the air, heavy enough to taste the humidity with every breath. It was somehow worse in the cemetery; the trees were slick with it, moss hanging off the branches lowest to the ground, swaying in a wind that didn't seem to exist. The tombstones and above-ground entombments of soldiers long-time passed were hazy silhouettes in the yellow lights of the nearest street and then the grey light of a half-moon once the three hunters ventured further in.

The Winchesters had told Andy to stay in the car, but yeah, no, screw that. That was how people died in horror movies, man. Didn't they

know that?

"Can I have a gun?" he asked as he caught up to the two brothers, one armed with shovels and a small duffel, the other with a shotgun. Both of them exchanged looks before answering together.

"No."

Andy made a face, toyed with the idea of making Dean give him the shotgun (although he knew he'd never actually do it. Sam would kill him and then Dean would kill him again once he came out of it. It was a fun thought, though.) "Does a gun even do anything to a ghost?"

"It does when the shell is packed rock-salt."

The kid's brow went up in interest. They'd given him the basic rundown of supernatural baddies and their weaknesses, mostly in response to his stream of questions and curiosity and logistics that kept him from thinking too much about the last few days or the shambles his life was in.

"Bet those aren't standard rounds," he chuckled, quickening his step to come up between them, almost tripping on his robe as it tried to tangle between his legs. "Do you guys pack 'em yourself?"

They looked surprised, exchanging another one of those brotherly-type looks, and Andy glanced between them.

"Really? Bible belt, guys. Practically doubles as the second amendment belt?" Andy laughed again at their faces. "What kind of civilians are you used to dealing with?"

"The kind that would have stayed in the car," Dean emphasized, but his grump was mostly for show.

"Or the kind too shocked by the werewolf breaking into their house to remember where the gun safe is," Sam added and Andy had to concede that point.

He didn't have much experience with guns, himself. He'd shot a rifle a couple of times with some high school buddies, mostly cans and bottles in fields or on camping trips, but it hadn't really been his thing. He knew plenty of hunters, though. The turkey and deer kind, he thought, glancing at the two brothers who were definitely unlike anyone he'd met in his hometown.

Silence fell between the three as they kept moving deeper into the park. Their ghost was old – really old – and that meant the back of the place, apparently. He was civil war era level old, which, according to Sam and Dean, was pretty rare. Most of the time, ghosts hanging around that long were usually taken care of by hunters generations before them. Unless they were newly awoken by something, like an excavation or grave robbery.

Apparently, the only sorts of ghosts who managed to stick around to the triple digits were either in a remote location, kept a low victim count, or were of the rare power level that made them too risky to go after.

"Like the Morton House," Dean said, not that Andy knew what that meant. Sam immediately spared his brother a look.

"No."

"I'm not saying we *go*," the older Winchester amended with an eye roll, but Andy kinda had the feeling that's exactly what he was saying. "I'm just using it as an example."

"Do I even want to know?"

Sam shook his head in Andy's direction, hefting the shovels over his shoulder as they picked their way through graves. Andy had been armed with a flashlight and the job of finding their dead Lieutenant (*'If you're tagging along, you're gonna be useful'*) but he wasn't really paying much attention to the passing names. Unfortunately for them, this section of the cemetery was old enough that half the names weren't even visible on the stone anymore, and the county office didn't have accurate plot records for at least a quarter of the park's skeletal residents. It certainly had the potential to be a very long night.

"It's a haunted house famous for its body count. No one even knows if it's one ghost or multiple, but the house locks down on February 29th, every four years. No hunter has ever come back from it."

"Plenty of school kids looking for a dare haven't come back, either," Dean added, pausing to wipe plant growth off of a tomb so they could properly read the faded name. Not their guy. "And it's one ghost. One pissed off, it-rub-the-lotion-on-its-skin level, psycho ghost, with a whole bunch of death echoes hanging around."

Sam raised his eyebrows at his brother, but Dean didn't elaborate further. The bitchface Sam pulled clearly said he was the one who

didn't want to know, now.

"How has that gone unnoticed?" Andy's eyebrows were also up, but he was focused about the missing kids. "I mean, that many deaths, on the same day, and local authorities haven't looked into it?"

"Because the house is back to normal by the time cops come looking. And no bodies have never turned up, so they're all classified as missing, usually declared runaways." Sam bent down in front of a grave, trying to discern the worn carving on it. He dropped the shovels to the ground beside him. "I think this is it, guys!"

"Thank Christ." Dean passed Andy the shotgun with a pointed look. The kid got a little more serious, giving a nod back as he took it. The older Winchester bent down for a shovel and started clearing the top layer of ground cover that had grown naturally after so many years.

The brothers broke ground and dug for several minutes of mostly silence, offset only by the shovels shifting dirt and the Winchesters occasional grunts of effort and heavy breathing. Andy stood guard, but he wasn't even sure what he was looking for. So, he just kept scanning across the misty landscape, the silhouetted tombs and tree trunks pretty creepy in the darkness.

"Oh yeah, if I was a monster, I'd definitely kill as many people as I could on a night like this." The comment, mentioned offhand, caused both brothers to stop digging, and silence reigned. Andy looked over his shoulder to catch their looks. "What? It's all about mood. Atmosphere! Even monsters understand setting the tone."

Dean shook his head, digging the blade of metal back into the ground. "Thanks for that truly helpful perspective there, kid."

Andy just shrugged, eyes going back to the mist. "Just trying to get in the killer's mind. Profile them. Like the FBI."

"They're monsters," Dean disagreed, groaning with effort against a particularly stubborn tree root that fought back. "This one's an ancient-ass ghost. Don't need profiling to hunt that down, just a good old fashioned salt-n-burn."

They'd made it about a foot down in a roughly six by two rectangle, and Andy grinned at them from the edge. "You know, that's what people in the sixties said about profiling psychopaths. 'They're psychopaths – don't gotta understand them, just gotta catch them.' But profiling actually turned out to be an incredibly useful tool to the FBI."

Sam was giving Dean the kind of look he knew too well. The look that said, '*He's got a point, you know*.' It'd be a bitchface all of its own number if that look didn't also pull Dean's ass out of the fire on the occasional hunt. The older Winchester stopped digging and leaned against his shovel, glaring up at the much shorter kid instead of his brother.

"Okay, here's my profile of you: you watch too much television."

Andy seemed to think about it, like *really* think about it, before he turned to Sam and said, completely sincerely, "That's true. See, working already!"

Dean just rolled his eyes and Sam, who hadn't stopped digging, wondered when he became the mule who carried all the gear *and* did all the work while the other two bickered.

Good god. He'd become a middle child.

"Dig, Dean," he grumbled, though it was mostly good naturedly as his brother grumbled back and kicked the blade into the dirt.

"What else would you profile about me?" Andy crouched at the foot of the grave, maroon robe piling in the loose leaves around his feet. The shotgun was laid across his legs and doing them a whole lot of good. About as much good as their look-out.

"I'll tell you what I'd profile," Dean growled, not stopping digging this time at least. "You need a life. Some grooming wouldn't hurt. Change of wardrobe-"

"Hey, these are *your* clothes!"

"And you definitely need to get yourself a girlfriend."

The words were out before he had time to think them through. Good natured ribbing that the hunter would lay on just about anyone. Not even targeted specifically at the kid, just pulled from the Dean Winchester library of insults. But as soon as his brain caught up with his tongue, the older man closed his eyes, shovel stilling in the ground.

Silence reigned, and not the good kind.

"…Sorry, kid."

"It's okay." Andy was still crouching, legs like a cricket, a little too pale with a brittle smile on his face. Soon enough, though, it morphed into a weak grin. "It's the robe, isn't it?" He grabbed a hold of one side, holding out the edge like he was a back ally drug dealer with a trench coat full of fake Rolexes and little baggies of the good stuff. "Gives off too much of a 'lives-in-his-mother's-basement' vibe."

Dean huffed something very close to a laugh. Even Sam, who had stilled since the close mishap, shook his head.

"Maybe just a little?" The younger Winchester offered a sympathetic grimace, hand raised with his thumb and forefinger pinched together.

Andy sighed dramatically, and the tension passed. "But it's so comfortable!"

Dean could almost agree – there were days when he longed for his Dead Guy robe (and more so the bunker that came with it) – but that would be too easy. He had a reputation to maintain. So he shook himself back to grumpy.

"Maybe in a house, behind closed doors, buddy, with a white picket fence and a little yapper to go fetch the paper. But not in public, looking like Jerry Maguire and Ferris Bueller had a love child that hasn't showered for a month. And definitely not on a hunt! It's a friggin' work hazard."

Sam was trying to muffle his growing grin, but Andy just scoffed.

"If anything, it's an advantage!" The kid stood, swishing back and forth at the hips. The tails of the robe followed, and Sam kind of wondered when this had become his life. One hunter doing the hula and the other looking close to brotherly-murder-by-shovel. "Free range of movement, flexibility, ectoplasm slime shield-"

Dean reached out, latched onto the end of the fabric, and pulled. Andy yelped as he toppled into the shallow grave, landing in a heap between them. Leaning heavily onto the shovel once more, Dean looked down at his sprawled form with a smile made up entirely of teeth.

"Work hazard."

"So…" Andy sat up. "In that way, it's like a cape."

The older hunter just groaned, throwing his head back in clear defeat,

and climbed out of the grave.

Andy scrambled up, soil-spattered robe and all. "And I'm a superhero."

He caught the shovel Dean chucked at him. "Why don't you put those heroic muscles to work, then, *hero*."

Sam, who decided several minutes ago that he was not going to dig this grave single-handedly to the surround-sound background music of two idiots bickering, was leaning on his own shovel when Dean looked his way. Andy started on his first dirt load.

"Whose idea was it for him to tag along?"

"Yours." Sam didn't even hesitate. He probably should have, given the glare he got in return. "Definitely yours."

"Brought two shovels for a reason, Sammy!" Dean hollered, bending down for the shotgun Andy had dropped. Sam rolled his eyes but dug the tip of the blade into the ground and started digging once more.

-o-o-o-

The attack, when it came, wasn't wholly unexpected, but the source of it sure was. Lieutenant James W Barnes' ghost (*'Look for a metal arm, Sammy! If there's a metal arm in that grave, I'm so keeping it! God, you don't even know, do you? Just wait; 'Winter Soldier' was* awesome. *Only gotta wait…uh…eight years. Maybe seven?'*) reported attacks had suggested a powerful spirit. They were talking level five poltergeist activity, at the least. Ectoplasm had been present at the last two crime scenes, and that slime took a lot of rage and a lot of time.

Sam had only seen the stuff once or twice before in his life. It just didn't make any sense.

They'd spent half the day at the county records office, looking for whatever Lieutenant Barnes could have been tied to, or what might have woken him up. They walked away empty-handed, a day wasted and another victim dead in the time between. The only reason they even knew the identity of the ghost was a witness who'd turned out to have a good eye. Civil War nut, he'd explained, followed quickly by the distant look and numb expression usually acquainted with a witness who knew they couldn't possibly have seen what they'd seen. But the town had a museum dedicated to their fallen soldiers and past wars, and James W Barnes just happened to have a decent photograph taken of him in the war, blown up and hanging next to one of the

larger displays of military regalia.

The Winchesters still didn't know what was keeping the Lieutenant tied to Earth, or what the hell he was so pissed off about. The victims had basic community ties to one another, but nothing criminal or particularly malicious. The three of them had spent a second day split between the museum and the public library until the sun set and they'd decided to just go burn some bones, see where that got them.

So when the pretty skeletal visage of James Barnes showed up just shy of the grave, skin hanging off his frame like ripped curtains (and looking nothing like Sebastian Stan, which was a damn shame), Dean had been ready. He pulled the shovel free of the pile of bones they'd just hit and swiped the metal right through the thing's legs. It wasn't pure iron, so it wouldn't last long, but Lieutenant Barnes disappeared with a whoosh and an angry cry.

By then, Andy had the shotgun leveled where the thing had appeared, though the barrel shook ever so slightly where it was braced against his shoulder and his eyes were definitely two sizes too big. Despite that, he was ready. Dean kept the shovel raised like a baseball bat while Sam dropped to his knees and started digging out bones and scraps of fabric and metal adornments with his hands.

What made the attack something none of them were expecting, though, was Andy's clothes to suddenly turn homicidal.

The kid's robe attacked him from behind, the ends coming up and over his head while the belt wrapping around his throat like a hangman's hood and noose. Andy cried out in surprise, the shotgun going off as he struggled, the shot thankfully wide of the Winchesters. The folds of fabric completely entangled the kid and he was hauled back and away from the grave.

His strangled, "Not the cape!" could just be heard through the fabric before Dean recovered was scrambling after him, and Lieutenant Barnes was back. Sam went flying out of the grave as the ghost threw an arm to the side. Dean managed to duck, his brother's limbs tomahawking over him as he dove for the ground and conveniently landed on top of the shotgun Andy had dropped.

He rolled on his back and fired just as the ghost bared down on him. As Barnes disappeared in a wave of blasted smoke, Dean spotted movement in the trees. It was a woman, tucked partially behind a tree, staring right at them. Her lips moved in a chant he couldn't hear,

one hand wrapped around the trunk of the tree, the other stretched toward them.

Witch. Great. A witch *and* a ghost. Or, more like a witch controlling a ghost. Lucky them. At least they'd found their mystery cause behind Lieutenant Barnes' sudden reawakening rage fest.

Dean rolled over and up to one knee, braced the butt of the gun into his shoulder and fired at the bitch. The tree splintered brilliantly with his hit, but the witch managed to duck behind it just in time. Before the hunter could take a second shot, cold fingers dug into the back of his jacket and he cursed as the Lieutenant hauled him up to his feet and sent him flying.

Amidst the chaos, Sam scrambled back towards the grave, snagging the duffel bag they'd brought with them as he slid into the hole. He could hear Andy's muffled hollering and saw the robe haul him up and into the trees, feet kicking with all the kid had in him. The younger Winchester dug the igniter fluid out of the bag with one hand, desperately clawing the bones free of dirt with the other. He upturned the container and squeezed all of its contents across the skeletal remains.

Cold plunged between his shoulder blades like a blade of ice and Sam screamed, body spasming. What felt like freezing water filled his lungs, encased his entire chest cavity. It was so cold he couldn't catch his breath. The young hunter doubled over, clawing at the now gasoline-soaked dirt as he tried to get away from the ghost towering over him, Barnes' arm buried in his back up to the elbow.

"Sam!" Dean, on his knees at the edge of the grave, swung a shovel at the Lieutenant's head. He missed Sam's hunched form by inches and the murderous ghost disappeared with a cry.

Twenty feet up in the trees, legs kicking and most of his body weight hanging from the shoulder seems of his robe to keep the weight off his neck, Andy managed to tear the fabric away from his face just in time to see a normal looking woman run from the treeline straight towards Dean. Her arm was spread out in front of her, fingers strained. The older Winchester was climbing to his feet, using the shovel as a leg up, his back to the woman he couldn't see coming.

"Duck!" Andy yelled without thinking.

Dean and the woman both hit the ground immediately. Whatever she was, she had powers of some sort, as a purple blast erupted from her

hand as she hit the deck. The energy flew wide of Dean, but Sam, immune to Andy's command and just straightening up from his bout of ghost-to-the-chest-cavity, was not so lucky. He cried out in surprise and pain as the purple charge toppled him backwards into the grave.

Andy kicked his legs, trying to drop out of the robe, but the tie remained tight around his throat as he struggled with it. The woman – *witch*, Andy figured out a little too late – snapped her eyes up to his from where she lay on the ground. Oh boy. She was *furious.* Andy had time enough to think *'uh-oh'*, before the witch threw her hand out at him and the tie around his neck tightened agonizingly. Breathing became more than just difficult, and good god, he was going to die.

Death by bathroom apparel. Unbelievable.

Dean scrambled to his feet and tackled the woman before she could get back up. Her concentration suddenly taken up by the hunter, Andy was able to get his fingers under the fabric and gasped for breath, which he did greedily. Orange light lit the corner of his vision, and he saw Sam scramble out of the grave, lighter in hand, just in time to take a hit from the Lieutenant. Luckily, the blast knocked him clear of the grave, which was now a pit of flames. The ghost stalked after the fallen Winchester, who was clearly struggling to get back to his feet, having taken several hard hits in a row. But as the fire grew, devouring the fuel with loud crackles, the Lieutenant faltered, staggering. He fell to one knee before the downed Winchester, who stared up at him with hopeful relief. Embers lit among the ghost's legs, climbing up and up until he was consumed by the same flames eating away his bones.

He burst out of existence like a firework, and Sam collapsed back to the ground with groan.

Andy managed to rip through the last of his robe, enough to get the straggles of fabric and belt up and over his head. He was just about to tackle how to get down from the tree, assuming the article of clothing would let him – it had started tightening around his wrists and fingers instead – when a woman's scream pierced the air. Andy cried out himself when his robe suddenly stopped holding him up and he dropped out from under it. The limp fabric caught on a passing branch and Andy's arms slid right out of it as he hit the ground below.

It was jarring and it hurt, but Andy stood triumphant and alive, his robe hanging lifeless a dozen feet over his head.

Beside the still burning grave, Dean rolled off of the witch – his hunting knife buried in her chest – and collapsed on the ground, chest heaving. "God damn witches."

Andy had to agree. He stumbled over to the two brothers as they both struggled to sit up, visually checking one another over for injuries before doing the same for him. They were all alive. Bruised and a bit beaten up, maybe. Kind of shocked and rethinking fashion choices, in Andy's case. But alive.

"So…no capes?"

Sam laughed, paused to catch his breath as his ribs ached in protest, then laughed again as Andy offered him a hand. He hauled himself up and off the damp ground with the kid's help. Dean groaned, climbing to his feet as well, but there was a grin on his face regardless.

"Sorry for the whole, 'duck' thing," Andy offered as the older Winchester limped over to them.

"You kidding me?" Dean checked his brother over again with another quick up and down, then repeated the look on Andy. The inspection apparently proved up to snuff as he clapped the kid on the back almost jovially. "You probably saved me one hell of a hit, maybe even a concussion. Magic *hurts*, dude. And in this line of work, that's another five years, easy, of not drinking my food through a straw. If I make it that long."

Sam, who was halfway to opening his mouth to say, yeah, magic didhurt, jerk, considering he *had* taken that hit, stopped as Dean's words made it all the way to his brain. He gave his brother the kind of worried look that said he was probably wondering if Dean was concussed anyway. Andy just blinked, looking pleased at first before his face scrunched up in reconsideration, a clear picture of hunter retirement now painted in his mind.

"Dude. That was the most counterproductive victory speech ever."

Dean huffed again and squeezed his shoulder in what doubled as comradery and a painful warning to take the damn compliment. Andy had never had an older brother, but he was pretty sure that was an older brother should clamp right there. "You did good, kid."

"That one was much better," Andy congratulated, but he was smiling widely. "Second attempt for the win."

"Don't make me hurt you." Dean groaned as he bent over and picked up the shotgun, then made his way over to the witch's body. Andy was about to ask what they were supposed to do with her – a little worried about the fact that they'd just *killed* someone, even if she'd been busy trying to strangle him to death with his favorite robe – when Dean rolled her over with his foot and she toppled into the smoldering grave.

Sam bent down for a shovel, tossing Andy the other one. He sighed – not much of a victory lap – but got to work re-filling the hole they'd spent the night digging. It wasn't easy, in fact the whole night was nothing but sore muscles, a pounding heart, and utter exhaustion. But, the ghost was gone, the woman controlling him dead, and no more people in that small Nashville suburb were going to die unpleasant, unwarranted deaths.

It felt… Andy didn't know. Good wasn't quite right. Not bad, at least.

When they marched back to the Impala an hour later, Sam speculating the witch had been using Lieutenant Barnes' ghost to go after personal grudges, they left Andy's robe hanging in the tree. Its tatters blew gently in the wind that still wasn't really existent, sort of a conquering flag or possibly a symbol of fashion defeat. Solid fifty/fifty, really.

-o-o-o-

Andy was beat by the time they got to the motel. It took everything he had not to fall asleep in the car on their way back into town. Now that he was staring at the bed, so inviting despite its rock-hard springs and paper-thin comforter, Andy didn't know if he'd be able to resist. He couldn't *not* sleep for the rest of his life. Superhero or not, (cape or no cape), everybody needed sleep.

Sam was climbing into the other bed, having changed into a pair of pajama pants and an old t-shirt while Andy sat on the edge of his mattress, looking miserable. They'd gotten two rooms again, and this time Dean had laid claim – *loud* claim – to the single, declaring rock-paper-scissors an inadequate and unfair decision making paradigm. Probably because he never won at it. Sam didn't mind, though. He'd been wanting to talk to Andy ever since they'd had to shake him yesterday morning.

"You look terrible," Sam started with a sympathetic moue. "You should get some sleep, Andy."

"I can't. Not when every time I close my eyes, I see…"

Sam looked away, which was his first mistake. As his gaze drifted to the ceiling, he was hit by that brutal image of Jess, pinned and bleeding. The brunet turned his head back to Andy, physically shaking off the terrible vision.

"I get it, man."

Andy sighed and started toeing off his shoes. "I don't think you do, Sam. It's not just…Tracy. It's the yellow-eyed man, too."

"Azazel?" Sam suddenly sat up, worry etched in his frown. He'd wondered at what Andy had said that morning, but he hadn't wanted to push. He'd…kind of been hoping it was nothing. "Andy, did you see Azazel in your dream?"

"I think he knows I'm with you." The kid rubbed at his arms, bare without his robe. They would have to get him a couple sets of his own clothes, soon. He couldn't keep wearing Dean's.

Sam's frown only deepened, but his gaze drifted down to his ow pillow. Andy hardly noticed.

"He's…terrifying, man. I think he might be worse than the nightmares. It was like he was *there*. He was real, and I couldn't get away."

Chewing on his cheek, Sam nodded. Then, out of the blue, he swung his legs off the bed and stood. He swiped his pillow, revealing a weird looking coin lying on the mattress. Andy blinked at it, then up at Sam as the hunter snatched the thing up and made his way to the other side of Andy's bed.

"Uh…Sam?" The younger Winchester didn't say anything, just plopped down on Andy's bed, putting the coin between their two pillows. Andy watched, eyebrows raised, as Sam got under the sheet and blanket, re-arranged the pillows so they were end-to-end and covering the coin completely, then laid his head down. All without a word. "We having a sleepover, buddy?"

"It's magic," Sam said by way of explanation. "A Persian sleep coin; you put it beneath your head while you sleep and you don't dream. Azazel won't be able to find you. We can try it like this, see if we can get two for the price of one."

After all, today's standard pillow wasn't exactly common – or maybe even in existence – back when the thing had first been created. Sam highly doubted there was a clause in the coin's magic that limited it to

a single pillow. He didn't know if the spell would work on two people at once, but there was no reason not to try. Andy didn't deserve the torment Azazel had in store, and if the yellow-eyed demon realized who he was with, he would use Andy to find the Winchesters.

In the morning they would make him a hex bag and, if he was willing, find a tattoo parlor to get him warded against demonic possession. But if the coin didn't work for two, they'd have to pray to Cas for a second one, if she could even find another. Sam had sort of been under the impression they shouldn't hail the angel unless it was an emergency. So there was absolutely no harm in trying this, first. Other than a crowded bed and the risk of a nightly visitor.

The kid hesitated, glancing between Sam and the hidden coin before he finally shrugged out of his last shoe and slid awkwardly under the covers.

It was a bit of a tighter fit than was strictly comfortable. Sam wasn't exactly a small man, after all, and the bed was only a double. But Andy was used to sleeping in a van, and Sam had spent his entire life bunking with his brother, so neither of them had much complaint about it. When both woke five hours later from a dreamless sleep, free of their yellow-eyed pursuer, there was no need to discuss the next night's sleeping arrangements. It was a silent agreement between them: a price they were more than willing to pay.

The next morning as they climbed into the Impala, Sam told Dean they wouldn't need two rooms after all. Predictably, the older brother spent the next several minutes shamelessly ribbing the 'happy couple', until Andy leaned over the front seat and said, "You know I can convince you that your shaving cream tastes better than any pie in the world, right?"

Dean snapped his cakehole shut, eyes all squinty in the rear view mirror. "You wouldn't."

"You could just tell him he's deathly allergic and can't ever eat pie again," Sam offered, a shit-eating grin on his face as his brother turned his most scandalous look on him.

"You know, you're right, Sam, I could."

Dean's dropped jaw snapped closed with an audible clack, broken only a moment later to grumble about bitchy passengers not able to take a joke. He put the car into gear and they pulled away from the motel. Sam shared a grin with Andy, who settled into the back seat, rather

proud of himself.

Jedi on the team, indeed.

-o-o-o-

Tom sat in front of his laptop (well, it was his ever since he'd murdered the owner) and squinted suspiciously at the screen. He had an internet browser pulled up, page currently displaying a map of the continental United States and a little blinking green dot moving, ever so slowly, along one of the main interstate routes.

The same route, in fact, that it had been moving along for two weeks now. Back and forth. There and back again. And again. This would be the third time the Winchesters were making the trek from Raleigh, North Carolina, to Seattle, Washington.

Tom slammed the laptop shut with a hiss. Fucking Winchesters. They'd planted the damn tracker on a commercial vehicle. He stood, grabbed the broken cocktail glass off the table – Sam Winchester's blood still lining the jagged rim – and snatched his jacket off the back of the chair.

The demon headed out of the rather high-end townhouse he'd been squatting in ever since he'd slit the throats of the couple who owned it and stashed them in their coat closet for safe keeping.

Time for Plan B.

Chapter End Notes

James W Barnes: Was actually a real Tennessee soldier in the civil war (no clue on his rank, though). Sometimes I just make up names, sometimes I find real people, and this time I went in search of Tennessee soldiers. I went with James since it was an easy name and there were probably tons of last names to pick from. Turns out, there are tons, and at least 12 pages on dedicated to James Barnes's in the civil war alone. Since Supernatural likes to have such fun and games with names, I figured why not?

Reviews: Please share your thoughts if you have them! As always, thanks for reading :D

Chapter 66: Season 2: Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I know many of you have been pondering for quite some time now what's up with Chuck's writing, and whether he's writing details of Dean being from the future. I present: the answer. I've not really written this kind of thing before, where two versions of events are happening simultaneously, so hopefully it comes across clearly.

Reviews: Thank you everyone who commented or 'pushed' that like button last chapter! We gota lot of newcomers, which is awesome (and to you all I say, Welcome!). I wanna take a min to spotlight something a couple of our binge readers mentioned, which was some form of happiness or surprise that this story had been updated recently, as many lengthy stories don't get finished. Seeing that brought up by multiple people really made me really smile because, honestly? If you'd asked me two years ago if I would still be writing this story today, I probably would have told you no. Would I have said I hope so? Absolutely. But if I'd had to guess and be honest about it, I'd have said that I was likely to lose interest, get disheartened, or just get too busy to write this mammoth all the way through. I'm happy to say the first hasn't occurred in even the slightest, and the last two may be battles I am waging, but I haven't lost yet :)

Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you to those that brought it up, and those who've been with me since the start, or the damn near start, or even just a really long time! It's been a long, but good, two years and I really appreciate that you guys appreciate this story is still going (if that makes any sense). I'm gonna keep working my little butt off (it's really not that little...) to keep it that way for the foreseeable future.

Chapter Warnings: Chuck's writing, Persephone's reading, Jo's hunting, Dean's scheming, Andy's helping, and Sam just thinks this is all a really bad idea.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chuck was nervous. His palms were positively leaking sweat around the stack of papers, and he couldn't seem to stop his whole face from alternating spastically between a smile and a frown, like some sort of crazy person. His cheeks were starting to hurt from it.

"H-Hey, Steph?" He stopped in front of her chair, and it very much had become her chair over the last three weeks. A dilapidated old thing that had more fabric hanging off of it than on it, but she'd seemed quite content with the Lazy Boy, hauling it over to his front window and curled up in it the first time he presented her with something to read. They'd started with an old draft from several books ago. Chuck had offered it to her, suggesting maybe she could read it and then version his publisher had fina'ed, so she got a hang of the kind of editing he went through. And the help maybe he needed after all.

She looked up from that chair now, halfway through the last book he'd sent to his publisher. It hadn't printed yet, and was the first thing 'new' he'd let her read. But it was far too late to make changes to it now. Chuck felt it was safer that way. He'd only managed to hand over old things that maybe he wouldn't feel too crushed over if she didn't like them or had harsh critique. As of yet, she hadn't offered much more than sparse grammatical input (apparently, his was, what was the word she'd used? Lacking.) and many questions concerning where the story might go from there.

"What's up, Chuck?"

He couldn't help the chuckle that escaped his mouth, momentarily distracting him from the fact that he'd been nervous. The slang sounded weird as ever coming from this woman. She alternated between the strangest mix of super-formal English and the kind of vernacular someone picks up from watching entirely too much 90's television shows. Chuck figured it had something to do with English not being her first language, but she hadn't told him much when he'd poked around.

Her super formal training in English, wherever it had come from, made her quite the old-fashioned grammar Nazi, though. Oxford Comma level Nazi. He'd had to remind her several times that that comma was considered optional. She'd just stared at him until he'd told her he couldn't change it, what she was reading was already

published.

Okay, so perhaps she hadn't lost every inch of that intimidating persona he'd first met. Still, he supposed being a grammar Nazi wasn't a bad thing in her job, though. Maybe she just scared her clients into writing faster.

"Here." Chuck thrust the papers he was holding towards her. It was only a couple of chapters stapled together, not quite the thick stack of a finished book like she was currently reading. "I, uh…it's new. Unpublished, I mean. Uh…ripe for…critique. I-If you… wanna take a stab at it?"

Stephanie sat up, eyes wider with interest. She took the papers from him, noticing his nervousness as he clutched them a tad too tight and took a second too long to let them go. When he finally did, she settled back in the chair, but stared up at him instead of the chapters now in resting against her drawn up knees. "You're finished with it, then?"

"Uh…not…completely. It's- It's just a first draft."

Which was a lie. He'd already been through three different editing passes on it, which was about two and a half more than he usually did, but he really wanted her to like it. Or, at least, he thought he did. He wasn't used to anyone but Sera – his publisher – reading them before they were printed. It opened up a whole new round of possible rejection (disdain, disinterest, repulsion. Straight up laughing in his face. Etc, etc), and Chuck wasn't so great with that.

"Okay."

She tucked her legs back under her and dug in to the first page with no further ado. Chuck stood there for another moment, awkward, before he turned and shuffled back to his desk.

-o-o-o-

When Jo Harvelle's number popped up on his cell's display, the thing ringing away in his pocket, Dean couldn't say he was surprised. He hadn't been expecting it down to the minute or anything, but he had been expecting it for the last week or two.

"Hey there, Jo," he answered easily, sliding into the diner booth that Andy and Sam already occupied. He was still making them pay for their threats by dragging them to every single diner that boasted about 'world famous' pie.

"How far are you from Philly?"

Straight to the point then. Dean pulled the phone away to glance at it like he could actually pass on that raised brow straight through to the demanding girl on the other end of the line. "Hello to you, too."

He could practically hear the eye roll. "Dean. I'm serious."

"Four hours," he supplied, while Sam tried to ask what was going on with just his face. "You got a case?"

"Yeah, I got a case. Three weeks ago, a girl disappeared from a Philadelphia apartment, and she wasn't the first." Dean remembered the hunt. It had been the reason he'd expected Jo's call. It had been her case, though he remembered them snaking it from her on Ellen's request. Not that that had stopped her for long. She'd her to show up before they even got started. "Over the past eighty years, six women have vanished. All from the same building-"

"Your mother know you're on a hunt?" Dean couldn't help but interrupt. He didn't need the details or the sell, anyway. They were obviously going.

"What makes you think I'm on it?" He could practically see her evasive eyes dart to the side, that smirk playing at the corner of her lips to cover her unease. "I could just be calling you with the details."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Right. Only this isn't the Roadhouse landline, and I'm not an idiot."

"Fine," Jo bit back, and he practically hear the pursed lips and terse face. "I'm on it. I've rented the apartment-"

Despite Sam now trying to flag him down for details and Andy glancing back and forth between the two of them, Dean ignored them both. He closed his eyes and rubbed at his forehead. God damn it. She wasn't supposed to beat them there. "Jo-"

"There's *ectoplasm* here, Dean. This is one seriously pissed off ghost we're dealing with."

"*Jo*-"

"I've gone back through the building's history-"

"Are you insane?" Her stream of excited words died abruptly, and

Dean sighed. "You're practically a walking billboard for this guy's type, and you went into that apartment *alone*?"

Now Sam was looking decidedly worried, which he had every reason to be, even if he didn't know the details. The other end of the call went dead quiet, and Dean knew he'd pissed her off. He just hope she didn't hang up on him without handing over an address first.

"How do you know I'm his type?"

"What?"

"The ghost," she clarified, voice clipped. "How do you know he has a type?"

Well, crap.

"Lucky guess." Dean ran a hand down his face, angry at himself and the situation. She hadn't said anything about the victims, other than they were young girls, had she? He hadn't let her get that far. Son of a bitch. It was time to switch tactics. "You calling us for backup? You better be calling for backup, or I'm calling your mother."

Jo snorted. "What's she going to do?"

Which was a fair question, but so not the point. "Jo."

"Yes." The word was practically spat, but Dean didn't really care. It was the one he needed to hear. "I…could use some backup, alright? You gonna step up, or you gonna tattle on me?"

"We'll be there in four hours. Text me the address." Dean pulled the phone away from his ear, then thought better of it. "And don't hunt this thing on your own, you got that?"

"I'm not a child, Dean."

"No, what you are is new to this, and your mother will murder me if you get dead. So sit tight – *not* in the building – until we get there."

He hung up before she could answer, knowing she would only argue. Even thought she was smart enough to know she was over her head, even though she'd called for backup. Jo was tenacious as hell and didn't know how to stop. Dean just hoped she actually listened this once.

Ellen wouldn't have to kill him if anything happened to her, he'd

friggin' do it himself.

Their waitress came over as Dean tucked his phone away, Sam already asking what was going on while digging out his wallet. The older Winchester still didn't answer, instead smiling tightly up at their server.

"We'll take that pie to go."

-o-o-o-

"Jo Harvelle is the daughter of the bar owner, yes? The…Roadhouse?"

Chuck looked up from his laptop. It had only been ten minutes or so, but Steph was several pages in. He rubbed at his chin, trying not to be self-conscious. It was just a question. An innocent question. "Yep, that's her. Jo and Ellen Harvelle."

Steph hummed noncommittally and went back to the chapter. Chuck hesitated, opened his mouth, closed his mouth, decided she probably didn't want to be interrupted, and went back to typing.

"How does Dean know the ghost's type?"

Chuck stopped again. "Huh?"

"Dean said she fit the ghost's type. How did he know?"

"Uh…." Chuck smiled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Just wait, you'll find out."

Steph narrowed her eyes at him, but she looked more putout than angry. So Chuck laughed nervously before going back to his writing. Eventually, she went back to the story, but he couldn't help glancing over at her with every page flip.

-o-o-o-

As they exited the diner, they were intercepted by a middle-aged man in a business suit before they could make it to the Impala.

"Excuse me, gentlemen?" The trio pulled up short at the incredibly average looking man heading towards them from the direction of their car. He was Caucasian, maybe early forties, with close-cut, pale hair, the beginnings of a receding hairline, and a stiff smile. Dean was immediately on guard, though nothing particularly screamed danger. "I'm looking for a gas station. Do you know where the nearest one is?"

Dean and Sam exchanged glances, Andy quiet behind them. Sam took one for the team, turning a friendly smile on the stranger. "We passed one on our way in. Two blocks up the road that way. On the right."

The man smiled and dipped his head. "Thanks, thank you very much."

And then he turned and walked in the direction Sam had indicated.

"That was weird." The two brothers turned to Andy, who was still staring after the guy. He glanced between them. "Was that weird? Felt weird."

"It was weird alright," Dean mumbled, glancing back over his shoulder at the retreating figure. "That was an angel."

"Wait, what?" Sam straightened, forehead smoothing out as he whipped his gaze back at the stranger in a damn near comical double take.

"For real?" Andy asked at the same time, eyebrows climbing towards his hair. "*That* was an angel? Like Cas?"

"Yeah." Dean was still watching the man, who made it past the next building and a row of hedges, both of which obscured him from sight. The hunter rubbed at his chest absently. He turned and headed for the Impala, the other two following, asking a million questions a minute, but Dean was busy wondering if that had happened the first time around.

He was sure it had been an angel. He'd seen enough of them, knew how they held themselves stiff in their vessels, the holier than though vibe that just wafted off of them in waves. But was this new? Was it a result of them going off radar, or had this happened the first time? Dean from 2006 wouldn't have thought anything of a weird guy in a suit who didn't leave much of an impression other than 'odd.'

Cas had said Heaven was likely watching them and would notice when they dropped off the grid. Hell had taken a crack at tracking them down. Was this Heaven's turn?

Dean angled another look over his shoulder in the direction the angel had gone, but there was nothing to see. He pulled open the driver's door and got in the car, the other two following, still bugging him for answers. They'd have to check the Impala over for trackers, *again*, but they couldn't do it there.

-o-o-o-

The hex bag was missing from the wheel well. They didn't see any other evidence of tracking devices, supernatural or man-made, or tampering at all. It didn't surprise Dean that Heaven was less technologically savvy than Hell. Went with that whole holier-than-though crap.

"We'll have to make another one." Sam glanced towards the trunk, trying to calculate how much they had left of their ingredients. They'd made one for Andy, and Dean had lost one on a hunt a couple weeks ago (*'What do you want me to say, Sam? The thing must have fallen out. I was a little pre-occupied not becoming Vamp meat!'*). Sam was certain they had enough to replace the one in the Impala, but after that, he wasn't sure. He made a mental note to talk to Cas about getting some more the next time they saw her.

"Yeah," Dean growled, though it wasn't Sam he was annoyed at. No one touched his Baby, and now Heaven and Hell had both put their stinkin' mitts on her. Sons of bitches, all of them. "We should up the warding on her too. Make it harder for them to mess with her."

He hadn't wanted to put the hex bag in the interior, because, *hexbags*, damnit. But maybe they would have to. Only problem was, they couldn't ward the car against angels getting in without locking Cas out too. But clearly, they were going to have to start getting a little more creative in their defense.

"We should keep moving." Dean headed back for the front of the car. Heaven probably wasn't doing anything more than tracking their movements – he hadn't spotted anyone following them and Cas had seem pretty unconcerned with the surveillance – but he didn't want to risk them dropping by for a listen. He really didn't want to go back to worrying about what he could say out loud again.

First chance they got, he was warding the car six ways from Sunday.

-o-o-o-

"Who was the man in the suit?"

Chuck stopped writing again, looking over the top of his computer to the woman still curled in her chair, but staring at him expectantly. He blinked.

"You wrote him into the scene, yet he left without any relevant

purpose." Stephanie looked almost annoyed at the inconvenience of one of the basic components to any plot and, for an editor, Chuck kinda wondered how many books she'd read before this one. "You must have had a reason to include him."

"You did not ask this many questions when you read the other drafts."

She shrugged one unapologetic shoulder in his general direction. "I had already read the finished book. I knew the answers."

"Yeah, well," Chuck gave the stack of papers in her hands a pointed look, "you'll know these answers when you finish reading this book."

Those green eyes narrowed on him again.

"Isn't that what an editor does?" he prodded, before realizing with a pleasant jolt of surprise that he was teasing her. Without fear of death-by-eye-daggers-or-possibly-dismemberment, even. When her narrowed-eyed stare didn't get worse but shifted more into a put upon glare, Chuck relaxed ever so slightly and that tiny little ball of confidence deep down inside him – more of a pea than a ball, really – grew just a little bit bigger.

Stephanie ducked her head back into the story, but not before correcting, "Editorial assistant."

Chuck shook his head and tried to focus on typing.

-o-o-o-

"What are we going to tell her?" Sam asked after the silence in the car had lasted more than fifty miles, the talk of angels and demons dropping off about an hour ago. Dean twitched in the driver's seat, already uncomfortable with the new choice of topic.

"Nothing."

Sam just turned his head to his brother and stared, unimpressed. "Dean," he admonished, that kindergarten-teacher-lecturing-the-slow-kid voice in full gear. "She going to know something's up. How are we going to explain knowing so much about the case?"

Andy's head popped up between theirs, causing Dean to lean away with a tsking sound. The kid really should give them some warning. And wear his damn seatbelt!

"Wait, is this about you being from the future?" Andy asked, arms crossed over the front of the seat, head resting on them as he glanced between the two brothers like an up-close tennis match. So up close, he was pretty much the net in this metaphor.

"What else?" Dean grumbled. He lifted one hand from the steering wheel and made it halfway to his chest before he realized what he was doing and, reluctantly, put his hand back on his Baby. He was well aware of his brother's eyes on him the entire time.

Andy either didn't notice, hadn't spotted the tick in general, or decided not to comment. Instead, he frowned, tilting his head so his cheek was pressed into his wrist as he looked at Dean. "We can't just tell her?"

The older Winchester angled a pointed side-eye in the kid's direction. "You know, most people don't just *believe* you when you say something like that."

Their resident third wheel just shrugged. True enough. He wouldn't have believed it himself, if Dean hadn't admitted it under Andy's power. Actually, he still wasn't sure he believed it. This could all be a psychotic break, and he was locked in his head, rocking back and forth in the corner of a padded room muttering 'yellow-eyed demon' and 'ghosts' over and over again to the wall.

That scenario was really just as likely, he figured.

"So we're going to lie to her, instead?" Sam got them back on track, though his tone lot a left to be desired, support wise. Dean was back to twitchy. He wasn't exactly thrilled about lying to Jo either, thank you very much, but it was their safest option. "She's not stupid, you know. She's going to know something's up."

"We'll…stick with the psychic story if we have to tell her something."

Dean gave up trying not to and rubbed at his chest, and ended up doing it a little more harshly than was strictly necessary. It wasn't aching, not like it did around a demon, but sternum-Cas wasn't sitting well today and Dean didn't like it. Whether it was the angel they'd bumped into back at the diner or the fact he basically scheming against a friend (*family*), Dean didn't actually know. Probably both. He was starting to think the angel didn't like it when he lied, and if that was what was going on, well Cas was gonna have to just learn to deal. He'd been lying for nine damn months now and his little chest angel hadn't had anything to say for any of that.

(Not true, but also not supportive of his point, so that truth could shove it, as well)

"The less people that know about this, the better," he added, partially for Sam who was still sitting there with a half-formed bitchface (hard to tell which one, since it was still evolving, but Dean guessed it was lucky #1), and partially maybe also for Cas, too. Lying to their friends might suck balls, but pretending to be psychic was easier than explaining where he was actually from.

Sam didn't say anything, and Andy resettled his chin on his arms. He stared out the window, thinking idly, before asked, almost casually, "So…what was the plan again?"

Dean rolled his eyes but outlined the facts of the case again. Their perp was Herman Webster Mudgett, aka H.H. Holmes. ('*Wait, like, the Murder Hotel guy? The Chicago World Fair guy? America's first* serial killer*? That H.H. Holmes?* That's *our ghost?!')* The lot next door to the prison where he'd been hung and someone had decided, decades later, 'yeah, let's put an apartment complex here.' Jo playing bait because she was young, blonde, and female. And the subsequent race to find her in the walls-slash-basement-slash-sewer-slash-torture-chamber.

"We push Jo towards the empty lot and the basement," the hunter decided, wringing his hands along the steering wheel as he all but thought aloud about it. "We lead her to the answers we already know, let her think she figured them out herself. It's what I used to before, with Sam."

"You did?"

He didn't bother explaining, despite his brother's pinched eyebrows and affronted tone. Dean really didn't want to get any further into this mess – or the potential this had to become an absolute mess - than they already were. They just needed to lead Jo to H.H. Holmes and his underground chamber *without* getting her kidnapped or used as bait, or suspicious of them in the slightest.

How hard could that be?

-o-o-o-

Dean needed to stop asking himself, or Time, or destiny, or what-the-fuck-ever, that question.

Jo was waiting for them when they pulled up to the apartment

complex, along with half a dozen cops and three cruisers. The three exchanged looks inside the Impala as they had to circle the block and find a place to park. Jo followed after them, rounding the corner just as they pulled curbside and shut the engine off.

"They must have found another girl," Dean muttered as they climbed out of the car. He vaguely remembered another vic getting nabbed while they'd been out looking for their ghost. He was pretty sure they'd her out alive, though. He vaguely recalled finding Jo and another girl. But then they'd had to turn around and use Jo as bait, yet again, because they'd had nothing else to draw Holmes back with.

If they could just get to that underground chamber and trap the ghost again, they'd be in and out in half a day, tops. Of course, they had to somehow manage all of that with Jo hanging around, chomping at the bit for a slice of the action, and they couldn't tell her how they knew the where and the when and the how and the why.

How did that saying go? Three people can keep a secret….

That wasn't even funny, in their line of work.

"He took another one. Teresa Ellis, apartment 2F," were the first words out of her mouth. Angry words. She pinned Dean with a look that definitely could have maimed, if not killed. "I could have stopped it!"

"No, you couldn't have." There was no use pulling punches, even when he knew they'd hurt. Jo was feeling the guilt every hunter with half a conscience felt when they lost someone on a hunt. But he knew from previous experience that even if they'd shown up a whole day earlier, they still wouldn't have keep Holmes from taking his most recent victim.

He also knew that victim was still alive and they had time to find her. They just had to figure out how to skip a day of research and searching, and get to the good part without mentioning Dean was form the future, Andy was a Jedi, and Sam saw dead people.

Oh, right. And they had a fiery Harvelle woman on their hands.

Awesome. This was going just *so* great already.

"I've had it up to here with your crap!" Jo crowded right into his personal space, glaring up at him with as much ferocity as he'd ever seen in her. Dean stared right back, like he had once before, ten years ago. Only now he knew so much more than he had then. "If you think

I can't do the job, then why did you even come?"

"I came because this isn't amateur hour, okay?" His words were just as biting as hers, his tone booking just as little room for argument. "You wanna be a hunter? Great. You're going to be a badass someday, Jo, I know it. But you don't start at level ten – no one does – and if you go into this thinking you know what you're doing, you're gonna get yourself killed."

Behind him, Sam held Andy back with a hand, the two of them a few feet further off and distinctly uncomfortable to be both on the sidelines of this conversation and sidelined by the conversation. The couple of feet Sam gave the two wasn't exactly privacy – there was no way this chat was getting that – but it was something. In front of him, Dean watched Jo grind her teeth together, her jaw clenched and vein pulsing, arms crossed defensively over her chest. But all Dean saw was a girl used to having to prove herself to every man who ever set foot in her home, and now she was putting on a damn good face when she didn't need to. Not around him. She just didn't know that yet.

Her eyes darted between his, and whatever she was looking for, she finally backed off a step, turning to the other two, instead. "Who's he?"

Subtle change of topic: check. Dean let her have it.

Andy's eyes widened at suddenly being addressed by this very, very angry chick, and he looked from one brother to the other before pushing past Sam to hold his hand out. "I'm Andy. I'm, um… just tagging along?"

One fine eyebrow rose even as Andy looked back at Sam to see if he'd gotten that even close to right. Especially once she didn't take his hand, and he dropped it awkwardly.

Jo looked back over her shoulder at Dean. "Not amateur hour, huh?"

The older Winchester just huffed. "It's good, Jo. He's with us."

She turned back around, not satisfied but not pushing it either, and Sam asked where she was with the case. Jo's eyes hardened and she held herself straighter, launching into the details she'd gathered and the reconnaissance she'd done so far. Dean had to give all three of them credit: she'd done her research and a lot of the legwork, and Sam and Andy kept straight faces, nothing in their questions or responses hinting that they already knew a lot of what she was telling them.

"I smelled something in the hallway last night while I was doing a search, and… I think something made a grab for me, but I didn't see it." Jo crossed her arms, looking pissed at herself for not doing better and acting defensive as hell, worried they might have similar thoughts. "I think it's in the walls."

"Sounds like solid recon," Sam responded with an encouraging smile, clearly having noticed the same thing as Dean. Jo was too hard on herself, thought she had too much to prove, and was going to get herself killed trying to do it. "Let's get inside, see what we can find together."

They grabbed their gear out of the trunk and Jo led them past the police and up to the apartment. Dean let out a whistle once they got upstairs. All of Jo's research was spread out on the kitchen table. He'd forgotten how good a file she put together.

"This is impressive," Sam agreed, pushing some newspaper clippings aside to reveal building blueprints.

"Put it together myself." Jo came up beside the taller man with a wry smile. "It's definitely a ghost, the ectoplasm confirms it, but I can't figure out what he's tied to, or who he is. This place was built in 1924 as a warehouse, it wasn't converted into apartments until a few months ago. Before that, it was an empty field."

"So, the most likely scenario would be someone died bloody in the building." Sam played along, bobbing his head. He wasn't exactly an Oscar nominee, but he'd played enough roles through their time as hunters to not sound too forced.

"I already checked." Jo crossed her arms, staring down at the spread of information. "In the past eighty-two years, zero violent deaths. Unless you count a janitor who slipped on a wet floor."

The Winchesters tried three times each to follow her research and get it where they needed to go without making big jumps. In the walls, basement, possible bloody death before the building. Each time fell flat, with Jo getting more and more obstinate about what she'd already learned and what she'd crossed off. Not to mention the growing suspicion as she stared at each of their fumbled attempts. Finally, Jo uncrossed her arms and focused a narrow gaze as fierce as her mother between the two Winchesters.

"Why are you guys acting weird?"

"You're acting weird."

Sam couldn't even suppress the sigh, that time, and Jo raised an unimpressed brow at the older Winchester.

"Nice comeback. You practice that all morning?"

"Shut up," Dean grumbled.

Jo launched back into her theory of a cursed object or something their ghost must be tied to. They'd have to sweep each apartment one by one, and should split up to do it. Which was a total waste of time and absolutely not what they needed to do. Dean was still trying to figure out how they were going to push her towards the empty lot without making things even more obvious when Andy interrupted, surprising all three of them.

"What about the surrounding buildings?" He was leaning on locked arms across the table from them, staring down at the photos and clippings. The kid glanced up, blinking in turn at the stares.

Jo regarded him with narrowed eyes, before glancing at both brothers and shooting back, "What about them?"

"Uh, I just mean… Did anyone die bloody in those?"

Dean blinked, realizing that they'd completely ignored one of their greatest assets. And it wasn't Andy's super-power (no way in hell he'd ever let the kid control Jo, or any hunter for that matter). No, it was his complete naivety to this scene. To hunting. They could blame his leaps of thought and easily missed information that any hunter should know as amateur hour. In the meantime, Dean and Sam could fill in the gaps, as if the kid's out-of-the-box thinking (cough, amateur, cough) was inspiration. Damn. He should have hired Andy as his unintentional cover nine months ago. He'd have had way less anxiety around Sam and Bobby at the time.

(Also, so not true, and totally wouldn't have worked. But, again, not supportive of his point here, so reality and fact-checking could just shove it.)

"How close does proximity matter to a dead guy?" Andy continued, shrugging a little self-consciously as Jo's stare lingered. "If he's an angry ghost wanting to kill girls, he's kinda gotta go where the girls are. Like…an apartment complex."

The younger hunter rolled her eyes, clearly more annoyed now than ever that Dean had brought a total noob along. And after giving her crap for her own slim resume. "That's not how *ghosts* work. They can't leave whatever they're bound to. If he died in one of the surrounding buildings, he'd be stuck haunting *that* building."

"Wait, he might be on to something," Sam parried before the lead Andy gave them grew too cold to use. Unfortunately for them, it only seemed to make Jo more annoyed. Right, because now the noob was upstaging her, and the Winchesters had his back. Good god, this was gonna turn into a feminism thing, Dean could just taste it. "You said this plot used to be a field. Did any of the surrounding buildings ever utilize it? Maybe that's why we can't find a violent death; it happened before this place was built."

"Uh…" Jo set aside her irritation and started pushing through the spread of papers until she found photos of the lot prior to construction. She laid it down for all of them to look at. "Here. This is the field. The surrounding buildings…Oh. Look at that."

She pulled back, both vexation and surprise flashing across her face before she grew serious again. "This building here. There are bars on the windows."

"A prison." Dean glanced at Sam and Andy. So far, so good. And all they'd had to do was bring along a hunter even less experienced then her and then given him all the answers. By her crossed arms and the none-too-happy glare she was throwing Andy's way, things were going just great there.

"I'll check the records," Sam said immediately, digging his laptop out of his backpack before the words were even out of his mouth. "Up until the nineteen hundreds, prisons were still executing people by hanging. Maybe they used the field."

Dean let out a silent breath of air as the team went to work. Yeah, Jo might be pissed off at all of them, but maybe, just maybe, they'd pull this off without her getting up close and personal with a serial killer.

-o-o-o-

Fifteen minutes later, Sam came back with H.H. Holmes' name. Jo whistled. She sure knew how to pick them. That got them to his Murder Hotel, and the likelihood of him in the walls.

"We need to get in there," Jo said immediately, already up and

moving.

"What about the basement?" Dean resisted the urge to close his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose. Damnit, he knew there wasn't a basement in this building. That's not what he'd meant. "That murder hotel had a torture chamber thing in the basement, right?"

"This building doesn't have a basement," Jo replied, once again looking at him weirdly, like she couldn't decide if he wasn't nearly as good at this as her mom had led her to believe, or if he was just having a really, really off day.

He hoped she went with the latter.

"I know, I meant- uh… what if it…did?"

A really, really, *really* off day.

"Like a sewer system?" Andy asked, staring at him a little too blandly. Again, Dean wondered where the kid had been the last half a year. And where his own brain was now, because the answer clearly wasn't in his skull.

"Yeah, like that. This guy was known for trap rooms and stuff. We should cover all our bases." Dean got a supportive nod from Sam, of course, and turned a look he hoped came off as confident and not cautious-as-hell in Jo's direction.

She stared at them for an eternity, a weird and unreadable look on her face, before finally saying, "Fine. We split up. Check the walls and the sewers."

"No chance in hell. We stay together," Dean countered immediately, a tight-lipped smile in place and a tone that booked no room for argument.

Jo crossed her arms and the effort not to roll her eyes was visible in the clench of her jaw. "It'll be faster if we all split up."

"How about pairs?" Sam offered, ever the peace-keeper. He glanced between the two feuding hunters, arms raised in partial placation. "Dean and I have the most experience, we'll each take one of you."

"Dibbs." The older Winchester sidled up to Jo, and if looks could kill, he'd be six feet under. Twice. Dean gestured to the other men in the room. "You two are on wall duty. Jo and I've got the sewer."

If he thought that might appease her, he was sorely mistaken. Instead, he got a cantankerous young hunter itching for a hunt she had every right to lay claim to, thinking he was confining her to a wild goose chase after a basement that didn't exist. She looked about ready to skin him alive by the time they gathered their gear and headed out.

Had he mentioned being from the future and knowing everything *sucked*? Cuz it absolutely did.

As they parted ways, Dean pulled Sam to the side and told him to forget the walls, grab a crap-ton of salt, rope to spring a trap, and a cement truck. He and Jo would figure out how to lure Holmes into the basement, and they'd trap him there for good, just like last time. With Jo already down there, Dean figured there was a good chance their ghost would follow.

-o-o-o-

Stephanie handed the chapters back over to Chuck, who was still writing the rest. He smiled up at her. "So?"

"I would like the rest when you are finished."

With that, and absolutely nothing more, she turned and headed back for her chair, leaving Chuck – and not Chuck – to stare after her, a touch disappointed (and a touch annoyed at the bossiness, which he was pretty sure wasn't bossiness, just directness, but on a woman intimidating as that, it sure as hell read as bossiness). The writer set the pages down beside his laptop, sighed, fidgeted, though he couldn't quite place what left him fidgeting, and hit the print command on his laptop for the rest of what he'd gotten down so far.

He could feel another headache coming on already.

Chapter End Notes

> **Quality**: I hope it didn't come across as being a little off, but I struggled with this one. Partly because I got halfway through it before realizing I hadn't planned it out well enough and had to sort of spot fix, partly because Jo Harvelle ended up being hard to right. I don't like angry characters, and she was kinda angry in this episode, feeling like she had to prove herself and be on the defensive. And Dean just made that even worse in our timeline. Which is so not fair. I'm the writer! I should get to decide whether or not Dean makes my job harder.

…It just, it really doesn't work out that way. Ever. (Looking at you, lady!Cas -_-) I feel so, so much more for Chuck now. Being 'God' sucks.

(Also, can we talk about how uncomfortable I just got calling myself 'god'? *shudder* No thank you.)

The Bitchface List: I don't always like to write out which bitchface is which in the chapter, because that format feels repetitive, or some of them are just too long and interrupt flow if they're used too often. But I do feel like I should put this list somewhere you guys have access to it… How does the Deleted Scenes sister story sound? I'll post it as its own chapter so you all have it as a reference if you want it.

I'll post the April Fool's chapter there too. I know some people mentioned not getting to read it (you're not really missing *that* much. Just some cockroaches, guys, I swear ;)

Btw, Bitchface #1 is *'What, that doesn't make any sense, Dean. Don't be an idiot.'* I honestly don't think we've used it since, like… chapter 2. And not Season 2: Chapter 2. No, I mean…chapter 2. So it deserves an A/N just this once.

Reviews: I will try to get to some review-replies this weekend! Sorry to keep you all waiting, I'm quite terrible at this part, but I really do like to answer you guys and acknowledge (and appreciate) your comments!

Chapter 67: Season 2: Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Thought I'd post a little early this weekend to make up for the lack of post, review replies, or Bitchface List update last weekend.

Speaking of: Whelp, I'm not dead (obviously), but I did end up in the ER for a while there. A couple weeks of depression mixed with this endless, stupid, friggin' back issue of mine, all came to a head in the form of a nasty drug interaction. One morning my brain woke up and thought, 'I'm gonna give Olympic Spinning a go today', and my head, jumping on the bandwagon (peer pressure, you know?) decided to put itself through the bathroom wall. Luckily, I have a tough noggin. And also, apparently, a tough bathroom wall. I'm recovering (more from the mayhem reeked on my system than the drywall head-butt) but, needless to say, this story is going to fall behind for a hot second. I need to switch to two-week posting schedule while I get back on my feet, because I haven't written in weeks and I don't really know when that'll change just yet.

Quality Warning: Following that lovely note up, this chapter is probably not up to par editing wise. It only got a once over, so apologies for any mistakes. I also don't find it the most exciting chapter, but setup and chatter is inevitable when your author can't write an episode in anything less than three chapters D:

Reviews: For a second there, this story had 66 chapters and 666 Follows. That made me grin in a definitely no good dirty rotten sort of way. The, let's say, no good dirty rotten cliffhanger sort of way ;P

Chapter Warnings: Jo's attempting (and failing) cell phone theft, Dean's attempting (and failing) to lie to anyone, Sam and Andy are attempting (and failing) to have any part in this chapter, and Chuck is the only one actually succeeding at anything this episode.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 34

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A tapping on her shoulder caused Stephanie to look up from the iPod resting in her hands. The music device was something Chuck had offered once she'd run out of things to read (was it normal for an editorial assistant to just…hang around your house all day?) She'd looked at it strangely before, like everything else he'd given her so far, diving straight in with true recluse fashion. Now she pulled the earplugs from her ears by the cord and stared expectantly up at the writer.

"Uh…next chapter," he offered with a sheepish smile at the stack of papers he'd tapped her on the shoulder with. He nodded at the iPod. "Find anything good?"

She took the chapter from him, wrapping the headphones around the small device and setting it on the side table. "Yes. So far I have greatly enjoyed the singing of Robert Johnson."

Chuck grinned widely. "You're a Blues girl. I'm more a Jazz man, myself. You know, he wrote a song about a Crossroads demon?"

The editorial assistant looked up from the first page of the newest batch of chapters to stare at him. "I know. It is on your eye pod."

"Ah." Chuck rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. Of course it was. That made sense. God, he was bad at talking to girls. "Uh. Well… erm…en-enjoy the new chapters."

He turned and headed back towards his desk. By the time he settled behind his computer once more, Stephanie had her nose in the new pages, hand reaching for the iPod. Chuck hadn't really figured this woman for an introvert when she'd first popped up on his doorstep but, ah well, he never had been the best judge of character.

Then again, it was all too possible she just really didn't like him.

-o-o-o-

They didn't even make it to the elevator, the four of them, before Dean's phone rang. He dug it out of his pocket with one hand, hitting the button to go down with his other, before he glanced at the caller

ID and froze.

Jo tried to grab the phone before he could answer it, but wasn't fast enough.

"Ellen," Dean started, keeping his voice even as he raised the device to his ear. Jo was right in front of him, glaring daggers up at him and hissing all manner of death threats.

"You heard from Jo?" Ellen's voice was tinny through the speaker, but Dean knew her daughter heard it the second she tensed and those daggers got a thousand times sharper. The older hunter glared right back, keeping his expression neutral. Which wasn't terribly hard to do, since he hadn't decided what answer he planned on giving yet.

"Why do you ask?" Oh yeah. Real smooth. Not suspicious at all. Because Dean Friggin' Winchester was real prone to saying things like *'why do you ask*.' Brilliant.

Ellen made an aggravated noise on the other end of the phone, no doubt behind the bar, a hand on her hip, equal parts pissed off and worried as only a mother could be. "She's been on about this case in Philly for weeks, but I wouldn't let her go. Now she's taken off for the weekend – said she was going to Vegas, but I don't buy it."

"Well, did you check for a paper trail-"

"Of course I did. I'm not new to motherhood you know." Dean almost laughed, but he knew it wasn't the time. "But with Ash as a roommate, you know good as me that means jack."

Dean met Jo's eyes, even as the blonde shook her head vehemently. Beside them, the elevator dinged loudly in the hallway, doors sliding open. No one moved, and eventually they slid shut again.

He heard Ellen sigh down the line, and his guilty conscience only grew. "You'll call me if you hear from her, won't you, Dean?"

The other Harvelle woman mouthed, "Don't you dare!" with a hand fisted in his shirt.

"Yeah, Ellen," Dean answered, and he kept Jo's gaze, no matter how much he wanted to look away. "She called us."

The younger hunter pitched her hands in the air angrily, shoving him back and stomping off away from the elevator. Sam and Andy gave

her a wide berth as she passed.

"She's there?" Dean could practically hear Ellen straightening upright with hope. It quickly faltered. "With you?"

He tried not to take it personally, but the quiver in her voice, the fear of her daughter hunting with a Winchester, stung. Dean knew he didn't deserve it, knew Ellen didn't even know him enough to really mean it (and once she did know him enough, she never would have meant it), but it still hurt.

"Yeah."

Jo stalked back around (Sam and Andy shying out of her path again), finger up and jabbing at Dean as she mouthed every threat she could think of in his general direction. Though, there was hardly a point in hiding her presence anymore. Sam looked about ready to hold her back, but Dean waved him off. No reason for more than one Winchester casualty in this.

"Dean, you put her butt on the first flight outta there."

Jo opened her mouth and hissed, "*Try* it!"

Dean kept her gaze. "I can't do that, Ellen."

Surprise lit the younger Harvelle's face, even as the older sucked in a breath.

"Dean-"

"I can try to lock her out of this, if that's what you want," he continued, watching the surprise morph from pleasant to betrayed all over again in the span of seconds. "But I do that, next time she needs backup on a hunt, it won't be us she calls."

Jo's eyes darted between each of his, hissed protests on pause for now as she watched him with a narrowed, uncertain gaze.

"I don't want that, Ellen. I know a Winchester is the last person you want to hear this from-" and he was going to have so much fun explaining *that* to Jo, her brow already furrowing- "but hunting with the wrong backup is as dangerous as hunting alone. She shouldn't have to do either."

The silence on the other end was like being stabbed half a dozen times

over, but Dean breathed through the emotional pain that might as well have been physical. Ellen didn't know him, not yet. He just kept telling himself that, eyes locked on those beautiful brown ones that he would see to old age this time, he swore it.

"If you know why I don't wanna hear that from you, then you know why I'm asking you to put my daughter on a plane, right *now*."

Dean finally turned away from Jo, away from the others. No way in hell could he stop them from hearing this, but the move was still instinctual self-preservation. "I'm not my dad, Ellen. I can't promise she'll be safe – you know I can't, and I won't lie like that to you – but I can promise I will do everything to protect her. Or sure as hell die trying."

This time, the silence in the hallway was just as deafening as the one on the phone. Dean focused on breathing through it (ignoring the hell out of it), his grip tightening on the phone. Pouring his heart out to everyone around him wasn't exactly within his comfort zone, here.

"Put my daughter on."

Dean passed the phone to Jo like it was a game of hot potato and someone had set the damn thing on fire. Jo was still staring at him, expression less readable now; muddled surprise, confusion, gratitude, and anger made it all too hard to know what she was really thinking. The young hunter took the phone and pressed it to her ear.

"Mom-"

"You listen up, Joanna Beth. You check in every hour, and I mean *every hour*, or I am on the first flight out there. Do you understand me?"

Jo's eyes snapped to Dean's, surprise painting her face almost as brightly as the smile that spread across her lips. "Yes! I mean, yes. Of course, absolutely, mom."

"Put Dean back on."

The younger Harvelle licked her lips, contemplating saying more, but decided against it. She handed Dean's phone back to him, and he was severely less enthused about getting back in line for the guillotine.

"Ellen."

"You let anything happen to my baby girl, and I swear, Dean…" She couldn't even complete the threat, but the hunter didn't need her to. There had always been a reason he'd been scared of her. A healthy fear, he reminded himself, given the sheer pain promised in words spoken hundreds of miles away.

"I know. You've got my word. We'll call you in an hour."

Dean hung up, knowing the conversation was over, despite them both having plenty left to say. All three of them, if Jo chewing on her lip was any indication. He pocketed his phone and turned away from them, hitting the down button once more.

No one said a word, and the elevator doors pinged open before anyone got the bright idea to try.

-o-o-o-

Dean hadn't remembered where the entrance to the sewer torture chamber was, just that there had been one, because they'd cemented it shut after they'd trapped Holmes in a ring of salt down in his own torture chamber. So they needed a metal detector. Andy, having not made it more than half the length of the lobby with his own Winchester partner, agreed to get one for them when Dean hollered at him. He was, after all, the kind of guy who could get things.

When he showed back up outside the apartment building with metal detector in hand, less than seven minutes later, Jo stared at him with the narrowest of narrowed eyes.

"Are you some kind of thief, or something?" she asked, tone skeptical, as she glanced back at the Winchesters.

"People just like me, I guess," was the kid's response as he handed over the device with a wide smile. "They give me stuff all the time."

Dean grabbed the metal detector and ushered Jo off on their task before she could ask more questions, giving Andy an annoyed glare (which the kid just waved off with an unaffected grin). He was still grumbling under his breath when they started searching for the manhole that would lead them below.

It didn't taken long to find, though it was dark and dry once they dropped down the ladder and landed in the underground system of tunnels. They broke out the flashlights and weapons – salt-loaded shotgun for Jo, iron crowbar for Dean – and started their way back

towards the apartment building.

"Nuh-uh," the older hunter said almost immediately when Jo took the lead. He snagged the back of her shirt and hauled her back. "You're rear guard. I'm going first."

"You're kidding, right?" Jo glared at him, one hand on her hip, flashlight illuminating the ground, and the other on her shotgun.

Dean was, in fact, not kidding. He'd never been so serious in his life (okay, slight exaggeration there, he could admit. Still.) He gave her a pointed look to say absolutely no way in hell was she leading this expedition into the monster's layer when said monster wanted to seal her up in a wall and watch her slowly mummify herself to death while he petted her hair and pulled pieces of her scalp off.

Okay, so maybe not so slight an exaggeration, after all.

He must have managed most of that internal rant in a single look, because Jo rolled her eyes, but fell in line. Trailing slightly behind and to his left, she swept her flashlight along the dark, dirt-covered walls of the sewer system. They made it about a hundred yards in tense silence, the kind Dean could tell Jo was about to break, before she finally did in a falsely nonchalant tone.

"So what's going on with you?"

"Don't know what you mean." His own flashlight swept the walls and dark tunnel in front of them.

"Yeah, you do," Jo bit out, suddenly stopping. Dean was forced to stop as well, turning towards her and the caustic words. "You're yo-yoing between being on my side and acting like you don't want me here. *You're* the one who chose to show up, and now you're giving *me* crap for it?"

"You telling me I shouldn't have come?"

"Cut the shit, Dean, and tell me what's going on." She targeted her flashlight beam right on his face and he had to look away, squinting past the bright light. "Is there some kind of chauvinistic stick up your ass? Because back at the Roadhouse, you sounded like you had my back. And up top, on the phone with my mom. Now you're acting like I can't even walk down a tunnel right. Excuse me if I have a little whiplash from your flip-flopping."

Jo finally lowered the light, and Dean blinked several times to clear the spots. "You done?"

She put a hand on her hip, likely because she couldn't cross her arms while also holding the shotgun. The beam of light swung wildly in the dark. Her gaze was no-nonsense, learned straight from her mother. She just hadn't mastered the I-will-actually-murder-you-in-your-sleep follow-up vibe. Dean was pretty sure, with time, she'd get that one down pat, too.

"I've got your back, Jo, but I'm not picking sides between you and your mom." Dean grunted low in the back of his throat, keeping his own flashlight trained on the ground and illuminating the space around them. "I know you want to hunt; I got nothing against it. But I don't wanna see you dead. And that's got nothing to do with gender studies, by the way, so you can stow the feminism rant. Woman can do the job just fine, but you're *new* at this. I showed up to make sure you don't get yourself killed, because I *do* have your back."

She was quiet for a moment, chewing on the inside of her lip with a stiff jaw. "You think I can't do the job?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're not *ready* to do the job *alone*. There's a difference, Jo. I don't hunt alone either, not when I can help it, because it's a dumbass decision."

Jo remained tersely silent for another pause. "My dad hunted alone."

Dean sighed, finally dropping his head. Damnit, this was not a talk he was ready for. "So did mine. Look where they both are."

It was harsh, not just for her, but for him too. Even if he'd had just as long as Jo to accept that truth, to get over their fathers' deaths. Even if the brutality of his truth was just a little closer because of an angelic DeLorean.

"Your mom, she's got as much a point about this as you do," he added, veering them away from their dads. Jo snorted, and Dean was the one to flash the beam of light on her face this time before lowering it. "Having someone want more for you than a life of hunting? There is *nothing* bad about that. Sometimes I wish I'd had it."

His thoughts flickered to his own mom, what she would think of all this, of her sons grown into the life she'd never wanted for them. It had hurt like hell to hear that, the words coming from her own mouth back in 1973. At the time, Dean wished he could explain, could tell

her it wasn't all bad. Or worse, he wished he could have saved her, had her as he grew up, to want better for him. But he had stowed it then and he'd stow it now. Wishes like that just wasted time and heartache he couldn't afford.

"You *love* the job," Jo countered immediately, and he could see the desperate gleam in her eye. How badly she wanted to love the job too.

"Yeah, I do." No point in denying it. "But there are days I wish to hell I didn't. They come more often than you think. You want this, you gotta be prepared for those days, too. And don't fault your mom for wanting better for you. You choose this life, good, fine, that's your choice, and there's nothing wrong with it. But don't spit on your mom's wishes just for having them, either."

Jo didn't answer, but he could tell she was at least taking him seriously, perhaps for the first time since they'd shown up. He might be overbearing here, but Jo had been rearing for a fight the moment they'd arrived. She was too damn stuck on proving herself to people who hadn't been doubting her to start with.

"We gonna find a ghost, or what?" she finally said, clearing her throat pointedly and pushing past him. So far, he hadn't let her lead, and he grumbled as he jogged to catch up. He didn't trust 'Time' worth a damn; there was no way he was letting her out of his sight this time, for any reason. Sao he fell instep alongside her, at least not curtailing her lead but not letting her walk into a trap first, either. As they resumed their trek through the tunnel, Jo glanced his way now and then. "So how are we going to ice this thing, if we can't salt and burn his bones?"

One of the first things Sam had brought up after revealing who they were dealing with, was that H.H. Holmes famously had his remains incased in cement upon his death. So no one would mess with his corpse, of course. Hypocritical dickwad.

"We'll trap him in his own torture chamber," Dean answered easily enough, thinking back to their plan the first time around. It had worked well enough then, no reason they couldn't do that again. "We'll get the girl out, wait till he shows back up looking for her, and trip a salt circle along the walls. Then we seal the entrance and Holmes spends the rest of eternity in his own little circle of cement hell. Was the guy's dying wish, after all."

He grinned over at her, but Jo wasn't returning the look. Instead she

was eyeing him all funny again, a raised brow fighting a simultaneously pinched frown. She looked, once more, thoroughly unimpressed.

A weak voice from up ahead, calling for help, interrupted the conversation. Both hunters glanced at each other as the cry repeated, asking if anyone was there, in a scratchy, tired, female voice. Jo and Dean took off running.

Teresa from 2F was, indeed, still alive, just as Dean said. She was trapped in the wall via a cutout that was sealed by a heavy metal gate. Dean got to work on it immediately while Jo kept an eye out for their ghostie, flashlight scanning the room. A circular room, perfect for springing a salt trap. Jo glanced over her shoulder, suspicions starting to form, as Dean got the metal trapdoor open and helped the traumatized woman to her feet.

She was dirty, terrified, and had a chunk of hair missing, but overall appeared in decent health, all things considered. There was also no way she was staying another second in that chamber. Dean spared a look with Jo, and they agreed they'd have to come back to spring their trap, the twitchy woman making it clear she was leaving, with or without them. It's not like they'd come down prepared with salt, or any way to build the kind of trap Dean had been talking about. Just another thing Jo added to the list in her head that had been amassing ever since she'd called Dean that morning.

Their rescued damsel wasted no time once they reached the ladder back to the surface. Teresa took off like a bolting rabbit, and Dean gestured for Jo to follow. The hunter put her hand on one of the rungs, but didn't go anywhere.

"How did you know?"

Dean, having expected her to start up and ready to follow after, was caught off guard and pulled back. "Know what?"

"Any of it." Jo's eyes were sharp, her shrug calculated. "All of it. How did you know Teresa would still be alive?"

Dean's brow pulled down between his eyes, but Jo wasn't buying it for a minute. "Holmes kept his victims alive for days, didn't he? It was wishful thinking, and it turned out to be right."

It sure hadn't sounded like *wishing*. It had sounded like confidence.

"And the room?"

"What about it?"

"You called it circular. Twice."

Shit, he had? He didn't think he had. He shrugged awkwardly, going for defensive but knowing he was off his game. Jo did that to him. Always had. "It's a sewer. Aren't all connection points between tunnels circular or square? Fifty-fifty chance, Jo. I got lucky."

"Like you got lucky knowing I was Holmes' type?"

Dean ground his teeth and looked away. Okay, apparently he still sucked at this. What else was knew? It's not like he'd had any practice, lately. Sam had known for months now, and Andy had Jedi-mind tricked him into confessing the truth before they ever bothered trying to hide it from him. Dean hadn't had to keep quiet for months, hadn't had to pretend he was ten years in the past and didn't know what he knew. He was more than off his game; he was out of practice, and Jo was way too smart not to pick up on it.

Which meant, yet again, Sam had been right. Dean really hated those days (and how often they seemed to happen. Damn smart kid.)

"Alright, look, I- yes, something is going on, okay?" he conceded, a pointed look in her direction doing nothing to lessen that sharp gaze. If anything, it just got more expectant, like she could tell he was lining up to procrastinate this. Jo crossed her arms over her chest and Dean had to speak through clenched teeth. "*Later*, Jo. I'll tell you later, alright?"

"Nope. You tell me now. I'm sick of you putting me off." She was an immoveable force at the bottom of that ladder, and Dean tilted his head back, cursing Gods he knew weren't paying any attention.

"I'm psychic, alright?" He decided to rip the bandaid off so they could get the hell out of the sewer sometime this century. "Can we go now?"

She didn't move an inch, though she certainly scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right."

Dean sighed, aggravated. He scrubbed at his hair and clenched his teeth. "It's the truth."

Jo just stared, realization slowly kicking in that he looked anything

but joking. She dropped her arms. "Bullshit."

"Look, can we *go*?" Dean didn't exactly want to hang out any longer in a serial killer's domain, not to mention a sewer, dried up as it was.

"Oh my god, you're serious." She blinked at him, eyes growing wide before they quickly narrowed in thought. Too damn smart for her own good. "Sam?"

Dean grabbed the ladder himself and started climbing. Screw chivalry and screw waiting around for a ghost to ice their asses. "Yeah, him too, alright? But not in the same way."

"You saw all this, didn't you? What else did you see?"

The silence that followed those questions paused the hunter only a couple feet off the ground. He sighed, thunked his forehead into the rung straight in front of him, and then dropped back to the ground. Apparently, they were doing this.

"You. In one of those slots back there, after he got you in the walls." Dean was, possibly, as serious as she had ever seen him. It wasn't hard to imagine what made him such a good hunter, with a rigid, intimidating posture and a look in his eyes that promised revenge for an event that hadn't even happened. "I lost you, Jo, and Sam and I might have gotten you back, but I *lost* you. And then you had to sit in there and play bait for a ghost that tried to kill you, and got damn close to succeeding."

"Did it work?"

Dean reeled back. Jesus, had she heard a damn word he'd said? She could read the anger in his expression, and adopted a defensive stance of her own.

"Fear's a teacher, Dean. You said it yourself; I'm new at this. I'm not gonna learn if you don't let me."

Good god. Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbed at his eyes, and let out a frustrated, protective growl. "Damn it, Jo, there's fear and then there's trauma. There's a difference, and I'd rather you have a good, healthy dose of the first and as little as possible of the second."

God knew he certainly didn't have them in that order. Sam, either.

Jo was silent for a moment, shifting her weight. "You know, your

number isn't the only one I have. I could have called half a dozen hunters, but I called you because I knew you wouldn't take this away from me."

It wasn't an accusation, it wasn't consolation. It was just…what it was, he guessed. It was annoying, is what it was, and not something they had time for, damnit.

"I'm not trying to take it away from you," Dean professed, suddenly so damn tired.

"You could have told me," she argued back immediately. "You're *psychic*, Dean. You knew how to solve this case right from the start, didn't you? I thought it was convenient, you guys showing up, pointing out those buildings that just happened to lead to our guy. God-" Jo cut herself off, shaking her head. "You should have told me; we could have done this *together*."

"We are doing it together!" Jo turned away from him, her anger building, and Dean growled again. God, he hated these conversations, and he was *so done* having them. "Damn it, Jo, every time I try to change something, every time I've told someone so that I can, it's all gone to crap, alright?"

And now he was getting into really dangerous territory, because one little slip and then she'd know his psychic claim was as full of shit as almost everything else he'd told her so far. He was going to lose her – Ellen too – by trying to friggin' save them.

Story of his god damn life lately.

The thought had not even finished crossing his mind when an inhuman howl ripped through the tunnel, its source definitely the torture chamber they'd just come from. Holmes had come back to find his playroom empty of its prize.

Jo froze, eyes going wide, and Dean grabbed the shotgun out of her hand and shoved her towards the ladder, even as she started moving again. He hauled her up the first rung, hardly needing to as she scrambled for it all on her own.

"Go, go, go!" he yelled, shoving at her hip, thigh, then ankle, before turning to fire into the tunnel, though there was nothing to shoot. Yet. Jo was scrambling up the rungs quick as she could, with Dean right behind her, shotgun abandoned on the ground for the sake of faster climbing. They both heard the roar grow louder, and the tunnel

leading back the way they'd come grew dark, a supernatural pitch that swallowed up the cement as it hurled toward them at incredible speeds.

Dean knew they weren't going to make it. He grabbed Jo's ankle and tugged. "Let go!"

She did, trusting him completely. He was only half a dozen feet off the ground, and he let go as well, catching her weight as it crashed into his. The two plummeted back to the floor, back to the shotgun that might give them a few extra precious seconds. But whatever happened, he wasn't letting her go. If Holmes wanted her this time, he was taking both of them.

But when had Dean ever gotten what he wanted in life?

Wind tore through the tunnel, darkness enveloped them, and the weight in his arms was gone by the time he hit the floor. As dim light returned, his flashlight flickering back to life on the ground beside him, Dean scrambled to his feet, gun in hand, barrel swinging wide.

It was too late. He was alone in the tunnel and Jo was nowhere in sight. He'd lost her again.

-o-o-o-

Chuck looked up from his desk to the editorial assistant suddenly standing beside it, stack of papers in hand. He pulled the pencil out of his mouth, eraser end all chewed up. A habit he had anytime he hand-wrote (which was usually when he had writer's block). The thought alone was enough to have him glancing down at his scribbles with some mixture of dismay and acid reflux.

The writer offered a weak smile to Stephanie instead, happy for the distraction.

"What did you think?"

She looked down at the chapter she'd just finished reading and offered an approving nod. "Dean is psychic?"

"Dean is…something." Chuck tapped the end of the pencil against pursed lips before sighing and tossing it atop the notebook in front of him. Not like the thing was doing him much good anyhow. "I'm not sure what, yet. But he thinks he's psychic."

Steph made a noncommittal noise, something of a hum, before handing the packet over. Chuck didn't take it right away, and if he was disappointed by her stoic reaction to his work, he didn't show it. The moment lengthened, Chuck just staring up at her, contemplation flickering across his face, before the writer – and also something much more than the writer – reached out to take the chapter. As he did, his fingertips brushed the back of her hand for the quickest of moments.

He took the papers back and set the stack on the desk beside him.

Stephanie turned away, likely to retreat back to her chair, but paused. She was rubbing the back of her hand absently, a silly little tingle spreading just beneath the skin there. Like a cool breeze. When she turned back to Chuck, there was a strange look on her face.

"She will be alright, won't she?" The writer raised his eyebrows, and Steph clarified, "Jo Harvelle?"

"Ah." A warm smile crept across Chuck – and not Chuck's – face. "You'll have to wait and see."

The woman – who was not really a woman at all – frowned at that, an emotion on her face not unlike confusion. It was replaced with the same narrow-eyed suspicion she got in those false blues anytime the writer teased her. Chuck just smiled wider and his editorial assistant huffed, dropped her hand, and headed back for her chair.

Chuck – and not Chuck – picked the pencil back up and got to work.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Reminder that we'll be switching to a two-week posting schedule for a while. I'll let you know when I think that'll end as soon as I know myself (aka, as soon as my brain stops being fuzzy and my body stops trying to have nap time all the time)

Up Next: Time's doing things backwards, the boys are destroying private property, Ellen wasn't joking about that flight, Andy's an incredibly handy Jedi to have around, and Tom's finally working on that Plan B.

Chapter 68: Season 2: Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Okay, I'm a liiiiitle late on that whole Sunday posting thing, but it's a nice long chapter this time. I think I'm going to keep the two-week posting chapter for a while longer, but in the meantime, all the next chapters are also pretty long (almost two chapters long, each), so that should balance it out a bit!

Chapter Warnings: Andy and Sam actually get to do things this chapter! Jo's playing hide-n-seek, where she neither gets to choose her hiding spot nor be the seeker, Dean's having some more chats he really doesn't want to have, Andy's really rocking the whole mind trick thing (enough so that this Author is gonna have to kick the poor kid out of the Scooby Gang soon if only so he's not a magical solution to *everything*), and Jo's a badass, but you all already knew that, didn't you. Oh, and Tom's up to terrible, no good, dirty rotten things that includes a not-really-cliffhanger-but-also-yeah-kind-of-a-cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 35

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean ran. His feet hit the decades old cement hard, scattering dust and the dregs of city drainage as he pounded past. Meter after meter of tunnel flew by until he could see the cross section ahead and the chamber that lay just beyond.

"Jo!"

The hunter burst into the circular room, but it was silent. Empty. He spun, checking each of the metal-covered slots in the walls, even when he already knew he wouldn't find her. Because they'd change things – *he'd* changed things – and that crap never came without god damn consequences.

"Jo?"

The cry echoed in the empty space, and Dean knew he'd have to head back to the surface. He had to regroup with Sam and come up with a plan to find her.

They *would* find her.

-o-o-o-

Persephone left the Prophet's house at precisely six pm, as she did every day, this time to Chuck's teasing smile and a promise of Jo Harvelle's fate when she returned in the morning. Unlike all the other days, however, it would seem she would not be completing the mile and a half walk back to the new motel the demons had set her up in. Tom was leaning against a car seven blocks away from Chuck Shurley's residence, watching Persephone approach on foot.

Her demon babysitter wasted no time with his usual pretentious preamble. "Where are the Winchesters now?"

She eyed him, her distaste for her personal guard no secret. "Philadelphia."

"Specifics, Princess," Tom demanded with a raised, unimpressed brow.

"What do you want, demon?" she spat in reply, shouldering the purse he'd provided her on day one of this ruse. "The Prophet's writing is no more specific than that. The Winchesters are in Philadelphia."

He stared at her, likely to assess whether or not he believed her. Not that she cared, either way. She just so happened to be telling the truth, and whether this demon believed her or not was not her problem. Personally she hoped he didn't, just to tick him off all the more.

"You know, if you're lying to me, Azazel is going to hear about it."

Persephone hardly appeared affected by the threat, even if Tom knew she took the yellow-eyed demon a lot more seriously than she took him. She crossed her arms and stared her babysitter down. "Does your daddy fight all your battles for you, then?"

Tom's returning chuckle was dangerous, but he shook his head and opened the driver's side door even as he shoved off the side of the car.

"Get in." The demon climbed in without looking at her, starting up the engine immediately. Persephone glanced over her shoulder, the way

of the Prophet's house, and Tom rolled his eyes. He jabbed one finger in a downward motion, gesturing to the passenger seat. "In, Princess."

He hardly let her close the door before he was pulling away.

-o-o-o-

Dean's phone was ringing by the time he made it to the top of the ladder. Well before Sam's hand appeared in front of his face to help haul him the last foot to the surface. Dean didn't even bother fishing the thing out of his pocket. It was surely Ellen; they'd missed their check-in. Didn't matter now, anyway; she'd be on the first flight out whether he answered it or not. Right now he didn't really have the time or emotional bandwidth to tell the woman he'd lost her daughter a second time.

"Where's Jo?" Sam asked, glancing back down the hatch when Dean was the only one to come up.

"He got her," Dean answered, already on the move. He pushed past a Andy as the kid hopped down from the cab of the cement truck they'd clearly stolen.

"What?" Sam barked, even as Andy picked up on the obvious tension and not-rightness.

"What's going on?" he asked, worry evident in his voice as Sam pushed past him as well. Dean was heading back for the apartments, not quite running but certainly not taking his sweet time. Andy glanced between the retreating brothers and the open sewer entrance. "Where's Jo?"

When it was clear he wasn't going to get an answer, he took off after them.

"Dean, talk to me." The younger Winchester caught up pretty quickly, his stride much longer. The three, Andy running a bit behind (he was considerably shorter than the two giants he now hung out with), made it back to the apartment to the distant sound of sirens. The woman they'd rescued – Teresa of 2F – must have made it to the surface before Sam and Andy showed up in their borrowed truck, and gone screaming to the nearest phone to call the cops.

They so did not have time for more crap.

"We got the girl out, but Jo was- we were...arguing. We weren't paying

attention. It was stupid." Dean didn't pause as he talked, running through the foyer and hallway to the elevator, punching the call button way harder than was necessary. He should have shoved Jo up that ladder. Damnit, he'd spent the last six hours lecturing her about amateur hour and then had been no better himself. "Holmes must have realized we raided his victim collection. He came after us, in the tunnels. Ripped Jo right out of my arms."

The elevator doors opened with a ping right as Dean was considering just booking it up the stairs. Andy finally caught up to the two of them, bracing himself on the wall as he panted from the impromptu sprint. Sam grabbed his arm and hauled him into the small elevator for a devastatingly slow climb. Thank god there wasn't elevator music, at least.

"So what's the plan?" Sam fidgeted beside his brother, worry clear in his eyes, while Andy caught his breath.

"If she's not in the basement, then- then maybe she's in the walls." Dean didn't have a clue how much weight that idea actually held, but it was the only thing he could come up with. Holmes traveled through the walls, and that's where he'd grabbed her the first time. If his torture chamber was out, then the walls were all that was left.

Dean prayed that wasn't just false hope talking, because he didn't have a plan B.

"Then we need sledgehammers and crowbars." Sam announced with a nod, and Dean took comfort in his brother's own assuredness. The elevator doors pinged open and Dean rushed out, Sam behind him, still tugging Andy along, the poor kid. Lucky for them, with Dean's foreknowledge of Holmes' liking of the walls, they'd hauled all that stuff up from the Impala when they'd first arrived.

Inside the apartment, they divvied up the gear (after Dean almost took the door off its hinges bursting through it). Sam and Dean took a sledgehammer each, Andy a crowbar, and they were back in the hallway within minutes. Splitting up made the most sense, and the three barely even had to discuss it. Dean would take the top three floors, Sam and Andy the bottom. They didn't waste time on details, the younger men hitting the stairs while Dean punched the button to call the elevator once more.

They would find her, he told himself. He said it again and again as he waited for the damn slowest car on the planet. They'd find her.

They *had* to.

-o-o-o-

It was dark and dusty and very, very cramped. When Jo came back to, she found herself upright, unbound but pinned so tightly between four paneled structures that she could barely move. The initial panic over being trapped wasted several precious minutes and was worsened by the fact that each frantic breath expanded her lungs beyond what there was physical room for. Jo berated herself to *calm the hell down* until she was finally able to slow her breathing enough to work within the confines of her surroundings.

Wherever she was, it was dark. Almost too dark to make out details, but as her eyes slowly adjusted, she could see just enough of the pipes on either side of her and the ribbed wood inches in front of her to realize she was inside a wall.

'Oh god,' she thought, leaning her head back against the hard surface behind her, trying to take in a deep breath. She was shaking. *'Dean said he got me in the walls. Shit, I am so screwed.'*

Jo took several more deep, calming breaths and reminded herself not to panic. Panicking would only make it worse, and she didn't have the time to waste. As her pulse slowed down, ever so much, her hunter instincts kicked back in, and she started looking around for anything she could use. Jo didn't know how the ghost even got her wedged into the small spot she was currently stuck in. There was no way she would be able to get out. The space between the two sets of pipes holding her up was barely enough for her breadth-wise, and the distance between them and the wall she was facing was only a couple of inches. No way she'd be able to squeeze past, even if she could wedge herself free.

The young hunter tried to shift her weight to free an arm. Her dad's hunting knife was in her right boot. If she could somehow shimmy down enough to get it, she might be able to dig her way through the wall directly in front of her. It felt like brick at her back, though she couldn't be sure, so it was more likely that she was facing the interior of the building and had a prayer of pushing her way through. She just needed room to work.

The first three attempts were utterly futile. There just wasn't room to bend her knees or her back, whether it was lifting her leg up or crouching down. She couldn't reach the knife. Jo bit back tears, panic

and desperation warring inside.

'*Pathetic*,' she snipped at herself. '*Crying isn't going to get you out of this.*'

It didn't stop the water from gathering in her eyes, but it did rally her for a fourth and fifth attempt. They were equally fruitless, and she let out a low-pitched scream of frustration and helplessness. She leaned forward enough to press her forehead to the dusty, cobwebbed wall. Even that she could barely do in the small space.

"Jo!"

The hunter picked her head up off the wall at the distant, muffled call. But it had definitely been there; someone was calling her name. When it sounded off again, a voice she now recognized, Jo practically jumped up and down – or she would have, had she the room.

"Sam!" She screamed it at the top of her lungs, stomping her feet and hitting the walls and pipes where she could. Anything to make a racket. "Here! I'm here!"

"Jo!" His voice was much closer now, right through the wall, and she sobbed in relief. She could hear him in the hall, and someone else too. Probably the kid, since she didn't hear Dean's voice. "Hold on, Jo, we're gonna get you out of there!"

There was more muffled chatter and then knocking on the wall. He was looking for studs. And probably her, too. So she knocked back to give Sam a clear idea of where she was. If they were going to punch through, she really didn't want it to be directly in front of her, with no more than three inches between the wall and her stomach.

His knocks moved further to her right, by about a foot, and then silenced. The quiet only lasted a second (though it stretched on for an eternity), before a crash shattered the wall. Jo turned her head to the side, eyes screwed up tight as dust flew about in the small space. Drywall and wood splintered as a sledgehammer ripped into the thin gap between the interior and exterior wall. As Sam pulled the tool away, light filled her prison, and Jo gasped at the illusion of free air, even if it was dust-filled and choking.

"We're coming, Jo!" was the hurried response to her coughing fit. The sledgehammer hit again and again, widening the hole until Sam could stick his mop of brown hair through. He turned his head immediately to the left, and looked about as relieved to spot her as she was to see him. "Hang on, I need to widen the hole."

"I'm trapped," she answered back, practically breathless but trying to keep it together. "I can't move; you're going to have to get in front of me."

Sam nodded and pulled his head back, leaving her alone in the walls once more. He kept at the hole, widening it with every swing. After a half dozen hits, she heard him talking to Andy, and the next swing was from a crowbar, latching onto the side of the gap and pulling. Wood splintered and drywall cracked. A foot long chunk of wall came clean off in her direction. Just a few more and she'd be free.

Jo kept her breathing as even as she could in the dust, her panic just barely under wraps. They were coming for her, they were right there. Still, she kept scanning the darkness beyond the hole of light, where the skinny tunnel continued down the length of the building. She couldn't see much through the dust and debris, but she didn't take her eyes off that darkness for fear of Holmes' dark, soulless eyes in the dark. Dean had been right there too, back in the sewers, and it hadn't mattered. She knew Sam was doing everything he could to get her out as fast as possible, but still Jo urged him on in her head. Their murderous ghost could be back at any minute.

Sam broke through after four minutes, pulling free the largest chunk of wall yet. It was enough, and strong arms pushed into the gap, grabbed either side of Jo, and hauled her out of the wall. She stumbled as she hit the floor of the hallway, but Sam had her, holding her upright as she found her legs.

Andy stood slightly behind them, hovering but clearly uncertain of his place in it. He held a sledgehammer loosely in one hand, and when a door opened down the hallway he turned to it and quickly and succinctly reassured the resident.

"Just fixing a leaking pipe, nothing to worry about. Go on back inside. Finish that latest episode of *Oprah*; it's a good one!"

The older man nodded, concern bleeding out into a blank calmness that was unnerving, before turning back into the apartment and shutting the door. Jo got the feeling the kid had been managing damage control like that for some time. It was the kind of thing, the obedient way the residents of the building just turned back to their homes – and thank god it was a weekday, with less folk at home – that Jo might have picked up on, were her mind not currently full-handed with trauma and relief. Still, amateur or not, Jo was a hunter, and her brain stored the information somewhere out of the way in the back,

where she knew she'd get to it later.

"Call Dean," Sam, instructed the kid as Andy turned back towards them after making sure the tenant had followed his command agreeably. Sam handed over the crowbar, which the kid added to his wall-dismantling collection even as he dug out a cell from his jeans' pocket. "Tell him we got her."

Sam looped one arm around Jo's waist, having to bend nearly double to do it, and started her towards the elevators. They left the gaping hole behind, unworried about the damage or the freak-out bound to occur once residents got a good look. Andy could handle it if they needed him to.

"I'm fine," Jo mumbled, brain still processing her freedom and the close-call. Maybe Dean had a point. Fear was healthy and all, but she never wanted to experience that much of it in a single go ever again.

"He's on his way down," Andy announced behind them as Sam reached the elevator and hit the up button. Jo had been stashed in the north wall on the second floor. Not that far from 2F, it turned out.

"I'm alright," she repeated, pulling away from Sam a little more as they stood there, waiting for the elevator. Her legs held up beneath her, and the woman visibly shook off the last of the panic and shock. "I'm good."

Sam backed off, but not so far that he couldn't be there again immediately. The elevator arrived with a cheerful ding no one was feeling, and they piled in.

-o-o-o-

Dean had made it through a single floor, hollering Jo's name, before Andy's text came in. He'd already dealt with two tenants, one of which, a young woman, had slammed her door shut immediately upon spotting a clearly-pissed-off man running down the hall with a friggin' sledgehammer in hand. The second, and older gentleman, had been visibly shaken but still hollered at him that he was calling the cops before shutting himself up tight in his apartment.

'Yeah, you do that, buddy,' Dean thought, not even bothering to pause as he yelled for Jo again. *'Pretty sure Teresa of 2F beat you to it.'*

He couldn't hear the sirens from the top floor, but he'd had no doubt that those cop cars had arrived by now. They would likely sweep the

building – twice over now that reports would be coming in of a crazed man with a sledgehammer – so they were on the clock in more ways than one.

Thankfully, as he fetched his phone from where it buzzed in his pocket, Sam and Andy had better luck than he did.

Dean ditched the sledgehammer in the stairwell before hurrying down the stairs. It would do no good to be caught by cops with it. At least this way he could fake some panicked story about seeing the hammer-wielding maniac and running for his life. Luckily, he was only a couple floors up from their home base, and didn't run into any cops on his race down to the apartment Jo had temporarily rented for the case.

By the time he burst back into the place, making sure to close and lock the door behind him, Jo had her game face on and was back in the hunt. And if she shuddered in his arms when he practically tackled her in a way-too-tight-to-be-healthy hug, neither of them said a word about it.

"I'm alright," she whispered against his chest, before clearing her throat and repeating the claim with more confidence. They pulled away, both stowing the awkward silence that followed. Jo dusted herself off, an actual cloud coming off her jeans and shirt, given the state of the walls she'd been stuck in, before planting her hands on her hips. "So what's the plan?"

The brothers were caught between surprise and relieved amusement. A hunter, through and through. Sam had no doubt his brother was right; Jo would be one hell of a badass at it someday.

"You sure you don't want to take a minute?" he asked, and everyone in the room knew he was talking longer than just a minute.

Jo leveled a glare his way that could have withered men twice his size (which was saying something). "I said I'm fine. Now tell me how we're gonna get this son of a bitch."

"I like her."

The brothers, in the middle of exchanging an entire conversation in a single look, both turned to Andy, who was still holding the sledgehammer and crowbar. His sheepish chuckled died out along with the dopey smiled he was aiming at Jo, who looked both affronted and proud, and then pissed off by the latter.

"Don't even think about it, Romeo. She'd eat you alive." Dean rolled his eyes (especially once Andy balked, then blushed red, then stammered that that wasn't what he'd meant, he didn't, he wasn't-uh…shutting up now) and turned back to the actual hunters in the group. "We need to get back down to the basement. Sewer. Whatever. We'll set a trap."

"What's the bait?" Jo asked without missing a beat. It was pretty obvious by the way Dean hesitated that there was only one real possibility.

"We'll…figure something out."

"You got a problem using what we already have?" she countered immediately, and Dean clenched his fists.

"Don't you think you've had enough for one day?" he practically barked back, but she hardly flinched. Harvelle women were made of some incredibly strong stuff. Even so, Dean could see through the brave face she was putting on. She didn't need to, but he knew that would never stop her. It hadn't stopped her in the face of death, slowly bleeding out in a hardware store.

And that was one thing he did *not* need to be thinking about that right now.

Jo, tapping her foot impatiently on the floor, re-rooted him in the present. "It's how we did it in your vision, isn't it? And it worked."

Sam turned to his brother, a bitchface already forming. "Vision, huh?"

The older Winchester groaned loudly, the sound almost coming out a growl. He scrubbed a hand through his hair harshly, both embarrassed and annoyed as he stared down #5 on the list of Sam bitchfaces. "You really wanna play the *'I told you so'* card, *now*?"

Sam's expectant look said yes, yes he did.

Before another word could be spoken, which most likely would have come from Dean as he tried to get them back on track, there was a heavy knock at the door. All four hunters froze, eying whatever crap kind of fake wood doors were made out of these days.

Andy raised his hands placating, warding off the others from making a move. "Don't worry, I got this."

He crossed over to the door before anyone could tell him otherwise, and opened it enough to slide his body against the frame. Whoever was on the other side wouldn't be able to see in much, but it meant the hunters couldn't see who was out there, either. "Officers! What a pleasant surprise."

All three hunters moved quickly and quietly away from line of sight of the door, backing up to the other side of the apartment where it would be harder for anyone, including the cops in the hall, to spot them. Luckily, the dining room table, currently laden with crowbars, sledgehammers, and *guns,* was also out of line-of-sight.

"What can I help you gentlemen with?" Andy's falsely cheerful voice was almost too much, and Dean might have smacked the kid, if he didn't know the psychic had other means of handling nosy cops.

"We got reports of a couple men in the building with sledgehammers. There's damage on the second floor, evidence of someone trying to take down a wall. You know anything about that or seen anything suspicious?"

Andy scratched at the stubble on his chin in thought, and Dean resisted the urge to throw something at the kid. Given the looks both Jo and Sam sent his way, he wasn't the only one. "Nah, can't say I have. Heard some commotion this morning, though. Something about a missing girl? This got anything to do with that?"

The cop shifted on the other side of the door, and it was a second voice that answered this time. "We're unsure at this time, though the woman has been found, safe. We're looking into it."

"Oh, well, that's great to hear! Glad she's alright. You fine gentlemen are doing an excellent job. You go finish your sweep, make sure the neighborhood's all good and safe. No need to worry about us."

"Of course, we can do that." There was a shuffling on the other side of the door that Dean could only imagine was the cops already turning away from the apartment. "Thanks for your time."

They left as quickly as they came, no more fuss, and Andy closed the door. He turned back into the apartment with a grin. Jo, hand still on her hip, immediately turned to Dean. It would have been impossible not to hear the way Andy's voice dropped a couple octaves on that last line and took on something not quite normal. Or the way the cops just moseyed on along their way without question.

"You gonna tell me he's psychic too?"

Dean looked like he didn't want to be having this conversation *at all*, but given that neither Sam nor Andy were backing him up, he just leveled the woman with a glare. "Yeah, he's got powers, alright? Can we get back to the murdering *ghost* in the walls?"

"How many of you are there?" Jo didn't even acknowledge his pissy words, looking between Sam and Andy. "You all have gifts, right? How- or why?"

She was too smart for her own good, but unlike his brother, Sam wasn't going to underestimate that. He knew what it was like to be treated with kid-gloves, and Jo didn't deserve it. "We don't really know. Azazel did something to us when we were kids."

"Azazel?" Jo scrunched her face up, brow furrowing. The name didn't ring any bells, but something about the way Sam said it…. She straightened as it clicked. "Wait, you mean the demon you've been hunting? The one that killed your mom?"

Her voice dropped on the last part, and Sam just nodded. She glanced at Dean, who shrugged a single, aggravated shoulder. Damnit, they had more pressing things to worry about right this second.

"We can hash this out later, alright?" he insisted irritably. "Right now, we need to take care of Holmes."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth when the walls and floor started shaking. The four of them scrambled for purchase, widening their stances or gripping onto counter tops or nearby chairs as the entire building trembled. It felt like an earthquake. Whatever it was, it didn't last long. Several pots and pans rattled off their shelves, some of their equipment rolled off the kitchen table and clattered on the ground, then it was over. As soon as the earth stopped moving, the four of them locked eyes and ran for the door.

There were cops congregated at the entrance when they got to the foyer of the building, taking the stairs in case the quake knocked out the power or wasn't done yet. There weren't too many officers, three or four squad cars' worth at the most. They were otherwise engaged trying to calm the residents that, like the hunters, had flooded downstairs as the earthquake subsided.

As they darted past out the front doors, they heard snippets of the conversation.

"Minor earthquake-"

"-say it was localized beneath the building-"

"Reports coming in that part of the sewer collapsed-"

Dean exchanged looks with Sam and Jo as they got out onto the street. There were more people gathered at the mouth of the back alley that led to their stolen cement truck and the entrance to Holmes' sewer of terror. A cloud of dust – the same color as the crap coating the walls and floor of the sewer tunnels – hung in the mouth of the alley, keeping people back like a natural barrier.

Clearly, their ghost was throwing a temper tantrum that his secret club house was no longer secret. They'd played their trump card too early, and now it looked like they were out of the game completely. God, Dean hated the pissed off ones.

"Great," he cussed, throwing out an arm. "That's just great."

He spun in an agitated circle. Sam waited it out, Andy glancing between him and Jo, before asking, "What do we do now?"

Jo chewed on her lip, never a good sign. "So… how hard *would* it be to salt n' burn bones encased in cement?"

-o-o-o-

"Okay, so we need a crane, jackhammers, and a *vat of acid*." Dean resisted the urge to rub his forehead. "Why does this sound like the plan of a Batman villain?"

"We're never going to be able to get that stuff unnoticed," Sam interjected, not wanting to rain on their brainstorming parade, but also trying to face facts. They were back in the apartment, and things were not looking up. "Even if we skip the phosphoric acid and trisodium phosphate-" no doubt the hardest components for them to get, at least in the quantities they would need to dissolve the concrete encasing Holmes' skeleton- "and just go for cracking the cement in two and burning what's inside. We'd still need the crane to lift it out of the ground and jackhammers aren't exactly *quiet*."

"So, what, we're calling it quits?" Jo's tone obviously said there was no way in Hell they were doing that. But as the brothers exchanged silent looks, they had to admit they didn't have a next step.

"Uh…" The three hunters turned to Andy as he raised his hand, like they were in friggin' kindergarten and had forgotten he was a member of the class. "I can do all that."

The three of them exchanged further looks, but Andy just smiled widely.

"Trust me, I totally got this."

-o-o-o-

The kid got the *city* in on it. They had cops cordoning off the Holy Cross Cemetery, just outside Philadelphia, where Holmes was buried. Excavators were called in on an emergency, must-happen-this-instant gig, and they brought with them the big guns. That included a crane and the archeological equivalent of CSIs on scene. Andy talked his socks off the entire night, wrapping anyone and everyone around his little delusional pinky. Sure, they'd all be hella confused the next morning when they realized they'd excavated H.H. Holmes' grave on the word of a kid who swore he had convincing evidence – so convincing that they all believed him – that America's first serial killer hadn't, in fact, been executed and the body they'd buried had been a fake, so they needed to check ASAP. What's more, they'd be even further confused when it occurred to each of them in turn that not a one of them had actually been present to see the body or perform a DNA test. They'd only have the word of a kid that confirmed it had, in fact, been Holmes' body and they were all good to go. But then, *all* of them would have the same confusing memory, so it had to be true.

Weird, but true.

It took the entire night and half of the next morning – with Dean running to the airport to pick up Ellen when he glanced at his phone finally and realize he had *twenty six* missed calls from the irate and worried-sick woman – but the five of them walked away from the cemetery having burned H.H. Holmes' bones with no one the wiser, reburied the two halves of cement that had survived the flames, and told everyone it was all good, they could pack it up and go home.

Hopefully, no one tried to unbury the no-longer-existent body in the future, or they would be in for one hell of a surprise (and a whole new level of conspiracy theories.)

-o-o-o-

"Handy to have around," Jo commented of Andy, around three in the

morning as she and Dean stood at the edge of the operation. The crew had set up flood lights, for Christ's sake, as they prepared to exhume the cement block via crane. Dean had never been part of a bigger circus in his life, and the sheer number of people involved and *literal* spotlights on them made all hunters present twitchy as all get-out.

"You're telling me," Dean harrumphed beside her.

She turned to him, and the hunter realized he'd left himself wide open for a conversation he didn't want to have. Damnit. Jo was too damn good at that and he'd walked right into it. "What aren't *you* telling *me*?"

"Jo-" he started, but with the look she leveled his way, he just sighed.

"You see the future, Sam see's people's deaths, and the kid can Jedi mind trick anyone?" Jo uncrossed her arms, trying to convey that she wasn't attacking him, here. But she deserved to know. "I'm betting there's a story there."

It took the older hunter a minute, but finally, he told her what they knew. What they were supposed to know in the current timeline, at least. "It's all connected to the yellow-eyed demon."

"Azazel."

"Yeah. He did something to Sammy- uh, to all of us."

"What?" Jo's expression was caught between sympathy and horror. Dean didn't exactly blame her.

"Jo, maybe-"

"You don't have to tell me," she said quickly, looking away, back at the excavation site as they lowered the newly freed block of cement to the ground. "But maybe I can help. I want to help, Dean."

"Don't think you can," he answered honestly. "But… I'll hit you up if that changes, alright?"

She smiled at him, the kind of sad look of comradery that only emotionally stunted people really understood. The kind that spoke volumes more than either of them would ever be capable of putting into words. They were bred of the same elk, Harvelles and Winchesters.

"Yeah, alright."

They headed into the mass of people gathered around Holmes' tomb, even as Andy started telling people to go take a coffee break, not to worry, they'd see to the rest of it.

-o-o-o-

"You're something else, Andy," Jo had said as they piled into one car at seven in the morning after having lowered the cement back into the grave and left behind a crew of soon-to-be confused city workers to finish up the re-burial. It was a tight fit, especially with Ellen sitting stony and silent in the front seat. The kid, oblivious to the tension, blushed a happy red at the compliment.

"I try," was all he said, practically preening in an innocent way that meant he totally got away with it. Anyone else, Jo probably would have decked 'em.

The trip back to the Roadhouse was tense and quiet. Not unlike the first time Dean had made the world's most awkward family road trip. He kind of wished he'd been able to keep Ellen out of it this time, not only for the awkwardness that was the near-eighteen hour trip, but for everyone's sanity. They ended up stopping halfway through the night, pulling into a motel just off the highway.

It was at Dean's insistence that he couldn't drive it all in one go and no one else was driving his baby, but in reality, he was pretty sure all five of them were about to lose it. They all needed a break to stretch their legs and their personal space. Even Andy had picked up on the quiet tension and sat, a fifth wheel awkwardly pressed against the passenger side window in the back, tapping his foot until someone glared at him hard enough that he stopped. For *eighteen* hours.

Ellen got herself and Jo a room from the small motel office without speaking so much as a word to anyone, including her daughter. No one argued with her, and Sam followed right after, getting them a room of their own (both Jo and the middle-aged woman behind the front desk raised eyebrows at the request for just two beds, no cot needed, but Dean's unblinking deadpan stare dared either of them to say a word about it. Jo walked away with two viciously raised eyebrows and a wicked smirk). They settled in their rooms respectively, barely a word spoken.

Or, at least, they settled on the surface. Sam and Andy were arguing who got which side, which was *adorable,* and Dean took his cue to

leave when both of them chucked their pillows at his head.

He found Jo standing outside her own room, ice bucket wrapped in both hands, leaning against the cinder block wall and looking for all the world like she was avoiding going back inside. Dean nodded his head towards the picnic table a couple rooms down, then meandered that way, hands in his pockets. Jo followed silently.

She set the ice bucket on the wooden surface, hopping up beside him. "Hey."

"Hey," he answered back with a weak grin. "Got a minute?"

"Like I'm just dying to go back to quality mother-daughter time. Didn't you know the silent treatment was my favorite?" she said dryly, chuckling with him when he shook his head. Yeah, he could imagine.

A not unpleasant silence stretched between them, and Dean finally sighed.

"Look…" The older Winchester hung his head and scrubbed at the back of his neck self-consciously. *Man up, Winchester.* Dean picked his head back up and turned to Jo. "Your mom is pissed, but she's gonna be more pissed at us tagging along than you hunting."

Jo frowned immediately, her first response of, "You let me handle my mom," quickly overrun by her second, "Wait, why? This was *my* choice."

His lack of response was probably telling, but Dean was having trouble forming the words. He knew what Jo's dad had meant to her. Knew she'd gotten years less with him than Dean had with his own dad. He wished he could switch their positions. He really, really wished he could. "Your dad and my dad, they hunted together."

"Yeah, I know. It's how my mom knew your dad."

"Yeah, well…" Dean swallowed past the lump in his throat. Jo deserved the truth, and he hoped hearing it from him this time would soften the blow. He didn't know whose sake he was hoping for more, though. "My dad was on the last hunt your dad went on…"

Jo quieted, easily picking up on what Dean wasn't saying in so many words. She looked away, struggling to swallow herself, now. Dean sat in silence, letting her work through whatever she needed to. If she needed to yell, to be pissed, to blame him, he'd take it. He'd taken it

before and he could take it now.

"Was it his fault?" she finally asked.

Dean struggled to answer. "I don't know."

"But you think it could have been." Jo was too damn smart and too good at reading people – at reading *him* – not to come to that conclusion easily enough. Dean didn't know what to say. "My mom must think so, or she wouldn't be angry about you guys hunting with me."

The older Winchester sighed, hooking his fingers together to keep from balling his hands into fists, or worse. He couldn't quite look at his companion, instead staring out at the empty road and the darkened fields beyond. "Dad wasn't exactly known for knowing when to quit. Or drawing safe lines in the sand, Jo."

She didn't respond right away. Dean still couldn't quite look her in the eye, especially as she stared straight ahead, unseeing. But he was pretty sure there was a sheen of water over those fierce brown beauties.

"But you're not like that," Jo finally said, voice soft. Understanding, in ways Dean didn't think he deserved. "Neither of you are."

When it became obvious that he didn't agree, she turned more towards him, her body language not unlike her mother: booking no room for argument. "Are you kidding me? You both came after me, tooth and nail, Dean. And you showed up in the first place! You easily could have died." She swallowed, glancing away to blink that water out of her eyes and angrily swipe a hand beneath one. "If it's true your dad got my dad killed…then you're nothing like your dad."

Dean looked away, stomach churning unpleasantly at memories he didn't want to remember, his chest both aching and warming. He wanted to tell the angel in there to back off, damnit. He wasn't worthy of that kind of praise. That kind of devotion or forgiveness. His chest burned all the warmer.

"What if I am, Jo?" he asked, fighting down the nausea and guilt. He resisted pushing against his sternum, poking at the angel inside that wouldn't let him be miserable. Didn't Cas remember that he got this woman – both women – killed?

Jo Harvelle pulled back at the scared admission, blinking at him as

her mind raced to follow what he was talking about. It didn't make sense right away, because she was right there, not dead, after a hunt where Dean and Sam had saved her life. She hesitated, realizing that what he was talking about might not have happened yet.

Psychic. That was…gonna take some time to get used to.

"Did you…" she swallowed past the nervousness that coiled in her stomach like curdled milk. "Have you- did you see…something?"

Dean paused for the wrong amount of time, but Jo couldn't really read why. "No, no, not like…that. But I can't be the reason-"

Jo's eyes narrowed as he cut himself off, clearly struggling to say what he needed to say. She grabbed his arm, forcing him to look back at her.

"No one makes choices for me, alright?" The fierceness in her voice almost made him laugh. It wasn't funny. It really wasn't. It friggin' hurt, is what it was, because he knew better than anyone that no one got to make their own choices in this life. No, apparently, Time made all the choices for you, the *bitch.* But Jo's eyes just narrowed further at whatever expression made it to his face. She looked pissed that he didn't believe her, wasn't listening to her. "I'm serious. I get myself killed, it's because of choices *I* made. I won't accept anything else. You got it?"

This time he did laugh, and it was honest-to-god laughter. Not humorless, not self-deprecating. She was straight up threatening him like he was somehow holding her back by hoarding all the blame to himself. Just like only Jo frigign' Harvelle could. Hell, that woman could out-stubborn Time itself, Dean had no doubt. God, he had missed her.

He smiled over at her, and if it was a watery smile, he ignored the crap out of it. "I got it."

She smiled right back and grabbed the ice bucket. "Now, you gonna leave me to face my mom all alone, or come partake in the scream fest?"

Dean winced immediately, the grimace the only answer she really needed. "No, you know, I think I'd rather live."

Jo snorted. "You're scared of my mom?"

"Yes. Absolutely, yes."

The younger Harvelle shook her head, but there was a smirk in her glare. She waited it out, and finally Dean sighed.

"You think I'll make it better or worse?"

Jo shrugged, hopping off the table. He was glad to see her recovering so well. Like nothing had even happened. That was his girl. She rounded back on him, ice bucket held against her torso with both hands, and smirked. "I think if she's busy yelling at you, she's not busy yelling at me."

"Oh gee, thanks." Dean rolled his eyes hard enough his head went with, but he climbed off the table all the same. It was one scream fest he was not looking forward to, but he supposed he'd weather it for the woman next to him.

Besides. He could probably drag Sam into the whole thing and hide behind his brother's gargantuan frame when the Harvelle ladies got to throwing things. Winchester stuck together, didn't they?

-o-o-o-

Chuck stared at the empty lazy boy, still sitting over by his window. He himself sat at his writing desk, decidedly not writing. Stephanie had called in sick that morning. Or, well, she'd called him and reported she wouldn't be making it to his house, but she expected to read that promised progress and more when she returned. No mention of sick, but Chuck deiced entertaining that idea was safer than thinking about the many ways he might have possibly bored her to death, whether with his mediocre writing or mundane babbling, so much so that the woman had needed a day away from him.

Of course, it was Friday, so really, if she'd just waited one more day for the weekend…

Chuck shook his head and reminded himself that he was supposed to be believing Stephanie was sick. And also coming back. Sometime. Soon. Like Monday.

He sighed, having grown weirdly used to having the mostly-silent company in his house or the sometimes hovering presence of someone encouraging him onwards in his work. Weird, really. He'd always been more of a lone wolf (okay, so wolf was hardly a fitting descriptor for him, but shut up, he was taking it). It figured he'd turn out to be a

true pack animal after all. Well, maybe a penguin. Penguins lived in groups, but were ultimately independent. And they mated for life, which meant enduring loneliness or isolation in the before and after, right? Yeah, sure, that sounded like it could be right. Chuck was probably a penguin.

(Admittedly, a more fitting pick than a wolf…)

He sighed. There was nothing for it. The scary woman would expect to have chapters to read when she returned, so he really ought to get on that.

Chuck glanced at the empty chair again and frowned with eyes that sometimes looked so much older than a mere thirty-something human. Eyes that grumpily forced their focus back to the laptop, yet kept right on frowning at the blinking cursor, awaiting words to fill the digital page as if by magic. Eyes that wondered if he should be looking a little further away than a computer screen.

God shook His head and opted not to. It was fine, most likely. Yes, it would be annoying if Hell spent the weekend undoing all the progress He'd been making, but, really, it was fine. It wasn't like he was planning on intervening, no matter what Hell was up to with his editorial assistant. He could start again on Persephone, need be.

They'd get there. They still had time. You know, so long as Time decided to keep playing nice.

-o-o-o-

On the other side of the country, a clandestine meeting was taking place between two of the world's less divine beings, while a third being of decidedly unknown divine status sat in a car like a child in timeout while the adults talked.

"Nice model. Little younger than your usual tastes." Tom smiled at his brethren, despite the fact that he could hardly stand her twisted, ugly face. Not like his was much better, of course. "Didn't realize you were busy playing jailbait while the rest of us worked."

Ruby's smile was all teeth. Coming from the prom queen wannabe she was currently riding, it was particularly bitchy. "Felt like branching out. Who's the tagalong?"

Tom looked over his shoulder at Persephone, sitting in the parked car a hundred feet away, her warded necklace glinting in the sunlight as

she glared at them from beneath blonde bangs like a sidelined bystander. He waved sarcastically at her before turning back to the conversation.

"An asset. But then, we were talking about you." Tom's return smile was feral. "Not even a hint, Rubes? Come on, what kind of secret mission does Lilith have you on?"

"The kind that will stay a secret." Ruby flexed her fingers, playing the nonchalant, bored teenager inspecting her perfectly pink manicure.

Tom just smirked. "You know I'll get it out of you eventually."

The other demon snorted. That was unlikely. Not even Alistair himself could get this mission out of her. Not when Lilith had entrusted her, and her alone, with its completion. But why not rub a little salt in that deliciously open wound?

"You can try," she sniggered, a sickly sweet smile on her borrowed face. "But your sister had a better chance at it."

The demon across from her hissed. Meg had always been a sore spot for him, likely because she was Azazel's favorite, and everyone knew it. Pathetic, Ruby thought, a demon craving praise. Demons should seek only their own approval, and follow others simply out of fear and survival. While Azazel certainly should be feared - he was the last of the Princes, after all – he'd spent more time searching for the key to Lucifer's prison than ruling over Hell. Which left the majority of the true power in Lilith's hands, much to Ruby's benefit.

No, she thought, eying the pathetic excuse of a demon in front of her. She had chosen the right King. Or, should she say Queen.

"I need a favor," Tom switched tactics, and Ruby just smiled lazily at the defeat. The cat who knew the canary wasn't even a challenge to begin with. "The witchy kind."

Even a smear against her pagan roots wasn't going to dampen her victory. Instead, she just picked at the underside of a nail, shrugging one shoulder, and asked, "What do you need?"

The demon produced a glass, top half shattered, jagged edge a reddish-brown with dried blood. "A tracking spell. A permanent one, not a one-time thing."

Ruby crossed the distance between them to pluck the glass out of his

hand. His look soured, but he didn't try to take it back. He was the one asking for the favor, after all.

"Well, there's certainly not much here to work with," she chided, if only to see the annoyance in his face, cleverly controlled as it was. "But I think I can whip something up."

"And what will it cost me?" The question was expectantly sneered and Ruby just grinned, all teeth again.

"How about a raincheck? We're on the same side here, after all, Tom."

The demon narrowed his eyes at her guile, but didn't argue. It wasn't like he had much of a choice, if he wanted this spell quick and dirty.

"Give me thirty minutes. I'll be back with your spell." She disappeared with a wink, and he crossed his arms and waited. Exactly thirty-one minutes later, he had his spell in the form of a hex bag and what was left of the cocktail glass, most of the blood gone from the rim. "Light the bag on fire then toss it on a map. Make it a big one, because once it's cast, the spell can't be re-cast. The fire will burn wherever your man is."

"I never said it was a man."

"Please. We all know Azazel has you on the Winchester boy. Does little Sammy keep giving you the slip?"

The only outward sign of his annoyance was a twitching vein near his jaw. "This will last? Fire hardly sounds permanent."

She shrugged again. "Permanent isn't easy, and you didn't give me much to work with. It'll burn as long as his soul does. I recommend putting the map somewhere it won't get wet."

Her helpful smile was anything but. Still, he had what he'd come for. "You have fun playing with your pom poms and pimples, now."

"Always."

Neither demon departed for a moment, both still sizing the other up, waiting to see who would leave first. Tom eventually did, realizing Ruby would wait him out far longer than he had the patience for. She watched him head back to the car with his mysterious blonde and take off, headed East. Once he was gone – and Ruby took every precaution to make sure he was actually gone – she left herself, heading back to

Windom, Minnesota and her mission.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: …how many people are going to google which Supernatural character lives in Windom, how many already know, and how many are gonna leave it as a surprise? XD

(I did not know, btw. Totally had to google the town name. I thought it was in Missouri XD Supernatural Guru I am not, but beastmaster am I when Google is at my fingertips.)

(I'm so excited guys. So many things are happening. So, so, so many.)

Fun Fact #412: Holmes' body actually was exhumed on the claim that America's first serial killer had not been executed and that it wasn't his body that had been buried. The body was dug up in 2017, examined, proved to be Holmes', and re-buried. I took a little inspiration for that here ;P I might have totally ignored that the cement never fully set, so it wasn't a block they dug him out of but more like a pit of sludge . But jackhammers are more fun.

Up Next: Timey Wimey is back to being a wibbly wobbly bitch that's taking the boys for a wild handcuffs-and-jumpsuits kind of ride in Baltimore as we deal with dirty cops, missing drug dealers, and a death omen that's not very good at her job.

Chapter 69: Season 2: Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Heeeeeey guys, it's that time again. Time for the reminder (plea) that my muse lives via a straight-to-vein IV directly fed by your comments and reviews. And my muse is getting dehydrated, dear, beautiful audience. It is tough to see our viewership numbers continue to climb while reviews dwindle with every post. Worse yet, I am well aware that a two-week posting schedule equals an automatic drop in reviewership. And it is because of that that I need to whine for a minute, because that suuuuucks. When I have to delay posting it is because I am not writing up to par; I am discouraged, dealing with a bout of depression, in a rut, or, in this instance, genuinely recovering from illness and injury that makes writing difficult. None of those things do better from a drop in people willing to comment while I continue to post as reliably and often as I can. Now, I do take deeeeep breaths and remind myself don't get bitter, don't get bitter, don'tgetbitterSilence, but I'm also not good at listening to myself, like, ever.

So guys, please. I need you all to step up and remember that I do this for free, and all I ask in return is that you let me know, on occasion, that you are out there reading it. No more words needed than "like button pushed", "still here", "👍", "👄". Whatever you want to convey that you are out there.

(To the ten-to-fifteen people who let me know every chapter that you are out there, you are my mother-friggin-heroes, the reason this story is still on-going, and when I get bitter, I go read all your awesome, wonderful, beautiful words again.)

(And to all the readers who left a comment when they first joined the story, you my heroes too :)

Chapter Warnings: Andy, Dean, and Sam are playing a game of who can be the bigger brat, the boys get to be PIs on a murder investigation, memory is a bitch, and, oh, yeah, Dean's waking up in places he doesn't want to be, covered in blood.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Brief depictions of gore in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 36

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Personally, Dean had never bothered contemplating what thirteen dwarves with pickaxes trying to bang out AC/DC's '*Back in Black*' in the cavernous amphitheater of his skull might sound like. Partly because he already knew; having racked up eleven concussions in his life, Dean had ample experience with skull-drilling head dwarves.

Apparently, he could now bump that count up to lucky number twelve.

Ever the hunter (and therefore dismally used to waking up in unknown and less than ideal situations), Dean started categorically observing his surroundings while still feigning unconsciousness. Hard surface beneath him, uncomfortable but not enough to be cement or even floor. Bad mattress, then, or maybe a cot. It was quiet, but there was an echo to the silence that suggested a small space, walls probably concrete or brick, not much around to muffle even the lack of sound. There were distant sounds of life – movement, the scrape of a chair, the murmur of a conversation – but they were far off and muffled, likely by a stretch of space and at least one closed door.

Dean figured he was in a jail cell even before he opened his eyes.

"Mr. Warren."

The hunter groaned as he rolled over on the thin cot. The room was bright and yellow and godawful. Who painted cinder block that color? Whoever they were, they needed to be murdered.

It took a minute, but Dean eventually got the room to stop spinning enough to squint at the woman leaning casually against the bars of his little cell. She was middle aged, but wore it well: trim pant suit that meant business, blonde hair down around her shoulders (so not all business, then), and eyes that were trying to be cold but probably cared too much about humanity as a whole to really manage it. Kind of a cutie, if older women were Dean's thing.

She looked vaguely familiar, but the hunter couldn't place her.

"Kris Warren?" she asked in that tone that called bullshit faster than a bull could, in fact, shit. The cop (detective, given the pant suit) was holding up a small card, feigning dramatic interest in it. "That is your name, isn't it? Says so right here, on your impressively fake driver's license."

Shit. They'd probably already ran his prints. Which… was possibly, incredibly, devastatingly, oh-shit-how-do-I-get-myself-out-of-this-one problematic, depending entirely on what year it was. Double shit… what year *was* it? Dean raised the heel of his hand to his throbbing head, applying pressure. Like dwarves squished easily. Ha.

"We ran your prints through AFIS. No name popped up."

Oh, thank God. Alright, so it was 2006, his concussion wasn't *that* bad, and he hadn't lost his marbles completely. Just half his functioning brain power. That was fine. Dean had worked with less.

"More than a dozen possible hits, though. Looks like you certainly get around, Mr. Warren. Breaking and entering, grave desecration, *kidnapping*. And those are just the ones we've been able to link."

He was never time-traveling again. Mental note: tell Cas, never again. The angel could have warned him that dealing with two sets of memories, ten years of time difference, and never knowing *when* the hell he was when he woke up from unexpected unconsciousness was going to be a veritable headache.

Literally.

Dean stilled when something foreign and encrusted flaked off his forehead beneath the pressure of his palm. Confusion knotted in his stomach, but it was kinda staring to feel more like dread. The hunter pulled away, staring with growing horror at his hand. Both hands. And his clothes. T-shirt, pull over, jacket, pants, boots. All of it.

He was *covered* in dried blood.

"What the hell..."

"Well, whatever your name is." The woman – detective badge now clear on her waistline – straightened upright and looked at him like the worst of the worst criminals she'd ever put behind those bars. Dean was too busy having a panic attack over who the hell he'd apparently exsanguinated to really notice. "You're being detained for

the suspected murder of Karen and Anthony Giles. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you-"

Dean slammed his eyes shut so he could focus purely on breathing. Had he said thirteen dwarves? Make it thirty. Oh, yeah, and one last thing. Who the *fuck* were the Giles?

-o-o-o-

-12 Hours Earlier-

"Anthony Giles."

Sam looked up from his breakfast of coffee and a plain bagel, a pathetically thin layer of cream cheese atop. Dean was holding up a newspaper, finger on the article in question. The headline read '*Man's Throat Slit Without a Trace'* and Sam squinted at it.

"Who's Anthony Giles?"

Both brothers looked up as Andy plunked down between them, holding a coffee in both hands with the kind of gleeful expression only caffeine addicts and hypothermia victims got with a cup of hot jo between their fingers.

"Did you pay for that?"

Andy matched Sam's suspicious squint with one of his own. "What is the point of super powers if you don't use them?"

"Pretty sure super powers are meant to be used for good, *hero*," Dean quipped, resisting the urge to quote Uncle Ben. Andy, while an excellent student of all sci-fi nerdage, was woefully lacking in his comic book education. Although, even in 2006 there'd been enough damn Spiderman movies for the kid to get that one. However, it wasn't like any one of the men sitting at that table had handled great power or great responsibility all that well.

"Oh, right. Should I just go back and pay for it with my fraudulent credit card, then?" Andy's smile was of the shit-eating variety, and Dean harrumphed at the absolute *pissy* look on Sam's face.

Andy 1, Sam 0. Dean was seriously enjoying the fresh blood in this game.

The older hunter reached over and grabbed Andy's coffee, claiming it

as his own with a long, slurping sip. The kid looked scandalized. "Next time, get us all one."

Sam's bitchface reached new levels. Maybe even beyond *Ultimate*.

Make that Andy 1, Sam 0, Dean 1.

Their resident super hero grumbled and got up from the table to go place himself at the back of the line once more.

Andy 1, Sam 0, Dean 2. He could practically hear the ding of the scoreboard in his head. Dean grinned over the rim of the cup. Sam just shook his head and nodded at the paper lying on the table.

"Who's Anthony Giles?"

The older Winchester resisted calling him a sore loser. They did have a job to do, after all. So Dean spread the newspaper out. "Baltimore lawyer. Working late in his office, throat slit, almost to the bone. No DNA, no prints. Room was completely clean. Security cameras caught zilch."

"So, invisible killer." Sam munched on his bagel. "Or someone tampered with the tapes. Still, could be a case. Does it sound familiar?"

"I think so." Even with a picture of the vic plastered across the page, Dean wasn't sure. Visual memory was generally stronger, but in this case, it wasn't doing him a lotta good. Not that he'd really remember a dead guy he only saw a picture of in the newspaper or maybe as a body on a slab in some morgue. Dean knew they'd been in and out of Baltimore for hunts at least three times that he could remember. Not that he could necessarily pair those visits up with individual hunts. Story of his life for the last year.

So he just shrugged, folding the paper in half and tossing it back on the table. "And if it turns out it isn't, it still sounds like our sort of thing."

"How do you not remember details like a dude with his throat slit practically in half?" Andy was back in his chair, new coffee in hand. Both Dean and Sam looked from him to the line and wondered how the hell he'd overheard them from there. The kid just sipped at his drink, keeping his body tellingly turned away from Dean and protectively hunched around the cup. "That doesn't happen every day."

Both hunters snorted. When Andy blinked at them, clearly missing the joke, Dean explained, "It does in our world, kid. There's been so many cases in the last thirty years- Hell, this one doesn't even make the top one hundred of weird shit I've seen. Probably doesn't make Sam's top fifty."

But it got the Timey Sense just barely tingling, and that was good enough.

Andy was making a face again, the one he made anytime he started thinking too hard on recent life choices and where exactly they were leading him, but didn't say anything. Sam went back to his breakfast and Dean started working out the quickest route to Baltimore.

After he stole the other half of Sam's bagel, of course. And made Andy go get him more cream cheese.

Andy 1, Sam 0, Dean 4.

-o-o-o-

When they got to Baltimore in the late afternoon, their first move was to check into a motel. It was item number nine on the list of *John Winchester's Rules for Hunting*. He hadn't actually numbered them, or kept them in any sort of order, but having a safe place to crash or hide out after a hunt was pretty high up on that list. There wasn't always time, of course, but when there was, the boys always dropped some gear and a med kit in a warded room, ready for them to return bloody if necessary.

Then they headed out. With Anthony Giles' office locked up tight and off-limits as a still-active crime scene, they'd have to wait until nightfall to check it out. So the Winchesters decided to interview the wife of their dead guy, to see if her husband had noticed anything out of the ordinary the past couple days. Talking about it on the way to her address, which Sam got off the hacked police report, the three agreed to go in as insurance agents. Well, Sam and Dean talked it out while Andy shot out suggestions, but ultimately it was the brothers who settled on insurance folk. It was an easy way to ask a lot of awkward questions about a loved one's death without setting off too many alarm bells. It was a good brainstorming session for Andy to start learning the ins and outs of hunting, though.

Not that he had to hunt, if he didn't want to. Which was what Sam kept telling him, despite the fact the kid continued to tag along. Dean had him pegged pretty well from the start. And not because he had a

lack of self-preservation, or an abundance of self-loathing or anger, or a comfort with death and isolation, or any of the dozens of other issues that usually formed a soon-to-be-hunter. Nope. Andy was just too damn curious not to get answers, and too laid back to get himself out while he could. Terrible combo, really, but at least the Winchesters would be there to make sure a cat was the only collateral of his curiosity.

Of course, they'd had to stop and get Andy a cheap, quick suit to play the part. He looked… just wrong in it. Not that the kid couldn't clean up. It just really wasn't him. Lucky for them, he looked significantly younger than Sam, despite their matched age, so he got to be the rookie agent intern, tagging along for some experience. Fitting, Dean said, since he was the rookie.

"Come on, when do I get to play a cool role?" Andy picked at the slightly wrinkled, definitely baggy suit.

"When you're cool."

Andy 1, Sam 0, Dean 5.

They knocked on Karen Gile's front door, the three of them standing on the small porch like a gaggle of monkey suited insurance agents. Fun times. Dean was all ready with the pitch when the door opened, revealing a petite brunette with square framed glasses and red-rimmed eyes.

The wave of déjà vu all but stole his breath away. It was so damn strong it came with figgin' flashbacks this time. The hunter braced a hand against the porch wall as he lilted to the side. He had knelt beside this woman's corpse. Stared into her lifeless eyes. There was blood everywhere. Her throat was slashed, almost to the bone. Dean held her hand – no, not he her hand, her wrist. She was still warm. There were dual bands of ugly bruises layered on her skin, like shadows of restraints.

"Um, are you- is he alright?"

Karen Giles was their next victim.

Dean blinked as the images and accompanying wave of nausea passed, leaving him dizzy and propped up against the Giles' house, the widowed owner of which was standing there staring at him with something between concern and wariness. He forced a thin smile.

"Fine," Dean ground out with a nod of his head, forcing his spine to straighten. Sam and Andy were staring at him with equal parts worry and *what-the-hell-dude*. "Just heart burn. Must have been something I ate."

Mrs. Giles looked a little unsure of the three men standing on her porch. Her eyes were red and puffy. There was a tissue clenched in her hand. Right. She had just lost her husband, after all. Sam cleared his throat and offered a condoling smile.

"Karen Giles?" he asked. When she nodded hesitantly, he continued, "My name is Sam Frehley, these are my colleagues, Dean Simmons and Andy Criss. We're with the insur-"

Dean's hand shot out to grip Sam's bicep, interrupting him as he blurted out, "We're PI's."

Sam's eyebrows went up into his hairline, his head whipping to the side like a bad car crash victim to shoot his brother a look. Of course, pro that he was, the younger hunter covered it quickly, with more of a grimace than a smile, but whatever. Karen was busy frowning at the older Winchester anyhow.

"PI's?"

"Yeah," Dean continued, releasing Sam's arm. "My partner and I were working with your husband."

Karen's frown didn't lighten, and she glanced between the two brothers before settling on Andy. "And him?"

The kid didn't miss a beat, smiling. "Intern."

"Tony doesn't use PI's," she responded after another beat, eyes going back to the Winchesters. She seemed to realize what she'd said and bit her bottom lip as it trembled. Karen sniffed, looking off to the side as she tried to staunch the tears. She wiped briefly at her nose with the tissue. "Didn't. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Sam offered a much more believable smile, sympathetic as it was. "We know this can't be easy on you. We just… we need to speak with you, if you have a moment."

"I don't understand." Karen shook her head. "My husband worked with the police when he needed to. Why would he hire PIs?"

"We can't say any more right now," Dean explained, lowering his voice as though sharing a secret. He knew the other two would follow his lead, Karen falling hook line and sinker as realization lit her face.

"Oh god." Her skin paled and she brought a hand up to cover her mouth in horror. "Do you think- Oh god, that's why he was-"

"We can't say, ma'am," Sam picked up their new roles easily enough. "Can we talk inside?"

"Yes, yes, of course." The grieving woman stepped back, and the three men passed into the house. She led them to a spacious, comfortable living room, with two designer couches separated by a sleek coffee table. She sat primly on one, dabbing at her nose again, as the boys settled opposite her. "Um…what- what case were you working on with Tony?"

"Mrs. Giles, I wonder if I could get a glass of water before we start?" Sam's smile was apologetic.

"Oh, uh, yes, of- of course." The poor woman stood, hesitated for a moment, and then left the room, purportedly headed for the kitchen.

Sam was on his brother the minute she was out of hearing range, Andy turning similarly to Dean from his other side, so he was literally surrounded.

"She's the next victim," Dean said in answer, rather than waiting for them to voice questions he knew they would. "We need a reason to stay and keep her safe this time."

"And as PI's we can express concern for her safety; whoever went after her husband is coming for her next." Sam was ever the quick one. "So, vengeful spirit?"

"I think so." Dean rubbed at his chin and jaw, but something about that wasn't quite sitting right. If only he could figure out what. He caught Andy staring at him from his peripheral and raised an eyebrow when the kid didn't follow up with a quip about his spotty memory.

Andy just shrugged. "Intern, remember? I'm just along for the ride."

New scoreboard count: Andy 2, Sam 0, Dean 5. Sam really needed to get a move on. It was like he didn't know how to play this game.

"What do you remember?" Sam interrupted before they could get side

tracked, aloud or in Dean's mind. They didn't have a lot of time here; getting a glass of water only took so long.

"Not much. Just her, with a slashed throat. It was night. I think it was in a bedroom." Dean shook his head, the flashes clear, but everything surrounding them fuzzy as hell. Whoever designed human memory was going to get a strongly worded letter from him when this was all over. "Don't know why I was back here, but I was."

"Okay, and you're sure she's next?" Sam meant was he sure she wasn't victim number three, four, five, or etc. Which no, he wasn't sure. All he knew was Karen was going to die, and they had better stop it. Sam just held up his hands when he voiced as much.

"There was something else. Marks on her wrists-"

Dean cut himself off as Mrs. Giles returned from the kitchen, three glasses of water balanced on a wooden serving tray. Sam got up to help, taking the load to place it on the coffee table in front of them. He took a sip from one mostly for show.

"Did your husband ever share any of his cases with you?" Andy was the first to break the silence, and Dean was torn between *way-to-go-rookie!* and *what-the-hell-happened-to-just-along-for-the-ride?* "He was a criminal defense lawyer, right?"

"Yes." Karen's smile was watery. "He was good at it, too. Liked helping people."

Yeah, Dean seriously doubted that. Something told him Tony Giles hadn't been a good person in life. He didn't know if that was future recall or just intuition (vengeful spirits didn't usually kill innocent people, after all), but this poor lady was either a fantastic actor a total dupe.

"Had any of his recent cases been bothering him?" Sam asked, and Karen blinked owlishly before shaking her head. "Was he acting weird, or strange?"

"Strange?"

"Yeah, strange," Dean jumped in. "Did he feel like someone was following him, did he keep seeing someone? Experience cold spots or visions? You know, Karen. Weird."

Sam cleared his throat, clearly thinking they were pushing too hard,

but the widow just shook her head, confused. "Anything at all, no matter how insignificant it may seem, ma'am."

"He…had- had a nightmare the day before he died. He said he woke up in the middle of the night and there was a woman standing at the foot of the bed. He blinked and she was gone." She stared at the three men, avidly listening to her babble on about a meaningless dream, and suspicion started to overtake her grief. "It was just a nightmare."

"What did she look like?" Andy looked a little too eager, but honestly, Dean had been about to ask the same thing, so it wasn't like he could exactly fault the kid.

"What the hell difference does it make what she looked like?"

The kid's mouth clacked shut and he looked properly chastised, turning to the brothers with a *'what do I say now'* look. Dean cleared his throat, preparing to cover for their intern, but realized he didn't exactly have a reason for why nightmare-lady's description should matter if she was just a dream and not a blood thirsty ghost likely coming for this woman next.

Luckily, Sam had their backs.

"Stress sometimes shows itself in unpredictable ways," the pre-law student picked up their slack with another sympathetic smile. "Our, um, our brains don't really ever shut off, Mrs. Giles. Sometimes they keep working while we sleep, and that can influence your dreams. This woman might be involved in the case that got your husband killed."

Hot damn, Dean could always count on his genius kid brother.

….Damn it, Sam probably deserved a point for that, huh? Andy 2, Sam 1, Dean 5. He was still losing, so it was fine.

Karen's mouth moved wordlessly for a moment before she had to stop and breathe through the fresh wave of tears at the reminder of her husband's demise. "R-Right. Of course. That-That makes perfect sense." She let out a sharp breath, sniffling back the emotion clogging her throat. "He said she was pale and had… uh, dark red eyes. I- I don't know how that can possibly help. Tony didn't say he knew her, or anything."

"No, that's very helpful." Sam offered another smile, and Karen smiled weakly back. He glanced over at Dean. "We, uh, we need to go check

your husband's office, see if he left anything behind on the case we're working, but-"

"What case was it?" Karen interrupted, lowering her handful of tissue. "Maybe I can help."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am, but it's too dangerous." Dean leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees, hands loosely clasped. It was the standard Fed look he'd learned early. It almost always did the job. "If whoever went after your husband suspects you know anything…"

Karen's watery eyes widened, and her breath stuttered in sudden fear. "Oh god."

Sam drew a Kleenex from the box sitting on the coffee table and offered it to her. "Did Tony ever share case information with you?"

"No," she insisted, wiping at her eyes with the fresh tissue, this time out of agitation and anxiety. "Nothing recently. Nothing like this, that could have gotten him-"

She broke off again to fend off the next round of reserved tears.

The three hunters shared a look, and Dean cleared his throat. "If it's alright with you, Karen, I'd like to stay. My partner and the intern can check your husband's office."

Andy pulled a *'come on, man'* face. Almost a bitchface, Dean thought. Not enough to change the score. He'd have to work harder.

Karen wasn't really all there enough to notice. "I-It's a crime scene."

Dean resisted the urge to sigh. Could this woman just cooperate and let them save her life already?

"We'll speak to the police," Sam said with a weaker smile. "We've done this before, Mrs. Giles."

"Of course. I- I have a spare key I can get you." She got up numbly before either of them could tell her that wasn't necessary. Dean wondered if she'd even heard his request to stay. As she left the room, he looked back at his brother and Andy, barely managing not to roll his eyes. She was grieving and in shock, after all.

"We'll check out Giles' office for any clues." Sam glanced at his watch, but he could tell by the diminishing light outside that they'd be good

to go by the time they drove over there. "You're good here?"

"Assuming she's cool with me stickin' around to make sure she stays not-dead?" Dean's growl earned him a reprimanding look from his brother, which he didn't pay any attention to. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Let me know what you find."

"Did the description she give spark anything?" Sam asked, voice lowering.

Dean shook his head. It sounded like every description of a ghost ever. Super helpful. He got yet another one of those disappointed-soccer-mom looks when he voiced the thought aloud.

Sam and Andy stood from the couch as Karen came back in, working a little silver key off her keyring. She held it out to them, and Sam accepted it with a smile and appreciation for all her help.

"If- if you don't mind…" Karen trailed off as she released the key, arm falling limply back to her side. She sniffed again, wiping at her nose with the back of her hand, barely keeping it together. "There's a photo on Tony's desk. It's of us, in Paris." She let out a little self-deprecating laugh, and even Dean felt for this woman. "I…it's silly, but, I can't stop thinking about it..."

"We'll grab it for you." Sam's smile was entirely understanding. He placed a comforting hand on the widow's shoulder, which seemed to help.

After a watery smile, Karen broke away to lead them to the front door. Dean lagged behind the group, wondering whether or not the widow would ask him to leave. In which case, he'd have to camp out somewhere nearby where he could keep an eye on her and the house.

Lucky for him, Karen saw Andy and Sam out, and then shut and locked the door behind them, Dean still standing by her side. She let out a shaky breath.

"So what now?"

Dean smiled, but it felt more like a grimace. "Now we wait, and make sure no one comes after you."

The words were supposed to be comforting. Given the way Karen's throat moved as she tried several times to swallow, they sort of missed the mark.

-o-o-o-

"So what are we looking for?" Andy shone his flashlight around the neatly organized office. Sam slipped the key Karen had given them into his pocket, still marveling at actually getting into a place the legal way (sort of, they were still breaking the law by entering what was considered an active crime-scene). He glanced around the office quickly, eyes pausing on the puddle of dried blood to their left.

"Anything weird or out of place," he answered, still staring at the reddish-brown stain where Anthony Giles must have died.

The sound of paper crinkling came from his right, where Andy was pulling something off the top of a printer. He held the page up. "Weird like this?"

Sam got his own flashlight on and pointed it at the paper. He squinted at the eleven letters repeated, over and over again, no spaces. It filled the whole page. Sam frowned. "Dana Shulps?"

Andy turned the piece of paper back to look at it again, then nodded towards the printer. There were a dozen more pages sitting in the printout trey, and a couple more on the floor where they had fallen. "It's all over the place."

"A name?" Sam hazarded, taking the paper from Andy as he retrained his flashlight around the office, looking for other things out of place.

"Maybe someone involved in one of Tony's cases?"

Sam shrugged. "Or our pale, red-eyed, mystery girl. Maybe both."

The printer sat atop a filing cabinet that Andy now started digging through. He pulled out the first drawer and groaned at the endless rows of folders. "We're gonna have to check all of this, aren't we?"

Sam huffed something both sympathetic and disparaging, because he was definitely part of that 'we'. He headed for the desk and computer there. "Welcome to the job. We can check digital files first, they'll be faster."

They got to work, quickly discovering that the printer wasn't the only thing spitting out Dana Shulps' name. It was everywhere; written on the glass surface of the desk, on the windows, and lines and lines of it on every open program on Tony's desktop. Despite more than an hour of searching, though, neither Sam nor Andy found any mention of a

Dana Shulps.

Andy closed the last filing cabinet with an annoyed noise. "Nothing. There wasn't a Shulps of any kind in there!"

"And no Dana Shulps has ever lived or died in Baltimore in the last fifty years." Sam sighed, equally frustrated. But he switched gears, getting back to cracking the password for Anthony Giles personal files. Maybe there'd be something in his notes.

"Awesome." Andy collapsed in the chair in front of the desk, watching Sam type away. He drilled his fingertips along his knees and thighs absently until Sam finally looked up, pausing his typing, eyebrow raised. "Sorry. Kinda bored."

Sam made a noise in the back of his throat. He leaned back in the chair in order to dig into his front pocket. He pulled out the Impala's keys and tossed them to Andy. "Here. I need at least another thirty minutes to crack Giles' password, and probably a couple hours after that to go through whatever's there. Why don't you go join Dean?"

Andy caught the keys with wide eyes. "Drive the Impala? You want me to *drive* the *Impala*?" He held the keys up like they were a ticking time bomb about to go off. "You could just save time and tell Dean to murderize me."

The younger Winchester huffed something close to a laugh. Yeah, he knew that panic well enough. "It'll be fine. Just don't ding her."

Andy kept staring, keys in hand, hand still raised. "Yeah, no, you know what, I'm good. I'll just wait here."

He set the keys back on the desk. Sam rolled his eyes, leaning forward to push the jumble of metal back towards Andy. "Go. You're not going to do anything here but distract me."

"Ouch, dude. I can be useful!" When silence followed that statement, Sam staring blankly at him and Andy twiddling his thumbs with nothing else to do, the kid finally sighed and grabbed the keys. He climbed out of the chair, walking towards the door more like a man on death row than a kid just given his big brother's car. "Fantastic. I'll work on my obituary on the way over. Re-write the will while I'm at it."

"Dean'll really will murder you if he finds out you crashed his car because you were busy writing your will."

Andy said something particularly snippy in response, but it was lost in part to his grumble and also Sam's resumed clacking of keys. The kid opened the office door, but turned back to jab a finger at the Winchester. "You tell him this was your idea."

"I'll be sure to do that," Sam answered, ignoring Andy's continued mutter with a quirked lip. The kid shut the door behind him, and Sam dug out his cell to call Dean and tell him Andy was on his way. And, you know, maybe that he'd stolen the keys right out from under him.

Andy 2, Sam 2, tie game. He did too know how to play this game, thank you very much.

(Dean cheated; his score didn't count).

-o-o-o-

Dean excused himself to the Giles' backyard to take the call from Sam. He didn't want Karen overhearing anything he'd have to figure out how to explain later. Telling her he'd only be a moment (and definitely close enough to hear her call if she needed anything in response to her nervous look), he left the widow on the couch with a box of tissues. He closed the patio door behind him and answered his phone.

"Tell me you have something. I am running out of crap to talk about with this lady and I have already re-salted every surface I can get away with *twice.*"

He could practically hear Sam's eye roll. He could absolutely picture the bitchface. Number three. Definitely number three.

"Does the name Dana Shulps mean anything to you?"

Dean frowned sharply at the words, memory sparking, but the flame didn't take. He'd certainly heard the name before. He even remembered seeing it printed, over and over and over again. It had been… it had been at Giles' office. And Karen's bedroom. He'd been at both crime scenes.

There was…there was more to it than that, though.

Damnit, it was like an itch he couldn't friggin' scratch. An itch that was going to get Karen Giles' killed if he couldn't figure it out.

"Yeah, definitely. Can't remember who she is, though. Come on!" he

growled into the phone as he slammed the flat of his palm into one of the pillars that supported the upper balcony and patio roof. "There's something about this case, man. Something not right. I can't put my finger on it."

Usually his déjà vu would have kicked into memories by now. It didn't take all that much to trigger memory, really. Thinking straight on it never seemed to work, but once one or two pieces fell into place, it was often enough to bring the rest flooding back. He had a name, two victims, and a damn description of their monster. What was he missing?

"Well, I'm close to cracking this guy's password, but it'll be another half hour, at least."

Dean sighed, running his hand through his short hair in frustration. "Great." Sam huffed in response and the older Winchester did not appreciate the lack of support, here. "What am I supposed to do, just keep hanging out at this lady's house?"

"Yeah, Dean, until our ghost shows up and tries to kill her."

That was bitchface number six right there. Oh goody, they'd upgraded.

"We don't even know if that happens tonight, man." Dean leaned back to glance through the glass of the fancy French doors. Karen was still lying on the couch. The hunter turned back to the conversation and the rest of the yard.

On the other end of the line, Sam was lecturing. "This was your idea, Dean. It's not even a bad one. If your 'timey senses' say she's next then…well, she's probably next."

Dean couldn't help the pessimistic grumble. "I'm been wrong before, Sam."

The distant sound of typing in his ear stopped and he heard his brother sigh. "Even if you are, this is still our best play. We gotta try to keep her alive. Besides, there's nothing else we can do tonight. Andy's on his way back to you. He'll…keep you company."

Dean snorted. "Oh, yeah, *great*."

"Also your idea, Dean." And they were back to the lecturing. Balance restored to the universe. "Let him talk to Karen. Or better yet, he can tell her to get some sleep."

"Right, because the grieving widow of a murder victim is totally going to sleep well while she's got two unknown men in her house *claiming* to be there for her protection. Genius plan, there, Mr. Bates." Dean started pacing the paved portion of the Giles' backyard. He glanced through the window again. Karen was sitting upright on the couch now. Dean went back to his pacing.

There was a telling silence on the other end of the line, followed by the resuming of key clacking. "That's why I said have Andy do it."

What? Why? Like the kid was gonna be any more persuasive than- oh. *Oh.*

"…That's kinda creepy, Sam."

"Not like she'll know. Besides, it'll probably be the only good night of sleep she gets for a while." There was bitterness in Sam's voice that Dean could sort of understand and maybe, just maybe, it wormed its way into his big-brother heart.

"Yeah, alright. Maybe we'll try that." The older hunter ran a hand down his face. He could use a good night's sleep himself. Or, you know, the answer to the world's most annoying riddle currently staring him in the face. "Just…call when you get into Giles' computer. Meanwhile I get to go back to playing Suzy homemaker."

Sam's laugh was the well-rehearsed amusement of a snot-nosed little brother. "I'm sure you'll do great with your easy bake oven."

"Shaddup. I'm a *great* cook." And an absolutely terrible baker, but Sam didn't need to know that. Not like they'd grown up with an oven for the kid to ever see catch fire while going for cookies. Nope. They'd made it to full grown adulthood in a bunker before Sam got to see that sight.

Dean was about to lower the phone and end the call when a stray thought flitted through his brain and he suddenly frowned, suspicion in his very narrowed eyes. "Sam. How exactly is Andy getting back here?"

That silence was telling too.

-o-o-o-

Karen reached forward for another tissue, a quiet sob escaping her. She missed Tony. And there was just so *much* she had to deal with

now. How could it be right, that on top of the grief and misery and loneliness of losing your husband, you also had to deal with the paperwork, the finances, the people. Endless lines of people offering their well-intentioned but useless sympathy. And in front and behind them: the police, the insurers, the lawyers, the office realtors, the *cleaners*, the funeral planner, and now Tony's mystery PIs. God, Karen just wanted to be left alone, but she'd never been *lonelier*.

She hiccupped past another stifled sob and buried her face in the tissue. Ridiculous, really, to be annoyed with the people who came by to help. The PIs, the last in a long line of those visitors, were even offering protection. Because they thought whoever had killed Tony might come for her.

Which was just plain ridiculous. She'd never been involved in any of Tony's work, so really, why would anyone come after *her*?

Karen blew her nose and lowered the Kleenex, only to catch a glimpse of something moving across her periphery. She sat straight up, clutching the flimsy, damp material enough to tear it in two. Nothing moved.

"H-Hello?"

Practically shaking, Karen reached up and removed her glasses, pinching the bridge of her nose and muttering to herself to calm down. Dean was just outside. And no one was coming for her, hadn't she just covered that? With a sniff, she put her glasses back on and straightened, only to rear back in shock at a fragmented, nightmarish figure standing across the living room.

Karen shot off the couch, clutching at her sweater. "Dean!"

It had been a woman. A woman with red eyes, broken into multiple reflections on the glass pane doors that led to the dining room. She was gone, like she'd never been there at all, but, but she *had.* No, Karen thought, as she edged her way along the couch, using the edge pressing against her calves as a guide. No way she was taking her eyes off of those doors. Of course it was just…just a figment of her imagination, probably. It was just Tony's nightmare, getting to her. That was all.

A door creaked on squeaky hinges, and Karen stopped breathing. That wasn't Dean. The patio doors didn't squeak; only the garage door did. Tony had been meaning to oil it for ages, now.

Karen didn't wait to find out who the hell was coming in through the garage, because it sure wasn't Tony. She ran for it, screaming for the PI still outside as she bolted up the stairs. She'd make it to the bedroom, lock herself in and call the cops. That's what she'd do.

-o-o-o-

Dean had just hung up the phone, having made Sam listen as he listed half the ways he planned to *murder* Andy if his Baby had even so much as *one* scratch on her, when he heard Karen's scream. The hunter shoved his phone into his pocket and all but barreled through the doors back into the house, almost taking one clean off the wall. He stumbled into the living room, gun drawn, but Karen wasn't there.

"Karen!"

He heard her reply, muffled, from upstairs. She didn't sound like she was in immediate danger, but something had definitely sent her running. Dean spun, but didn't see anything. No ghost lady, no red eyes. Still, no reason to risk it.

The hunter took a second to swing by the fireplace, grabbing one of the iron rod pokers from its stand before he took off up the stairs.

"Karen?" He spun at the top landing, but only one door on the second floor was closed. The bedroom door. Dean had made his excuses earlier to sneak through the house, a container of salt on him, and he'd made sure to get the windows in that room extra good. Now he could hear Karen's panicked voice coming from behind it, speaking to the police from the snippet he caught.

The hallway lights flickered and Dean stopped, glancing up at them. Crap. He doubled timed it for the door, but it was locked. He used the butt of his gun to pound on it. The other side had gone terrifyingly quiet.

"Karen!"

When she screamed, he said screw it and kicked the damn thing open.

Their red-eyed mystery bitch was standing over Karen, who'd backed into the closet, cowering beneath the ghostly woman. The lights went out completely, the printer in the corner stopped spitting out pages mid print. Dean didn't need to look to know what was written on those papers.

"Hey, lady!" The woman turned, and even the wash of déjà vu at the sight of her, red-ringed eyes lined by bags, pale and yellow as any ghost, blood pouring from a slit throat, didn't stop Dean from swinging true. The iron rod cut her in half, and her split, wispy form disappeared with a flicker.

Karen collapsed to the floor, sobbing even as she tried to keep it together. Dean kept his guard up, knowing the ghost would be back, as he stepped closer to the distraught widow.

"Wh-What was that?"

"The thing that killed your husband."

Karen gasped for breath, her tears choking her ability to speak, but not think. "Wh-What?"

"Uh…yeah. We're…sort of like ghost hunting PIs." Dean cast her a quick, weak smile, but kept his eyes trained on the room. Throat Slasher was gonna be back. The salt at the windows hadn't stopped her, so either Dean had missed a way in (possible, it wasn't like he'd had proper time to ward the place while playing babysitter), or she'd already been inside. Or attached to Karen, somehow. Dean had seen weirder. "We gotta get out of here."

He hauled the shaken woman up by the elbow. Karen's feet held beneath her as he steadied her against the closet door. "You gonna make it?"

She locked eyes with him, and he was surprised by the ferocity in her gaze. This woman planned to live. He hadn't expected it from her, meek as she'd been downstairs. Guess grief and fear did two very different things for some people. "Get me the hell out of here."

"You got it, ma'am."

There was something still bothering Dean as he started for the hallway, hand leading her by the elbow. Something about the ghost. She hadn't been attacking Karen in those brief seconds before he'd cut her down. Just standing over her. And he'd definitely seen her before. He just couldn't remember the context….

….It had been night. They were in the woods. His life was on the line. Some sort of confrontation…

But not with the ghost.

Dean halted so abruptly that Karen bumped into his backside with a little yelp.

It hadn't been a vengeful spirit. *Wasn't* a vengeful spirit. It had been-

"Karen? Karen, are you here?"

-a Death Omen.

Whether from his memory or the foreign voice – the very *human* voice – now coming up the stairs towards them in the dark, Dean didn't actually know, but he remembered. He remembered getting arrested standing over Karen's dead body because he'd come back to ask if she'd known anything about a Dana Shulps. Only it wasn't a name; it was an anagram. An anagram that led to a building where a dirty cop killed his drug-dealing partner by slitting her throat and burying her in a wall.

Oh god.

"Pete?" Karen seemed surprised by the voice, but hope chased the confusion right off her face. She ripped herself free of Dean's grip and ran for the stairs before he could stop her. "Peter!"

"Karen, no, wait-"

Dean didn't make it in time to save Karen Giles, for the second time. Her surprised cry as a knife flashed in the dark was cut short by gargled, bubbly terror that made Dean's heart seize. Karen stumbled back, right into his arms as he ran to catch up. She was clutching her throat, blood pouring from between useless fingers, eyes wide as she stared at the cop – her friend, Tony's friend – coming up the last step.

Dean went down with the dying woman in his arms, her weight, however slight, still taking him to his knees. He scrambled to get his gun arm out from under her without dropping her to the floor, but Detective Peter Sheridan, bloodied knife in one hand, precinct-issued gun in the other, had the drop on him. He'd had the drop on him long before Karen Giles had gone running from the death omen that was there to warn her. Dean hadn't stood a chance. Neither of them had.

Karen was still alive in his arms, choking to death on her own blood, when the cop pistol-whipped him into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: It just hit me how many people I violently murder in this story… I'm, um…guys, I think I may be kind of evil. And apparently just realizing it now.

Tons of author notes this time. You'd think I didn't write the chapter well enough or something ;P

Concussion Count: I think Dean having only received eleven concussions in eleven seasons is probably ridiculously conservative (especially as I gave him an extra one back in Season 1…). Technically speaking, the current internet count of Dean being knocked unconscious is fifty by season 11. Some of them must have resulted in concussions, obviously not all of them or that poor boy would in vegetable coma land. So I wanted to balance a conservative number with how-are-their-brains-not-mushed-potatoes-by-now? Plus, I figure if it's too conservative for you, we'll just say those are the eleven concussions Dean actually remembers XD

Dean's Memory: Keeping Dean's memory of events realistic without it just becoming "convenient" that he does or doesn't remember things has been kinda tricky. Mostly I use my own faulty memory of episodes before I re-watch them as a guide to what is and isn't plausible when it comes to memory. Hopefully it's working out alright and Dean not remembering some of these key moments isn't coming across as contrived. If it's starting to become repetitive though, please drop a line and let me know. I'll balance it out by starting to emphasize the things he does remember instead of what he doesn't.

Minutiae: I ended up re-watching this episode for a multitude of reasons (the major one being I really didn't remember much about it ^_^') But it's the first I've re-watched since 2.03 (meaning I skipped several or only watched them in pieces or read transcripts). So while I was watching this one, probably about fifteen minutes in, I suddenly sat straight up and went "When the hell did Sam BREAK HIS ARM!?" and was like, shit shit shit, I haven't been writing Sam with a broken arm!

Soooooo, Sam broke his hand in a fight with a zombie in 2.04, when that dude brings his girlfriend back from the dead and they notice because they go to visit Mary Winchester's grave after John's death? It was apparently to cover Jared breaking his hand in real life. Uh… so…. I'm gonna say that they didn't go visit their mom's grave this time around, didn't get on a case about zombies,

and so no broken hand! There we go, solved! ^.^'

Now there's just an unchecked zombie murderer running around out there….

Yup, no, I'm totally comfortable with that XD

Review: "Like Button Pushed" please! (or any variation of)

Chapter 70: Season 2: Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I know we're a day later than usual getting this up; apologies! I had a very busy Saturday and pretty rough Sunday, so there wasn't really time (or energy) to edit and get this chapter out. But that's apparently what Mondays are for!

Reviews/Castiel: So, last chapter had exactly *one* line about Cas in it, and more than half of reviewers mentioned it. It is never a good sign when you've deprived your audience of a character so much that one mention of him makes everyone comment on how much they loved that line. My favorite though, had to be SailingTheNightSea's description: "This is real Jane Austen level slow burn." Haaaaaaaaaa, XD ouch. So much ouch (the truth hurts ;P). That one's going in the tags on AO3! In the meanwhile, I am going to try and get some more Cas in here pretty soon, guys, I promise. Not Destiel, because we wouldn't want to let Jane down XD, but Cas for sure.

Lawls, I'm so sorry, but in, like, a can't-stop-chortling sort of way.

Minutiae: I'm definitely bending standard police procedure in this one. Not outside the realm of TV standards, though, and very much within Supernatural's canon, particularly for this episode. But I know I'm bending procedure, so I have to say it out loud :P Still, I think it'll fly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 37

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

By the time Andy arrived at the Giles home – Baby perfectly intact, thank you very much – there were over a dozen cop cars out front, flashing lights turning the entire neighborhood into a morbid cross between the worst club scene ever and a warning ad for epilepsy. Having absolutely no idea what was going on but knowing it couldn't possibly be good (and acutely aware of his own standing with law

enforcement), Andy pulled to the opposite curb almost a full block away.

Neighbors were outside their houses, in pajamas and robes, arms crossed over chests or hands raised to their mouths. Cops had cordoned off the entire area around the Giles' house and were maintaining the perimeter from locals and just-arriving news vans.

Really not good then.

Andy thought about trying Dean's cell, but decided not to risk it. Which turned out to be the right call when only minutes later two police officers and a man in civilian clothing – suit, tie, and dress shirt stained with a terrifyingly large amount of red (Detective, maybe?) – walked out of the house, escorting a fourth, stumbling man between them. It was hard to see his face from so far away, but Andy knew the short hair, the broad shoulders, the slightly bow-legged walk, staggering as it was.

That was Dean, handcuffed, clothes covered in something dark that Andy hoped to God wasn't blood, walking like he was drunk, being pushed into the back of a cop car.

Aw, crap. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

-o-o-o-

"Put these on."

Dean caught the bundle of clothes chucked his way and stared down at the grey sweatpants and shirt, black, bold letters spelling out Baltimore PD down the side and on the breast. He looked up at Detective Ballard with a skeptic brow.

"Your clothes are evidence. Forensics will collect them when we turn you over to County."

Dean dropped the sweats onto the cot beside him, not quite caring to follow orders, here. His head was pounding thanks to the non-business end of a gun meeting his friggin' skull, courtesy of Baltimore P.D.'s dirtiest cop. Whose partner was now standing on the other side of the jail cell, looking at Dean like he was the scum of the earth. Murderous scum of the earth.

"And when exactly will that be?"

Maybe Sam and Andy could spring him in the transfer. Considering the front of him was covered, thighs to neck, in Karen Giles' blood, Dean was guessing his odds of getting out of this one any better than he had the first time were significantly decreased. Forget Detective Peter Sheridan escorting his ass out into the woods for a two am private execution. He wouldn't have to lift a finger this time; Dean would just go straight to federal prison.

Do not pass Go, do not collect 200 ways to avert the Apocalypse.

"Well, we've got some questions we'd like to ask you," Ballard – she hadn't given him a first name and he didn't remember it – leaned against the cinder block wall beside the bars of his current cage, crossing her arms in the classic female powerhouse pose. Dean swore every female cop had that stance down pat. Of course, no one quite wore it like Jody Mills, but this detective sure tried. "After that, you'll be formally charged and handed over for processing."

"For the murder of Karen Giles." Dean didn't bother keeping the incredulity and sarcasm out of his voice.

Detective Ballard raised an eyebrow at him in return. "Well, you are covered in her blood."

"Right." Dean looked down at his shirt and the still damp, tacky blood clinging it to his skin. He blocked out the image of Karen, staring up at him with terrified eyes, blood spurting past her desperate hands. Instead he picked at the ruined cotton, shooting the woman a harsh look. "Cuz this looks just like arterial spray. And not like your partner *rolled me* in her blood after he *slit her throat*!"

If he thought the detective's eyes were cold before, he'd been wrong. Now they were downright frigid. She pushed off the wall, partly in what he imagined was shock, and partly in defense. But then, she'd been sleeping with that asshole last time, hadn't she?

"That's one hell of an accusation," she bit out, fire on her tongue to chase the ice in her eyes. "Especially coming from the man caught standing *literally* red-handed over her body."

"Under it."

Detective Ballard blinked at the low growl. "What?"

"He told you I was standing over the body, huh? I was holding her. He slit her throat and I caught her." Dean turned his body half away from

her, gesturing to his thighs and the unnaturally neat line of blood-to-no-blood. "What, crime-scene photos didn't show this fine, ass-shaped hole in your blood pool? How about a gap the size of an unconscious *body*, then, because you're partner clocked the hell out of me while Karen was *alive* and bleeding out in my arms, lady."

Ballard stared at him, and her eyes might be cold, but Dean could see the logic getting through. Not enough, of course. No, he was accusing a cop of murder. Accusing her of not knowing her own lover was a cold-blooded killer. But he remembered liking her, thinking she had some brains under the uniform, at least for a cop.

The laugh she let out was short and bitter and disbelieving. "You're really something. You don't know what you're talking about."

"No?" Dean pushed his luck, approaching the bars. The detective stood her ground, but he could tell by the way her arms tensed that she was ready to back away if he proved violent. He leaned against them, bracing his forearms on the crossbar so he could bend at the waist and make it seem natural. Get himself more to her height than the looming foot he had on her. "How about a crap ton of drugs missing from your lockup. That sound familiar? What was that, a year ago now?"

The detective reared back, though her feet never moved. Dean saw the confusion, the first flicker of doubt that went beyond what little evidence he had for her while locked up in a jail cell. He gripped the bars, planning on taking that seed and getting the damn thing to sprout before he ended up dead in some back country woods or rotting in a state penitentiary.

"Your partner-"

"Get your ass away from the bars!"

A loud slap of a manila folder against the wall broke the growing tension in the room as Peter Sheridan stepped into view. Detective Ballard backed off, a deep breath shaking free any doubt Dean had gotten going. The hunter leaned back, wrists still on the crossbar but now taking full advantage of his height. He eyed his framer with derisive challenge clear in his green gaze.

"You okay, Diana?" Peter walked over to his partner, back turned to Dean, body language over bearing in its protective stance. Too obvious. A blatant show. It made Dean want to roll his eyes as the far shorter detective had to tilt her chin up. She seemed oblivious to the physical manipulation as she shared a shaky smile with him.

'*Gag me*,' Dean thought, looking away as the two shared a quiet word.

"You must think you're pretty tough shit, huh?" Oh, the detective was apparently talking to him now. Dean was sure to put every ounce of his 'shaking-in-my-cowboy-boots' fear into the dangerously blank and knowing glare he leveled at the man. Peter Sheridan was too stupid to be wary of it. "Put the sweats on and your clothes in the evidence bag, or we'll *make* you. You have five minutes before we haul your ass into interrogation, naked if we have."

"Oh," Dean leaned forward, pressing his face to the bars as Peter grabbed Diana by the elbow and the two detectives started back down the hall, ignoring their prisoner. "I'd love to see you try, pal!"

The hunter growled as the officers disappeared, soon replaced by the one obviously slapped with guard duty. He was a beast of a man – Dean hadn't even known they made uniforms in Hulk size – who stationed himself just to the side of the bars. His hand settled atop his gun holster none-too-subtly and he had the kind of look about him that suggested Dean do what he was told before the B.U.G (Big Unfriendly Giant) here actually did try to make him.

Dean sighed, crossing over to the pair of sweats and picking at his bloody, ruined clothes. He scooped up the sweatshirt, staring at the Baltimore PD shield stamped across the breast. Well, he'd sure stepped in it this time. Andy and Sam had better be thinking something up, and quickly. Time was never on their side, but in this case particularly, they'd have just about forty-eight hours to figure something out. If Peter Sheridan waited that long.

-o-o-o-

The interrogation room was cold, the chair was hard, the cuffs bit into his skin, and the stupid sweats *itched*. Dean glared at the two detectives across the table from him, Ballard seated and Sheridan leaning over her. He looked like he was ready to mansplain some serious bullshit. Dean couldn't wait.

Diana pulled a sheet of paper out of the manila folder Sheridan had had back in the holding area and slid it towards him. He stopped its movement with his hands best he could, chained to the table as he was. When he looked down at it, Dean found a pretty good sketch of himself and Sam staring back.

"Sacramento PD just faxed us that. Look familiar?"

Damn. Meg and the diner. There hadn't been cameras, but there'd been plenty of witnesses to remember their faces, to see them rescue Meg Masters. Only, at gun point, it sure hadn't looked like a rescue to any of the decent folk that had tried to stop them that day. And if they took his prints before throwing him in lockup, then Sacramento would have popped up as soon as they ran them, even if the cops there didn't have names to put to the evidence.

"That would make you Dean, I assume," she added, nodding at the paper and the names, first only, beneath each sketch.

"Good looking guy," Dean replied with a smirk, flicking the paper back her way. It spun almost three-sixty before she put a stop to it with a firm palm. He shrugged. "Uncanny resemblance. Can't say I recognize 'em, though."

Detective Sheridan rolled his eyes with a sneer, but Ballard let his attitude slide right over and off her.

"You got a last name, Dean?"

"Sure do."

Both detectives let the silence stretch, but Dean didn't elaborate further and the male detective shook his head.

"This is pointless," he muttered. "You can play this game all you want, but we got you on murder."

"No, what you got is me in a house where a woman *was* murdered. By *you*."

Both officers ignored him. Instead, Diana laid out the facts, her cold, stoic expression not giving away an inch of the doubt Dean knew he'd seen in her eyes earlier. She was pretty good for a cop. He remembered sending her to Sam, after the kid managed an escape. At least they wouldn't have to deal with that this time. They had nothing to grab Sam on; no last name, no location, nothing. Hell, these guys didn't even know he had a brother. At this point, all they had was a sketch of a one-time partner, who may not even still be in the picture.

At least Time had given them that much. One tiny little positive in their usual shit-storm of worse-worse-worse. That was Time for ya. The giving type.

And it was a shit-storm. They had the murder weapon, literally in his

hand, for starters.

"Yeah, because you planted it there, you asshat."

Karen Giles' blood all over him.

"Clothes were spic-n-span before you clocked me with your Sig Saur."

And he'd been in the Giles' home to begin with, patio doors damn near taken off the hinges. Even if he could make Diana – or anyone, for that matter – believe him about the piece of dirt standing across from him, he couldn't deny that he had been in the house of a grieving widow who just so happened to turn up dead after he'd kicked two doors in to get to her.

"Look, I was invited, alright?" Dean rubbed at the corner of his eye. He'd scrubbed the dried blood off his face pretty vigorously back in the cell, but it still felt like it was there. "I was working with Tony when he died."

That seemed to surprise the two detectives, and they shared a glance.

"Working how?" Diana folded her hands atop the metal table.

"I'm a private investigator." Dean made sure to keep his voice even, which for him usually sounded bored. That worked too. He offered Diana a tight smile before shifting his gaze to her partner. "He hired me, to look into this bastard, right here."

Peter just scoffed, shaking his head as he pushed off the table, straightening up. "Unbelievable. Tony Giles was a friend of mine, you son of a bitch. And you *murdered* him and his wife. In cold blood. I'm not going to let you sit here and spin your little delusions of murder and psychopathy on me."

"You know, I've done a lot of shit in my life, but I think I'm the kettle in this scenario, pal."

The detective took a challenging step forward, looking like he was half a step away from hauling his suspect out of the chair and making his point a more physical one. Dean vaguely remembered him doing that once before. Certainly wouldn't put it past him for a repeat performance.

"If you're a PI, where's your work?" Diana's eyes were pinned on him, ignoring her temperamental partner for the moment. Dean slowly

dropped his gaze back to her. "Photos? Notes? Anything to prove you are what you say you are. How about a last name, for starters."

The hunter leaned back in his chair. "I give you any of that, what's to say it doesn't disappear, same as those drugs?"

Detective Sheridan's left eye twitched, and Dean watched his hand ball into a fist, hidden from his partner by the width of his body. Guy had a pretty crappy poker face. It was a wonder he'd lasted this long without getting caught.

"If you thought I was in on it, you wouldn't have told me back in holding."

Dean's gaze snapped back to the woman. Damn, she really was good. For a cop. He smiled and sat up, putting his cuffed hands on the table almost conversationally. "Then send your partner out of here, and we can really talk."

Sheridan slammed his palm down on the table between them. Diana jumped, but Dean didn't move a muscle. He just shifted those dangerous green eyes up to the man he sure hoped would die the same pathetic death this time around. The detective's veins throbbed with how hard he was clenching his jaw.

The plus side? Dean's *Yeah-That's-Right-I'm-A-Scary-Ass-Mother-Fucker-You-Sorry-S-O-B* glare was definitely getting to Sheridan. And he knew he was starting to get to Ballard, too. The downside? That same glare was not doing him any favors in the not-coming-across-as-a-murderous-psychopath department. But one problem at a time, damnit.

"Enough!" Pete spat through gritted teeth. "This isn't a game, asshole, and I'm done with your wise-ass remarks. If you're really a PI, why don't you tell us why your prints were found at over a dozen unsolved crimes."

Dean raised a sarcastic brow. "Uh, I'm a *PI*. I look into crime scenes, buddy."

"Yeah?" Sheridan spread both hands on the table, leaning towards Dean. The hunter didn't resist the urge to lean the hell away from the fool. "Well that's some sloppy investigative work, if you ask me. Why exactly did Anthony hire you, an apparent expert in grave desecration, breaking and entering, and oh, yeah, this one really got me: kidnapping."

Okay, so the kidnapping charge wasn't going to be the easiest to explain. Technically, they had rescued Meg Masters from the actual demonic kidnapper. Not that either of these two were going to believe him, even if he used the redacted version. Probably best to stick with being an incorrigible ass.

"You missed that whole 'pot calling the kettle black' comment a minute ago, didn't you?"

This time the detective did surge forward, grabbing Dean by fistfuls of sweatshirt and hauling him, and most of his shirt, up and out of the chair. The hunter internally winced at the sharp pull of the cuffs, chained to the table and digging into his skin. But he didn't let it show, too busy giving Pete Sheridan the smuggest, tight-lipped, *I-am-Dean-Winchester-and-you-will-not-out-asshole-me* smirk.

"Pete!" Diana was on her feet, hands on the table and that fierce gaze locked on her partner, who stood still at her bark. "That is enough!"

Dean waggled his eyebrows at the man, but Sheridan just sneered and shoved the hunter roughly back into the chair. He grunted, hands spread as far as he could for balance, and managed not to topple onto the floor.

"Jeez, anger management much?"

"Let's go." Diana sent a withering look Dean's way, following it with one slightly less, but far more expectant, look at her partner. Dean raised his cuffed hands, the picture of innocence. Sheridan curled his lip but ultimately stalked out the door, Ballard following.

-o-o-o-

Pete slammed his palm into the hallway wall as they left interrogation behind. A passing officer gave the detective a wide berth, and Diana caught his high eyebrows as he passed. Knowing better than to grab her partner when he was like this, she took off down the hall, leaving Pete to follow. He did, with a huff, until they were around another corner, in a lower-traffic area near the vending machines.

"You cannot lose it like that in there," she admonished the moment they were alone, keeping her voice low. "You'll blow this case and he'll walk out of here on a technicality!"

"I know," Pete snarled, but reigned in his temper almost immediately. It simmered just beneath the surface of his skin, though, as he leveled

a calmer but still dangerous look her way. "What about you? You weren't exactly jumping to my defense back there. Tell me you're not buying his crap, Diana."

She paused, brow furled in a thoughtful moue, and her partner darkened considerably.

"You think *I murdered* Karen and Tony?"

"Of course not." Diana all but rolled her eyes, tilting her head to the side and staring up at him expectantly. "I know they were your friends."

"Good friends," Pete emphasized, but backed off. He leaned against the vending machine, plastic surface warm from the bright lights of the interior.

"Look, I know you want to clean this mess up quick, but you've got to admit some things aren't lining up," Diana continued, mirroring her partner's position against the appliance. "There's something off about this guy, for sure, but he's not wrong about the blood, Pete, or the crime scene photos. And where's the motive?"

"Diana, he's a con-man! You can't tell me you believe a word he said back there."

The female detective shrugged, because, honestly, his words were niggling at her brain. Particularly the bit about their missing heroin. They never had caught the cop that did it. But how did this Dean guy even know about it? "What if there was another person at the scene? What if he's not wrong, and he's just got the wrong guy framing him. Tony knew a lot of criminal types."

"You've got to be kidding me," Peter muttered, tilting his head until he could pinch at the bridge of his nose with an arm propped up on the vending machine. "He was a defense lawyer, for God's sake.
Of *course* he knew criminal types."

She could see him trying to keep a lid on his anger, and felt guilty for riling him up. Diana knew he struggled with his temper, but she didn't think she was wrong for asking the questions.

"Why were you at the house, Pete?"

He picked his head up, and she saw when his surprise at the question turned tempestuous. His face retreated to that deadly calm, eyes half-

lidded. That was usually when he started hitting suspects. Not that he'd ever hurt her, she was sure. Well, fairly sure. Sometimes his temper really was perturbing.

"You read my report. I went to check on Karen, make sure she was doing alright." His expression never shifted, and it settled uneasily in her stomach to see him address her like he would one of the criminals in interrogation. "I heard her scream, Diana, and there was a struggle upstairs. She was already gone by the time I got up there, but that scumbag locked up in interrogation was standing over her, knife in hand."

Peter had gotten his gun on him, but the guy charged. There was a struggle – one that wrecked the scene and scrambled the hell out of their blood evidence – but Pete had gotten the best of the man and taken him down.

At least, that's what was in the report. But this Dean character wasn't making up the void in the blood pool – what hadn't been smudged and spread in the struggle – or the clear line on his pants, suggesting he'd been on the ground before the blood reached him, leaving the back of his thighs clean. It didn't make sense with Pete's story, and that *was* worrying her.

If he'd give them his last name, an ability to prove his story, then maybe they could get to the real killer. Or at least the real truth, if Dean was their murderer.

"Come on, Diana. Don't let this guy get to you."

She sighed, dropping her head with a little shake.

"Of course," she answered, because her partner wasn't wrong, either. There was definitely something dirty about this Dean fellow, that much she was sure of. And the rest, well…

Pete stepped into her space with a gentleness to him that hadn't been there moments ago. He tugged at the corner of her blazer, a secretive smile on his lips that she couldn't help but mirror. "Look, we'll keep leaning on him; he's bound to tumble eventually. I'm telling you, this Dean guy is our guy."

He reached up, running this thumb along the bottom of her chin and Diana smiled wider, leaning into the touch. They didn't get to steal moments like this often, not on the job. A door at the end of the hallway to their left opened, and the two stepped apart as a party of

three men came into view.

Peter eyed them – two officers and a suspect being escorted to interrogation – and nodded their way. He turned his eyes back to his lover. "You know what? Let Dean stew for a bit. Maybe we'll have better luck with the other one."

Diana turned her head to look at the man being led past. He was tall, a lot taller than Dean, with longer hair and softer eyes. He matched the artist's sketch of the second kidnapper in Sacramento almost to a tee.

He must be their Sam, then. And, if Diana was a betting gal, their missing killer.

-o-o-o-

It was a good thing Diana was not a betting gal.

The timelines didn't fit. Yet another level of complexity on this already bizarre, enigma of a case. Diana sat across from the equally mysterious Sam, report in hand from the forensics teams at both the Giles' house and office. Sam and an unidentified man had been seen entering Anthony Giles' office around eight pm. Karen Giles called 911 at 9:46pm, and Detective Peter Sheridan had been found by responding officers at the residence at 10:03pm. He immediately re-dispatched those officers to Anthony Giles' office on information he'd overheard from their murder suspect, talking to a partner on his cell. They found and arrested Sam at the office 10:28pm.

Which was another thing that wasn't lining up. Between finding their suspect armed with a knife, standing over Karen Giles' body and engaging him in hand-to-hand, when exactly had Pete overheard this phone call? It wasn't particularly clear in his report, stating it had been before he'd heard Karen scream, as he approached the house on foot from the driveway.

Diana's growing theory of another perp on scene was making more and more sense to her. Problem was, what had caused Pete to mistake two men for one?

Yet another issue was why the officers had left the Giles' residence in the first place. SOP was to secure the crime scene. Another unit could have been called to investigate the Giles' office. But Pete had been insistent, they'd said. They would get there faster than any of the other units, and if they wanted to catch the partner, every second

counted.

He wasn't wrong, but… they had standard procedure for a reason. One of which was to keep this kind of confusion and muddled evidence from happening. Had those officers stayed, there would have been two other witness accounts to back Pete's claims.

Which, Diana uncomfortably sidelined for further thought later, really wasn't helping her partner's story right now.

But back to the man sitting in front of her, stewing over a cup of coffee she'd brought him, staring at the table top with a morose and frustrated glare. Sam, who also refused to give a last name and insisted he was a PI, could not have killed Karen Giles. Although it was possible for him to have done the deed and returned to the office in the thirty minutes between Karen Giles' likely time of death and the responding officers arriving on scene at Tony's office, it would have been cutting it damn close. Add to it that Sam had no blood evidence on him, no car found at the scene, and no car keys, it was unlikely he was their killer. None of the six local taxi companies they'd called had dropped anyone off within a three block radius of Giles' office within their time range, either.

It was looking more and more like Sam hadn't left Anthony Giles' office since he'd first been seen going in. They still had him on breaking and entering, of course. Cops caught him red-handed at Tony's computer, an unregistered firearm on his persons, a picture of Tony and Karen in Paris taken from a bookshelf and placed beside him on the desk, and a cell phone with one recent call, the outgoing number a match to Dean's. So, Sam might not be their murderer, but he was still a criminal.

Or, as he insisted, a PI. A PI with a key to the office that Karen had given him (found on his persons at his time of arrest), a story about Karen requesting he grab the photo of her and her husband (which they could not disprove, given Karen's untimely demise), files from Tony's personal notes open on the desktop(*"Karen gave me the password, alright? She knew we were working with her husband, and he hadn't given us all his notes. He was playing this one close to the chest."*), and a rather convincing act of perfectly balanced innocence and guilt as he told Diana that breaking into a crime scene was wrong, granted, but it wasn't like they had time to wait for the cops to clear it.

Right. Because he and Dean were on a case they refused to give the specifics of, under a deadline they wouldn't share. (*"If Dean didn't tell*

you the details, he had a good reason for it.") He put the perfect amount of vagueness in each of his explanations and excuses. Not exactly convincing, but damn difficult to disprove.

However, the report did shed light on a third partner. Because that's what this case needed: more suspects. An unidentified man – average height, bit scraggly and a sloucher, with dark brown or black hair – was seen by an eye-witness entering the office with Sam. He had not been there upon the cops' arrival.

So, Diana was back on the possibility that Dean was telling the truth, he hadn't been the killer because there had been a third man. She wasn't sure yet if Dean had simply gotten confused; he had taken a blow to the head, after all, though Pete swore paramedics had cleared him, despite the lack of paperwork for it. She supposed it was more than possible that Dean had gone down an innocent man, only to wake up covered in blood and blame the detective, the only other person he'd seen in the house, for framing him. It was also possible, she kept in mind, that Dean was a criminal and a con-artist, in on the murder committed by this third partner, and playing the police by pointing his finger at Peter Sheridan.

She sure didn't trust him, after all. Either of them. But Diana was also determined to see the guilty party be brought to justice, and she wasn't convinced that was Dean.

"We ran Dean's fingerprints through AFIS," she began again, deciding to switch it up. Sam had seemed genuinely surprised when she'd told him they had his partner on murder. As if they hadn't both tried to kidnap a girl in Sacramento, California. As if the Dean he knew wasn't capable of murder.

Or, he was just that good of an actor.

"Okay," the kid answered, glancing up at her with that same combination of impatience and anxiety. If it was an act, it was a good one.

"Got over a dozen possible hits."

Sam sat more upright in his chair, which he'd spun around before sitting down, leaning over the back of it. "Possible hits. Which makes them worthless."

Which he would know, as a PI. He'd also know that, either way, the Baltimore PD could hold them for forty-eight hours without formal

charges.

"But it makes you wonder," she offered almost off-handedly, a little tilt of her head, a little shrug of her shoulder, a sly look that should make the kid even more nervous. "What are we gonna find when we run your prints?"

Sam's smile was bitter. Humorless. He knocked his fist on the table, knuckles rapping at the metal surface sarcastically. "Yeah, well, you be sure to let me know."

Neither his anxiety nor his anger ratcheted up in even the slightest imbalance. He was perfectly both. Diana's eyes narrowed at him, more convinced than ever that this was an act, albeit a good one. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms lightly. Time to bring in her wild card, then.

"We have enough to charge Dean for murder. His life could be over." Sam's face twitched, and the scales tipped more heavily towards anxiety. Interesting. She wondered if there was more than partnership going on here. The two could easily pass as brothers, their looks similar enough. Maybe this was a family matter. She leaned forward, placing steepled hands on the tabletop. "Yours doesn't have to be. Breaking and entering? We can get that charge reduced if you help our investigation."

"You want me to turn against my own partner?"

The incredulous look in his eye told her he never would.

"No," Diana answered honestly. "We've got him red-handed at Karen Giles' murder scene. We just need you to fill in some missing pieces."

Sam was silent, chewing on his thoughts as much as he was chewing on his cheek. He tapped a finger against the table, once, twice, three times before he abruptly pulled his hand back and straightened again. "You said, 'could.'"

Diana blinked, feigning confusion. "I'm sorry?"

The kid stared right at her, and she found the look unnerving, though she didn't let an ounce of her discomfort show. "You said Dean's life *could* be over."

She shrugged. "It could be. Maryland takes a double murder seriously; the death penalty is a possibility here."

"Double murder. A minute ago it was only one murder."

"Karen and Anthony were likely killed by the same person. Same MO."

"Really. Well, then you've got the wrong guy." Sam shook his head, that bitter smile back on his lips. "Dean and I weren't even in town for Tony's death. But let's go back to that 'could.' Because that's not what cops say when they have someone red-handed."

She bit back the smile as he took the bait. Instead, she fiddled with the corner of the file containing both crime scene reports. Again, she shrugged one shoulder. "There are some holes in your partner's case. Perhaps enough for reasonable doubt."

"What kind of holes?"

Diana met his gaze, and neither of them blinked. "The possible-second-person-at-the-scene kind."

Sam's eyes widened before he quickly covered the reaction, expression narrowing as he thought furiously. Diana let him, for a moment, before she pulled out the police sketch of the two of them from Sacramento out of the folder. She slid it towards him, following it up with the witness statement from Giles' office.

"A second man was seen entering Tony's office with you. His description doesn't match Dean's." The kid's eyes tracked over the drawing, but it was the witness statement he picked up. Not surprised by the police sketch, then, and more concerned by their mystery man. Diana hoped it was a sign that turning Sam against this third wheel would be easier than turning on his partner. "You have another associate, and he wasn't there when you were arrested. Where'd he go, Sam? Back to Karen Giles' house?"

Sam's fingers tightened on the edge of the paper, almost imperceptibly, before he released the document and straightened off the chair back again, conveniently moving his hands out of sight so she couldn't pick up on any further giveaways. Oh, he was good.

"There was no third person." He raised a steady finger to flick the paper back her way, so like her partner that Diana again wondered about the possible fraternal connection. His facial expression shut down, cold and blank as a wall of ice, and she knew she'd lost him. "My partner and I work alone."

-o-o-o-

Diana sighed as she settled her hip against the edge of the desk. Pete was watching the surveillance tape of Dean's room, despite the man being visible through the one-sided mirror just to their left. He turned from the monitor to offer a sympathetic smile at her exhausted countenance.

"You get anything from the other one?"

"Sam's story matches Dean's, down to the last detail." She shook her head, sure they were being played, but unsure how the hell the two of them were pulling it off. Diana crossed her arms, then raised one to pinch at the inner corner of her eyes and drag her fingers to the bridge of her nose. She needed a good night's sleep to think on this messed up case, but they weren't going to get a break anytime soon. They had only forty-eight hours to figure this out before they'd have to submit what evidence they had and press formal charges.

They had Dean red-handed, sure, but there was still a lot of wiggle room for a good attorney to get him off before he ever saw the inside of a courtroom.

A knock on the door interrupted her morose musing, and both she and Pete looked up as a junior officer stuck his head into the surveillance room.

"His lawyer's here." The man nodded towards Dean's slouched form through the mirror. Their suspect hadn't moved since they left him, instead hunkering down in the chair. He was tapping something out on the table top, fingers occasionally tracing letters they couldn't read, and his lips moved silently. Sheridan had been trying to figure out what he was muttering for the half hour Diana had been with the other one.

Her partner picked his head up and away from the small screen as the officer's words registered. Pete frowned over at Diana. "You let him make a phone call?"

Legally, they were obligated too, but it wouldn't be the first time they'd told a suspect otherwise. But Dean hadn't asked for one while in interrogation, so he must have when Diana was alone with him in Holding.

Diana was shaking her head, though, expression as surprised as his. "He never asked."

Pete unhooked his arms from behind his head to look at his watch,

and then at the officer. "You're telling me a public defender showed up, out of the blue, at six in the morning?"

The guy just shrugged. "Don't think he's pro-bono, Boss. Guy said he was here for Dean Winchester."

Both detectives sat upright, shock overtaking their features.

"Wait, *Winchester*?!"

-o-o-o-

Dean was halfway through his mental list of acronyms for Dana Shulps, when there was a knock on the door to his room. He paused, busy trying to keep track of the growing list in his head and unsure if he just hadn't hit the right word yet or he didn't remember it well enough for déjà vu or memory to kick in.

Cops didn't knock on their own interrogation rooms.

An officer opened the door. It was one Dean hadn't seen before, and he gave the guy a skeptical look before going back to the anagram. The feeling appeared to be mutual as the cop indolently said, "Your lawyer's here."

Dean didn't even look up, remembering some pretty useless public defenders during his last couple go-arounds with the law. At least now he could ask for a pen and paper. The officer closed the door once more as his supposed saving grace walked over to the table.

A briefcase was set down before a very familiar voice said, "Mr. Winchester."

Dean's head snapped up to find Andy Gallagher standing across the table, dressed in his ill-fitting suit, a briefcase from God-knows-where in hand and-

"Is that a *fake mustache*?" the hunter hissed, leaning forward against the table to gape at the fuzzy caterpillar perched on Andy's upper lip. It didn't quite look glued on, but it also wasn't even, either. And it didn't remotely match his brown mop of hair.

Andy pulled out the chair opposite Dean and slid into it with a reproachful scrunch to his face. "I'm a wanted man, remember? I can't just waltz into a police station without a disguise."

Dean stared at him. Then he stared some more. "And you thought *this* was *better*?"

The kid shot him another look, but opened up his briefcase and pulled out a legal pad and a pen. "Now, Mr. Winchester," he said, deepening his voice in an attempt (a terrible, terrible attempt) to sound serious. "Let's discuss your case."

The older hunter narrowed his eyes into one hell of a glare, but leaned back in the chair, stuck with this, apparently. At least Andy could get him out of here if things got dicey. "Don't use my name, they haven't figured out who I am yet."

"Wait, really?" The look on the kid's face alone was a dead giveaway that that cat was well out of the bag. Dean physically growled, and Andy at least had the sense to sort of shrink away. "Uh…oops."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"How was I supposed to know!" Andy threw back at him. "I couldn't just walk up to the front desk and ask to see the dude who murdered that nice lady and her lawyer husband."

Dean growled again.

"Not that you murdered her," Andy was fast to say. He pulled out a thin file from the briefcase. "Look, they wouldn't give me anything until I said I was your lawyer, so…" He shrugged, opening the folder and pulling out the details of the case the police must have provided him. "Good news is, they ran your prints and got nothing. Well, I mean, they got a lot of stuff they can't use-"

"You've studied law, now?"

"Uh…*and Order*." Andy offered him a grin that made Dean really, really want to hurt him. "Twenty seasons, four hundred and fifty six episodes. Hours of educational entertainment. I'm a tv-certified professional."

Dean went back to staring. "Oh great. I'm saved."

Andy rolled his eyes, spreading his hand atop the file and finally glaring at the unappreciative guy sitting across from him. "Hey, you could be grateful, you know. I could have left you here and ran."

The hunter finally let up on his glare, though he couldn't help one last

parting quip. "Not likely, kid. There's no prison on earth that could keep me from hunting you down and strangling you to death for stealing my car." He leaned forward against the table again, mouth like a shark, and was pleased as punch when Andy physically leaned away. "And you know it."

"Okay, I did know that," the kid answered way too quickly, one finger raised in his defense, "but that's not the *only* reason I'm here." Dean's unimpressed brow was enough for him to fidget. "And I didn't *steal* her. Sam gave me the keys!"

"Where is Sam? He get into the guy's files?" Dean switched gears, deciding to give the kid a break. He was here, after all, and hadn't been wrong. While unlikely that a Baltimore police precinct would be on the open lookout for a small time murderer from Oklahoma, coming here had still been a risk and, more than that, took guts. Dean *was* grateful. He just wasn't gonna hand it over that easy. The man had a reputation to keep, after all.

"Uh…" At Andy's hesitation, the hunter's expression darkened. Then the kid's brief, fifteen second reprieve of Dean's ire was over a lot faster than he'd hoped. Fast enough, actually, that he never even realized he'd been on the receiving end of a reprieve at all, let alone had time to hope for a longer one. "Yeah, about that…"

-o-o-o-

Sam was pacing the room they'd holed in up in when Detective Diana Ballard entered the for the second time since they'd brought him in for questioning. They'd removed his cuffs when he'd first come in, the female detective even offering him a drink while she played good cop. Apparently, breaking and entering wasn't cause for concern over Detective Ballard's safety. Not that Sam would ever hurt her, but the leniency would be her mistake when Sam decided how to get him and his brother out of this. He rubbed at his wrists bitterly, like he could still feel the cold metal there, despite the fact it had been at least an hour since they'd been removed.

"So." Detective Ballard smiled at him as she slid into the chair, setting a file down on the table between them. Sam immediately knew something was different. That sure wasn't the good-cop smile she'd used on him the first time. "Sam Winchester."

The young hunter managed to bury his reaction, though it was a close thing. He couldn't do much against the paling of his skin or the

reflexive swallow, but he'd spent his entire life lying, and lying to cops more often than not.

"Surprised?" The detective's smile grew tight before she looked down at the file. "Once Dean started talking, drawing the dots wasn't so hard. We know all about you, Sam. Twenty three years old, no job, no home address. Your mother died when you were a baby, your father's whereabouts are unknown. And then there's the case of your brother, Dean."

Sam bit at the inside of his cheek to keep the defensive look off his face. He wasn't entirely successful, so he leaned against the back wall, crossing his arms defensively and keeping his mouth sealed shut. He focused, instead, on the sharp gut instinct that told him she was lying her ass off right now. No way his brother would ever talk to a cop willingly, even the one from ten years in the future.

"Feeling shy, now? No problem. I'll keep going." Detective Ballard stood from the chair, file in hand, and started a slow pace of the far side of the room. "Your family moved around a lot when you were a kid. Despite that, you were a straight-A student. Got into Stanford on a full ride."

She closed the file, staring at it for another moment before tucking it and her hands behind her as she turned to regard her prisoner. "Then about a year ago, you were in Boston with your girlfriend, Jessica Moore. There was a home invasion. Her father, Frank, was stabbed with a knife. You, *and your brother*, were both there. And that's where the details get a little sketchy."

Ballard tossed the folder onto the table, the thing open. It showed the police report they'd had to file at the hospital. It included pictures of the wound post-surgery. Sam turned away from it. The detective braced both hands on either side of the folder, a cynical smile on her lips. "You went off grid. Left everything, including your girlfriend, behind."

Cold brown eyes snapped up to hers, and the look he leveled her way was almost petulant. The tone certainly was. "I needed some time off. To *deal*. Jess and I broke up. She was going through some stuff, and what happened to her dad…" Sam looked down, and he didn't have to fake the regret that crossed his face and silenced his words. He looked back up. "So, I'm helping my brother with his PI gig."

The Detective's look was blandly skeptical. "How's that going for you?"

Sam shrugged one shoulder. "It's not exactly a break, but…it keeps my mind off things."

"I'll bet." She set her hand, fingers spread out, atop the folder and tapped it. "Grave desecration and B&Es will do that for a guy."

Sam bristled at the accusations. Not that the information was incorrect, but the intent behind them sure as hell was. But he stayed quiet, knowing that was his best, and safest, bet. This was building into a real mess. They had Dean on murder, him on breaking and entering, and Sam had no clue how they were going to get themselves out of this one.

Hopefully, Andy had kept himself from getting arrested. Maybe he could do something with his powers to get them out of there.

-o-o-o-

"You don't want me to get you out of here?" Andy's voice was incredulous, eyes wide as he stared at Dean, who was busy scribbling something out on the paper he'd stolen from Andy almost the second the kid had put it on the table. "Are you crazy?"

"We got out of this without you just fine last time," Dean countered, inserting a touch of annoyance at their resident Jedi. He and Sam *were* capable on their own, they didn't need fancy powers, thank you very much.

"Last time." Andy blinked. "This happened *last* time? And you didn't think, *'gee,* maybe I should warn them I'm about to get *arrested*'!?'"

Dean spared him an annoyed glance, but it wasn't enough to stop the kid from leaning forward, eyes and tone disbelieving as he realized the answer to his own question.

"How do you not remember *getting arrested*?!" Andy shook his head, leaning back in his chair so he could throw out his arms in disbelief. "Do you, like, smoke more weed than I do, man? Because your memory *sucks*."

"Shut up," the older hunter hissed, leveling a more intense glare Andy's way. "You tell me what you did ten years ago down to the day and then we'll talk."

"Well I sure wasn't getting arrested! Know how I know? I'd remember that!"

Dean set the pen down before he was tempted to chuck it at the kid who was still going to get him out of here, even if it wasn't with Jedi powers. "Lay off, kid. It's not like it was the first time."

Andy facepalmed, elbow on the table, and groaned into his hand. "Tell me again why I didn't leave you here and run for my life? I could be in Jamaica right now."

"I'd find you and murder you."

"Right." Andy sighed, dropping his hand from his face, muttering as he did. "Not like I could drive your precious car to Jamaica, stupid." He cleared his throat and spoke up, ignoring the unamused look Dean sent his way. "So what do you want me to do?"

Dean ripped the piece of paper he'd been scribbling on off the pad and folded it in half. He handed it over, pressed between two fingers. "Get in to see Sam, give this to him. And then create a distraction in ten minutes."

"A distraction." Andy took the paper, tempted to look inside but deciding he'd pushed enough boundaries for the day.

The hunter shrugged. "Yell fire, flip some lady's skirt up, start a food fight. Whatever, man. Just cause a commotion and get out of here."

Andy raised an eyebrow, tucking the paper, which no doubt now had some sort of escape instructions, into his briefcase. "Oookay. And you want me to get Sam out and not both of you because…?"

"Because over a dozen cops saw me arrested. Sam too, probably. You don't know who all those guys are, and unless you can make some sort of blanket announcement that everyone will listen to, and also wipe a mile's worth of paperwork, that's too many loose ends, kid."

Andy scrunched his mouth to the side, considering that. He hadn't really worried about much more than telling the officers to let Sam and Dean go, then walk out of here with them. But Dean sort of had a point. He had no idea what would happen when the cops he didn't influence showed up, asking where their suspects were. Or how that would work with the paperwork the precinct surely filed concerning the Winchesters' arrests.

Still. Staying to possibly be charged with murder and transferred to county lock-up seemed a lot riskier than some incomplete paperwork and a couple cops with questions no one could answer.

"Trust me." Dean handed him the legal pad and pen back. "That kind of mess with a double murder suspect? They'll call in the Feds. We don't want that complication. I got out of this just fine last time. Besides, we're supposed to be sticking to the timeline, remember?"

Andy snorted, because sure, he remembered (not that he knew much about that timeline, or had even really wrapped his mind around that whole can of worms just yet), but Dean never seemed to until it was convenient to his argument. He tossed the legal pad and pen back into the briefcase, but paused as he stared at the pen, which had sort of come apart on the single bounce. Come apart, because pieces of it were clearly missing that had not been missing before he handed it to his 'client.'

"Alright, whatever you say, oh Captain, my Captain." He shook his head, figuring that Dean, of all people, could probably pick handcuffs with a damn toothpick in the middle of a jungle if he had to. From what Andy had seen of the brothers so far, they made MacGuyver look like a rookie. He shut the briefcase and stood. "One distraction coming up in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," Dean confirmed, a light smirk in the corner of his mouth.

Andy left the room, nervously drilling his fingers on the side of the briefcase as he passed the cop stationed outside of the interrogation room. The guy just nodded to him, though, and Andy reminded himself he could control people with his voice, for Pete's sake. He didn't have anything to be worried about. Except drawing the attention of every single cop in the station because he had to be the distraction.

Well, wait a minute, now. He didn't have to *be* the distraction. He just had to make one. Dean's words about a food fight got Andy's gears turning, and he looked around at the slowly populating precinct. He might not have access to food, *per say*, but there were other ways to start a fight. Seven in the morning sure wasn't prime arrest time, but he saw a couple drunk and disorderly's sitting on a bench, miserably awaiting the next step in the judicial process.

They sure looked like food enough to Andy.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Guys *head, meet desk, with an added thunk for emphasis* we're two (looong) chapters into this episode *thunk* and we're

not even to the good stuff yet *thunk thunk thunk* Why do I do this to myself?!

I actually stopped multiple times during this and asked 'do you really need to write this episode? Is it even important?!' and the muse said 'Yes, Andy is wearing a fake mustache. It is important.' Lo and Behold, the muse has spoken. Thirty six pages and counting all so that Andy Gallagher can have his fifteen minutes of lip-caterpillar fame. Sure. Why not. -_-

Fun Fact #207: In the original episode, Sam was arrested at the motel. The cops found him because Dean had a matchbook from the motel in his pocket when he was arrested. Personal head-cannon: Dean never kept any identifying objects from places again. He didn't necessarily remember this case as being the cause of that habit, but that's why there was not one on him when he was arrested this time ;)

Of course, it didn't matter because Time's about as no good dirty rotten as your author.

REVIEW MILESTONE:HEY GUYS! We are within spitting distance of that awe-inspiring 1,000 comments on AO3! It's not a shoe-in (we're forty shy right now) but I bet we can do it. In which case, you might recall from it happening over on FF, I post double chapters when we hit new milestones. If we make it, I will post the next two chapters (which 1. conveniently return to normal length and B. wrap up this case!)

However, whether or not we make it, this will be our last two-week stretch, guys! I have enough chapters built up to resume a weekly posting schedule after the next chapter :)

…Assuming Croatoan doesn't suddenly start kicking my ass. Which...it's Croatoan...so it totally could...

Chapter 71: Season 2: Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: We did not quite make the 1,000 comment milestone, but we got close. Normally, that would mean I just hold off on the double post until next time. However, I am going on vacation next weekend, so getting two chapters edited and up is going to be tough. Therefore, you all get an extra special treat this time! Four awesome somebodies on AO3 need to get us over the hump, and I'll post the next chapter on Monday.

Chapter Warnings: Andy's starting a food fight without the food, Sam's thinking they may need to re-lable their Jedi Master as more of a Sith Lord, Dean's sort of finally almost getting through to Diana, and our Death Omen is showing up places she's not meant to be. Darn you, Death Omen!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 38

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The precinct was never quiet, even in the latest hours of the night or earliest in the morning. There were always criminals of all walks; scumbags and drunks and trouble makers were brought in and out all hours of the day. But this was possibly the quietest it ever got, between the hours of six and nine am, with the first shift of beat cops out on the streets, the night prowlers finally in bed and the day crime not yet getting started. A little lull period, in which Diana Ballard was usually at home, asleep after a long night's work on a case. But not this morning. Not this case.

Diana blew out a breath of air, enough to shift her hair off her forehead. The mostly blank report in front of her was a pain in her tired ass, but there was no going home until she got it written up. At least some of it.

The detective scrubbed face, exhaustion starting to kick in. Well, long-past kicked in, really, but she was used to the occasional all-nighter.

Just, not usually two in a row, and her and Pete both were steadily heading for thirty six hours on the job now. They still had to confront Dean Winchester, now that they had his name. They had enough to charge him, so all that was left was one last chance to talk. Then, either way, they could wrap this up. It would be in the DA's hands by noon.

It didn't sit right with her, of course. There were too many unanswered questions. But she and Pete had to get sleep at some point.

Diana sighed and put her fingers back to the keys. A few more paragraphs, a couple more sections. She could get that much done. Before she could move her fingers, however, the blinking cursor suddenly took off all on its own. The detective blinked dumbly at her computer as it started typing for itself, the same two words, over and over again.

Dana Shulps.

Dana Shulps Dana Shulps DanaShulpsDanaShulpsDanaShulpsDanaShulps

She pulled back, fingers flying off the keys, a trill of terror suddenly mixed in with all the confusion. What was going on? Diana sucked in a breath and blinked, only to find a blank page once more staring back at her.

What?

No, seriously, what just happened?

The detective shook her head, rubbed at her eyes, and checked again. Mostly blank doc just waiting for her to fill it out. Man…she was more tired than she thought. With a moment of hesitation she wasn't proud of, Diana put her fingers back to the keys, but couldn't stop staring at the screen, waiting for something to happen.

Okay, maybe it was time for that last round of interrogation. She could finish the report afterward.

No sooner had Diana stood up then something *did* happen, and it had nothing to do with her computer. The precinct erupted in chaos, and it all started in the bullpen. Shouts erupted and Diana went for her gun, spotting Pete shooting out of his seat in front of her. They and a dozen other cops and detectives ran towards the yelling.

It was chaos. There were half a dozen small fights broken out, two of them involving civilians and the rest *cops*. Others who seemed to still be in their right minds were trying to break up the fighters. Diana and Pete dove into one themselves, but it was like the men and women couldn't even hear them. They just kept at each other, grappling and exchanging weak punches, no matter who pulled them off or what was said. A few had been detained, but even handcuffed to whatever was nearest, they were still trying to get back in the fight. One cop – Charlie, the front desk officer – was dragging one of the waiting chairs behind him, one hand still cuffed to it, as he went back in one armed to his battle with Janice Price.

It made no sense. Diana knew these people. Worked with these people. *What* was going on?

And then it all stopped. On a dime, all at once, every combatant dropped arms. Exactly one hundred and twenty seconds after the first fight broke out between two recovering drunks, every single one of the men and women involved in a tussle just stopped, blinking, dazed, and most definitely confused. It left a couple of the non-crazies trying to pull people off one another stumbling back at the sudden lack of resistance, often with their now dazed fighter in hand. A couple tumbled to the floor together.

"What the hell," Diana said loudly as the chaos died down into murmurs of discord and injury. She wasn't the only one. Diana helped Janice up from the ground, where she'd gone down in a post chaos tackle by a fellow cop. She had a black eye and a sharp cut on one cheekbone, but otherwise, she was alright. They all were. Despite the weird and random breakout of violence, no one was seriously harmed.

It was another seven and a half minutes of trying to figure out what the hell had happened – everyone talking over each other to get to the bottom of the unexplainable chaos – before a rookie came flying into the main entrance, panting heavily with a look of pure panic on his face.

"He's gone."

Diana stopped what she was doing – an informal interrogation of yet another friend and coworker who was utterly clueless as to why he suddenly needed to punch the living daylights out of his partner – and turned, stone cold dread pooling in her stomach.

"What?"

"The suspect." The out of breath cop panted, spitting out words between heaving gasps. "Sam Winchester. He's gone."

Diana turned wide eyes to her partner, but Pete's face was already morphing from surprise to pure rage. He took off for interrogation, and Diana had to run to keep up.

-o-o-o-

Sam looked up as the door to his own little interrogation room opened, admitting an officer and…. Andy. In a mustache. A very fake mustache. The Stanford near-grad managed to keep a straight face as Andy nodded at the cop before proceeding over to the table Sam was camped out at. He set his briefcase down as the officer closed the door, leaving them alone in the silent room.

"Mr. Winchester."

"So, I take it you're the reason they suddenly know our names?" Sam raised an eyebrow at the poor kid, who looked sheepishly at him as he opened up the case, supposedly under the pretense of actually lawyering. The hunter cast a glance at the camera in the corner of the room, but the blinking red light was currently off.

"Sorry," Andy muttered, digging out a pad of paper and a pen, and passing a folded piece of paper Sam's way. "I didn't realize they didn't know. Guess I'm, uh, kinda new at this."

Sam didn't rag on him for it. First of all, he was sure Dean already had. But more than that, Sam knew the kid was only trying to help. Knew how risky it was for Andy – a wanted murderer with a warrant out for his arrest – to walk willingly into a police station to help get them out of this mess. That took guts, and loyalty the Winchesters had never asked from him. The hunter gave a forgiving nod and reached forward, snagging the folded paper off the surface of the table. "You've been in to see Dean?"

Andy nodded, though he knew Sam got the answer first from the scrawl of his brother's handwriting. "Yeah. They've got a pretty solid case on him, far as I can tell. But he says it's the cop – the dude one, not the lady one – framing him. Dirty as a mud pie on Tatooien, apparently."

Sam quickly scanned his brother's coded note, bobbing his head at Andy's information. "Does he have a plan?" Other than helping to get Sam out, given the allusion to '*The Great Escape*' in his not-so-many

worded note.

"Uh…" Andy shrugged, not exactly inspiring a lot of confidence. Sam pinned him with an expectant look. "He told me to make a distraction."

"Alright." Folding the paper back up, he shoved it into his pocket as he stood, stretching his long legs. The room he was in was windowless – a proper interrogation room located in the interior of the building's layout – so they'd have to go out the door they came in. Which was currently locked from the outside and guarded by a bored kid probably new to the force. Sam had a couple of thoughts, but none of them particularly quiet or subtle. "Any ideas?"

Andy lifted his wrist, pulling back the cheap suit he was wearing to look at his way-too-big-for-his-wrist watch that Sam wondered if he'd stolen from the same place he got the briefcase and fake mustache. "Give it… twenty seconds."

Sam raised a brow, but Andy just grinned up at him. At exactly the twenty second mark – and Sam was counting silently in his head – there was a shout from outside, followed by a grunt and then what sounded like all Hell breaking loose. Andy winked at him with that same grin and walked over to the door just as it swung inward.

The officer on the other side was, oddly enough, holding the door open with one hand, the other slapped over his eyes like a kid playing hide-n-seek. Andy strolled past, one hand in his pocket, the other swinging his briefcase without a care in the world. Sam stared after him until the kid *whistled* for him and Sam tilted his head back to keep from rolling his eyes. With a sigh, the Winchester just shook his head and followed.

Right. Jedi.

Sam thought maybe it ought to be 'Sith Lord', given the chaos they walked into as soon as they rounded the corner into the main room. There were fights breaking out across the room, some between civilians, some between *cops* (Sam stared in wide-eyed horror at those), with other officers trying to break up the bouts fruitlessly. The weirdest part, though, was definitely the way that any cop they got near immediately turned their backs on the pair, a hand slapped over their eyes as they crossed paths.

Andy smiled, all innocence and sparkles, up at him. "I might have dropped a word here, and there…and maybe way over there, while

they escorted me to your room."

Sam could only stand, shaking his head for a solid second, trying as hard as he could not to smile (the kid did not need any encouragement), before a stapler went flying over their heads. Both hunters ducked out of instinct. Sharing a look, the two decided they'd loitered long enough and took off quickly for the front doors, most officers too pre-occupied to notice them, a few of them ducking their gazes when they did.

-o-o-o-

Dean was a quarter of his way through a table-top out rendition of The Rolling Stones' *Hot Rock* album (side A, track four: '*(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction'*, a true piece of Rock'n'Roll perfection, in his humble opinion), when he heard the fight break out. His first through was, *'What the hell?'* followed by the realization that Andy might have taken his suggestions a little too much to heart. Which immediately got a smirk and an *'atta boy*' out of him before Dean realized that, likely, this would call more attention to them than just letting Sam escape on his own.

Oh well. It's not like Winchesters ever caught a break when it came to winning. And he'd kill to see what was happening out in the station right now.

He rolled the thin, long strip of metal and the interior spring mechanism he'd swiped from Andy's pen between the palms of his hand, considering whether or not to pick the cuffs now or wait for that asshat detective to 'transfer' him in the middle of the woods at two in the friggin' morning. It was probably safer to wait, Dean thought. If he played his hand too early and they caught him out of his bracelets, he wouldn't get a second chance. Despite the confident front he'd pulled with the kid, last time had cut it way too close. Dean wasn't planning on letting things come down to the wire quite so tightly a second time.

Dean was just pocketing his borrowed lock-picks someplace the cops wouldn't look when the air across the room from him flickered. The hunter immediately went on guard, too used to that phenomenon not to spot it immediately for what it was. Ghost. Dean's hands slid into fists on the table top, painfully aware of the handcuffs and suddenly wishing he'd picked them after all. It happened again, the air shifted, blinked rapidly, before a woman was suddenly in the room with him. Her clothes ragged, blood dried on her chest and neck, throat slashed,

and red eyes open wide, staring right at him.

Dean recognized her. The missing drug dealer. Pete's old flame and first murder.

Oh, yeah, and also their *death omen*.

"Oh shit," Dean muttered, eyes going wide as the ghost raised an arm, stumbling towards him, gargling through her split vocal cords. Fresh blood spilled down her chest as she tried to warn him of his impending doom at the hands of her own murderer.

Dean had time to pretty much think, '*Son* of a *bitch*!' before the door burst open.

-o-o-o-

Peter Sheridan stormed into interrogation to a wide eyed Dean Winchester staring at the far wall like he'd just seen a ghost. But Sheridan didn't care about that. No, all he cared about was that this piece of shit, this asshole who knew a hell of a lot more than he should, had just facilitated his brother's escape. Pete didn't know how, but damn it, he knew he had. He knew it.

The detective hauled their murder suspect clear out of the chair, slamming him into the back wall. He didn't care that the interrogation table screeched across the floor, dragged by the chain securely attached to their dirtbag's cuffs. He hoped it hurt like hell.

Dean grunted against the hard wall, trying to raise his arms up to stop the cop practically choking him to death, but couldn't. The table kept his arms stretched out and down, bracelets biting into his skin and sure to leave one hell of a bruise.

He really should have picked those locks, damnit.

"You son of a bitch," the cop hissed in his face, spittle landing on Dean's skin. He turned his head away the best he could. "How'd you do it?"

"Do what?" Dean cracked one eye open to grin at the cop. Sure, yeah, there was a solid chance it was gonna get him killed, but Dean Winchester never could take a bullet lying down. Or, er, strangulation. "You lose something, Detective?"

The punch that landed wasn't wholly unexpected, but it still hurt like

a bitch. Man might be a coward and a dirty cop, but he wasn't a pushover, apparently.

"Pete!" The lady cop's voice was practically a shriek in the room, and it stilled the murderous detective for a single moment. Dean could feel the hands fist and un-fist in the stupid B.P.D. sweatshirt Detective Ballard had given him at the start of this nightmare.

"He'd dirt, Diana. He killed Tony, Karen. And now he's helped his brother escape? We can't let him get away with that." Sheridan didn't look over at his partner, just kept his eyes locked on the fierce green staring right back at him. Unafraid. Pete gritted his teeth. He'd put the fear of God in those eyes before he was done with Dean Winchester.

"How, Pete?" Diana's words, frank and biting, finally caused the cop to look her way. Her chest was heaving, she'd clearly run after him, but her stance was firm. Her face…the turmoil there was evident, but so was determination. Damn her morality. "He never left this room. How'd he help Sam escape?"

"I don't know," Pete hissed, looking back at their prime suspect. The suspect he'd easily pin Karen and Tony's murders on, so long as he could keep the man quiet long enough. He pulled Dean off the wall and slammed him back again. "The lawyer. Something. But I know he did."

"You should really buy a guy dinner before you get rough with him," Dean mocked, that smug smirk still on his face. Would nothing wipe the damn thing off? Sheridan tightened his grip. He bet oxygen deprivation would. Winchester picked his head off the wall and leaned into the detective, like he could see the murderous intent clear on his face and thought to match it. "Or you gonna give me a pretty necklace before you brick me up in a wall, too, *Pete?*"

Sheridan clenched his teeth, fisted hands tightened in the sweatshirt, inching up towards his neck with obvious purpose.

"*Peter!*" Diana barked again, this time with more incredulity. She still hadn't clued into what her partner – *lover*, Dean's mind supplied for him again – was capable of.

"No one would know."

She stared, blinking in disbelief, at the man she shared her bed and her life with, currently pinning a suspect to the interrogation room wall with every intention to finish the job. "Are you kidding me right

now?"

Pete didn't look at her, just glared up into the cold eyes of a guaranteed murderer. He was sure of it, even if he knew this guy hadn't murdered the Giles. Dean Winchester was a killer, of that Peter had no doubt.

"The precinct is in chaos, Diana! And he did it. Any one of them out there could have come in here and killed him." Peter's grip shifted, hand itching for his gun. "Hell, he could have done it to himself."

The silence that rang through the room was deafening, but no one moved. No one backed down. Over by the door, Diana's voice got quiet.

"Put him down. We have enough to charge him. Let's leave it at that and go get some air."

Sheridan's eyes shuttered at the command, calm and in control. He lowered his eyes from Dean's, eyeing his neck with a deep (and deeply disturbing) sigh. Then he was hauling Dean off the wall and shoving him back towards the table. The hunter didn't quite make it, hitting the surface and practically sprawling over it to stop from going down, knocking the meagre contents to the floor.

Pete barely looked at Diana as he left the room, a single glance her way that she couldn't read. Didn't want to read. Because that look was somehow disappointed that she hadn't let him… let him what? She shook her head. Jesus, what was happening? She really didn't want to know.

Diana bent down, picking up the notepad and pen that had scattered on the floor as their suspect managed to seat himself back in the chair, leaning over his legs to give the handcuffs some slack. He was rubbing at his wrists. They probably hurt like hell. She didn't bother saying anything to the man, about her partner's treatment of him or anything else. Diana didn't believe in killing a man in cold blood, but she did believe in the system that would take Dean Winchester down. She straightened up, notepad in hand, ready to toss it on the table and leave as well, when she glanced down at the scrawled writing. Diana froze.

Dana Shulps.

Right there, at the top of the page. Dana Shulps. And below it a bunch of nonsense. Words that didn't make any sense. But Diana couldn't

shake that first name. That name that had appeared on her computer, all on its own, like some sort of…

Slowly, she turned to their prime suspect, setting the notepad on the table. Tapping it, she asked, "What is this?"

Dean looked up at her with one eye squinted, still rubbing at his wrists. Diana caught a flash of a bruise and frowned. That looked…the width of that bruise, the deep purple of it, didn't make sense. They looked deep – old and *bad* – but they definitely hadn't been there earlier.

Her perp straightened – sitting back with a look of annoyed defeat – and Diana shook herself out of it. This case, man. It felt like she was going crazy. Diana kept her eyes locked firmly on her prime suspect, ignoring his wrists and the damage Pete had done.

"Anagrams."

Diana's frown became pinched. "What?"

"An anagram." Dean sighed. "A word made from another word, with the letters all scrambled-"

"I know what an anagram is." The man raised his hands at her harried, aggravated tone and she bit back a sigh of her own. She tapped the notepad again. "Dana Shulps. That's the starting word? Where did you get it from?"

Dean eyed her, glancing at the paper her hand was spread over, and then back up. She could tell by his calculated pause he was about to lie to her. "Something Tony was working on. A clue, I guess. He didn't share it with me. But there's no Dana Shulps in any of his files so, I figured…"

He shrugged, and Diana finished his thought for him, "Maybe it's an anagram for something else."

Dean just shrugged again. "Why not. Tony's left me a lot worse before."

He was lying again, but that wasn't the part she really cared about at the moment. "Where did you see it, exactly?"

The man eyed her once again, like he was trying to suss out the same thing she was, only in reverse. "Printer. At the house and the office. It

was everywhere. Hell, the damn thing was written on Tony's *desk*. Whatever it means, it shows up and dead bodies seem to follow."

Diana swallowed past the sudden spike in her throat. She drew her hand off the notepad and turned to leave. She was letting this man get to her.

"You saw it somewhere too, I take it, Detective?"

Diana paused, turning her chin into her shoulder, not quite looking at him, before she left the room. This time, she made sure the door was firmly locked and, for good measure, put an officer on the door with strict orders not to let *anyone* in.

-o-o-o-

The tap water was tepid, at best. What she needed was ice cold, but the precinct's pipes had always sucked. Never as hot as you wanted them in the winters, never as cold as you hoped for in the summers. Diana looked up at her reflection, water running down her face in rivulets. What she needed was a hot shower, a good cup of coffee, and a long night's sleep. With the circles under her eyes as dark as bruises and her hair having seen better days, she looked about as bad as she felt.

Water ran down her neck, disappearing below the v-shaped collar of her blouse. Diana stared at the clear trail left behind, before reaching up and tugging at the thin chain hanging around her neck. She pulled free the pendant at the end of the necklace. It was a beautiful, simple little thing Pete had given her that, in many ways, she cherished.

Handmade, one of a kind, over on Carson street, he'd said.

'You gonna give me a necklace before you brick me up in a wall, too, Pete?'

What had Dean meant by that?

Diana sighed, shook her head, and tucked the necklace back into her blouse. Dean must have seen it. But how could he have known Pete gave it to her? Had he seen them together? *When*? Pete wasn't the most discrete, she could admit, but…

She shook her head again. She was letting that man – a conman – get in her head and under her skin. It didn't matter. So, he was that good at being evil. Fine. She would just have to that much better at being good. Diana reached forward and turned the faucet off. She just had to

shake this (whatever *this* was) and finish the job. Then Dean Winchester could rot in a jail cell and she could figure out everything else, with Pete and…well, just everything else, sometime after that.

The detective was reaching for a paper towel when the faucet beneath her turned back on, making her jump. She stared at the spout pouring water into the sink. Hot water. *Very* hot water; steam was rising from the porcelain basin. Diana eyed the faucet knobs, but they seemed to be in the off position. She reached out, trying to turn one, only for there to be no give.

What the hell?

Diana verbally gasped when two more faucets burst to life, and then another two, and another until the entire row of sinks was pouring water like damn Niagara Falls.

"What on earth-"

The steam started fogging up the mirrors. Diana stared at the cloudy surfaces, a true trill of fear running down her spine, as a squeegee, squeaking sound like someone dragging fingers down the wet mirror, was accompanied by letters starting to appear, one by one in the fog, with no one there to draw them.

D-A-N-A S-H-U-L

Diana tried to run for it, but the minute she turned, she was met by red eyes and gurgling blood.

-o-o-o-

Dean was not expecting the lady cop to make a second appearance so soon. Sure, he was pretty certain Diana was beginning to realize how fucked up her boyfriend was, but the hunter was also pretty sure he'd lost any common ground with her over the near forty-eight hours he'd been here. Of course, that wasn't *entirely* his fault, being assaulted by her dickhead boyfriend, having to facilitate Sam's escape, and accusing her partner (in more ways than one) of cold-blooded murder.

Given all that, he didn't think she'd come bursting into the interrogation room in a *hurry*. She did take the time to close the door behind her, locking out the armed guard standing just on the other side. Dean blinked at her frazzled expression, then sat up a hundred times straighter as the deer-in-headlights look registered. He knew that look.

"What happened? What did you see?"

Diana paused, taken back by his question, which was, apparently, the wrong thing to say. Dean saw the hesitation, the doubt, immediately triggered in her gaze, but she pushed through it. Instead of answering, Diana crossed the room to hover over the table. She crossed her arms, then immediately uncrossed one in order to point at his wrists, which hung between his knees, still chained.

"Those bruises. Where did you get them?"

Dean glanced down at his forearms and the ugly markings there, identical to Karen Giles'. Yup. Their death omen might be pretty damn useless, but she sure packed a punch, regardless. He looked back up at the detective, lips a thin smile. "You were here, lady. You saw your boyfriend manhandle me-"

"Handcuffs don't leave marks like that. They're thicker than that. Older too. Now where did you get them?"

Her brisk, sharp words wiped the smile right off his face. He scoffed, dropping his arms and leaning back in the chair, shoulders slumped and facade of nonchalant control back in place. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Diana stared, unblinking and unnerving. Damn, she really was good, for a cop. Then, taking the hunter by surprise, she stuck her arm out, pulling up her sleeve to reveal identical bruises slapped across her own wrists. "Try me."

Dean sat up, staring at the marks he remembered seeing on the detective's skin once before. He sure as hell hadn't had a matching set at the time, but that was Time for you: a bitch.

"You saw her, didn't you?" He looked up at her, all the smirk and smugness long gone.

The detective's eyes wavered, but nothing else gave her away, and her tone, if anything, grew icier. "Saw who?"

Dean just huffed. "Red eyes, blonde hair, bleeding from the throat? That ringing any bells?"

Diana Ballard paled, and her pretty brown eyes finally darted away. She cleared her throat, lowering the sleeve of her suit to cover the marking. "That's not possible."

He spread his arms as much as he could while cuffed, as if to say, '*and yet.*'

"You expect me to believe that woman was a… a what?" Diana laughed, but this was anything but funny. "A *ghost*?"

It sounded ridiculous just coming out of her mouth. But Dean wasn't laughing. He just stared at her, eyes as deadly serious as they had been when Pete had him up against the wall. Only less…hostile.

"You're serious- what? A *ghost*? Really." She crossed her arms. "Ghosts don't exist."

"And yet, you look exactly like someone who just saw one." Diana hardly looked amused by his quip. Dean tapped his heel against the leg of the chair and, with a one-shouldered shrug, amended, "It's a death omen, if you wanna talk technicalities."

If anything, she looked even less amused. Which, no, wasn't really possible. "A death omen."

"Yeah. They usually show up to warn others." Dean shrugged, but those intense green eyes never left hers. "In this case, she's following your buddy Pete around, warning all his next victims. Trying to stop the same thing that happened to her. So far, she's not been all that successful."

Clearly.

Diana turned away from him, most likely at the mounting evidence – no matter how unbelievable, it was quickly becoming less and less dismissible – that Pete was what this man said he was. This man, who was so obviously a conman. He had to be.

"This is insane," she muttered under her breath, reaching up to rub at her temple but ending up so much closer to clutching her hair.

"I know," Dean said aloud, though there was no way he could have heard her. "You think you're going crazy. But let's skip that part, yeah? Because this thing doesn't show up without a reason. So let's go to the next step, where we keep you alive."

Diana leveled a glare – a terrified glare, but still a glare – on him. "You can't honestly think Pete is going to try and kill me."

"You tell me. You're the one who just told the guy 'no' after he showed

his hand on the whole, 'let's kill a suspect in cold blood' thing. How do *you* think good old, calm, anger-management Pete is gonna take that?"

Dean stared at her as he spoke, daring her to counter what he could already tell she knew. And she did know. That look Pete had given her on his way out… Diana shivered and turned partially away from the man, trying to hide how clearly unsettled she was.

"I thought you said you were a PI," was what she eventually threw out, and while it may not have been the most subtle change of topic, Dean let her have it.

"Yeah…I'm really more like a Ghostbuster."

Diana huffed, shaking her head from her slightly turned away position, still not quite looking at him. She stared at the floor for a good thirty seconds, Dean just biding his time while he let the sane woman contemplate the insane, before she finally turned fully towards him, a decision clearly made. Her shoulders were squared, her chin was up, and that decent (and probably actually good at her job) cop was back in the room with them.

"Why should I believe any of this, huh?" She tossed an arm out to the side before it landed on her hip, hiking up her blazer. "You're a conman. All of this? You could just be playing me."

Which wasn't exactly something he could deny. He could be. He wasn't, at least not at the moment, but that didn't mean he hadn't in the last forty-eight hours spent with her. So he just shrugged and went for broke in the good old honesty category.

"Sure, but you're a cop. Trust your gut, not me." The look she leveled his way wasn't a kind one, but he also knew when he'd won someone over, and he'd finally won Detective Ballard to his side of crazy. Which meant it was time to go for broke. "Out of curiosity, what did your gut say about Sam?"

The sigh that left her chest was the world-weary, what-have-I-just-agreed-to kind that Dean knew only too well. Diana dropped her hand from her hip and ran it through her hair. "Other than that he was your brother *before* we had your name?" She sent a look his way that dared him to challenge her, but he just smiled the kind of smile that teenage kids sent their parents in emoji form when they'd broken the family heirloom vase. Not that Dean would know anything about that. She rolled her eyes. "Why?"

Dean thought about it for another, maybe, half a second. If that. He weirdly liked this lady, after all, poor choice in men aside. "Go to the first motel listed in the Yellow Pages. Look for Jim Rockford."

The detective's sharp eyes snapped to his, widening as they realized what he was offering. "You're giving your brother up."

Shrugging was pretty much the only damn thing one could do while handcuffed to a table, but Dean was getting pretty tired of it. "Look, you can arrest him if you want, or you can help him solve this case and, *maybe*," he raised his hands here, waving identically bruised wrists in the air, "we both get out of this with no more visits from a death omen."

Diana stared at him just long enough to let out another one of those sighs.

-o-o-o-

When Peter Sheridan came out of the washroom after a prolonged stare into the mirror, a good slap to the face, and a reminder that he could *handle this, he'd handled it before*, it was to the sight of his partner walking out of the precinct. Only, he knew Diana. That was her hurried, urgent-but-trying-not-to-make-a-scene walk that really wanted to be a run. Pete's eyes narrowed as he turned his head back the way she'd come, from the hallway that led to interrogation.

Something ugly pooled in his stomach. On anyone else it might have been dread. On Peter Sheridan, it was just anger. He took off at his own decent pace towards Dean Winchester's room – determined to finish this once and for all – but drew up short as he rounded the corner to an armed officer standing guard outside the door.

"Damnit, Diana," he hissed between clenched teeth as he spun back around and headed the same way his partner had gone. That Dean kid had gotten to her and now he was going to have to kill her too.

By the time he made it to the parking lot, she was already pulling onto the street in her dark blue sedan. Sheridan swore, turning in a circle, fingers curling into fists with the urge to hit something. He grabbed at his hair, loosened his tie. This was falling apart, damnit!

Okay, *think*. Peter took a deep breath, smoothed out his tie, cracked his neck, and knew what he had to do. He didn't know how the hell Dean Winchester knew what he did – *if* he even knew what he did or was just a damn clever con – but if it was true, than he had to destroy

the evidence.

He had to get to the old supply store on Ashland and burn it to the ground before anyone discovered Claire Becker's body.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: My internal thoughts while writing this chapter? "Four chapters. This friggin' episode is gonna take four chapters. Good god Gertrude, whyyyyyyyy?"

Non-Linear Story Choice: Lemme know if the bit at the start of this chapter - the fight breaking out and Sam being found gone, then jumping back to Andy walking in to talk to Sam - was at all confusing. I don't usually write that way, but I had some struggles with order this chapter. I will swap it around for future readers if it just isn't working out.

Comments: Folks on AO3! Make it happen and I'll get you that next chapter ;) Everyone else after those four reviews, plus the peeps at ff dot net: I would still really love to hear from you :D

Chapter 72: Season 2: Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Have I mentioned you guys rock lately? Well, you do. I loved the overall response to last chapter's quality check: "Yes, the writing is fine, it's great, now do more of it. Now now now now NOW." XD You guys make me feel all the warm fuzzies. All of them.

Review Milestone! You folks over on AO3 knocked it out of the park! You were like, she wants comments? FINE. TAKE THEM ALL AND GIVE US OUR CHAPTER. NOW NOW NOW NOW NOW. Did I mention you all rock? I think I might have said something... it wasn't loud enough though. Not by far. **YOU ALL ROCK** :)

Enjoy your double chapter, and the wrap up to our Baltimore case!

Chapter Warnings: Oh my Chuck, do we have a Chapter of almost entirely Sam and Andy!? Yes we do! What the hell, this story is supposed to be all about Dean (and Cas. Oh, wait, I'm totally failing on that front…) XD Maybe I can fix it at the veeeeeery end....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 39

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

When Sam Winchester opened the motel room door, he didn't look all that surprised to see Diana Ballard standing in the doorway. She, however, was surprised to see the person behind him. A familiar face, sans facial hair.

"The lawyer." Diana turned a baleful glare on Sam Winchester, who responded with an appropriately castigated expression. "Really?"

"You must be the lady cop whose boyfriend's trying to kill her," Andy

said with way too much enthusiasm, sticking out his hand for a shake that was absolutely not returned.

Diana had to snap her jaw shut after an unacceptable amount of time letting it hang open. "Does *everyone* know about that?"

Sam raised his hands in surrender after a second accusatory glare was sent his way. "Yeah…Dean's, uh…something else when it comes to just knowing things…"

Andy snorted, but Diana did not have time (or energy, or the emotional bandwidth, or, really, any fucks left to give) to probe into it. The taller of the two men dug a folded up piece of paper out of his pocket, handing it over to her. The detective eyed it suspiciously, sending another look at the giant of a man (who had the smarts to once again look sheepish), as she opened it.

A note, in the same scrawled handwriting as the legal pad filled with anagrams back in Dean's interrogation room.

Hilts-

It's a street . Ashland. Our Omen's inside a wall.

Del Toro's dirty. Benson's next.

-McQueen

Diana huffed, a bitter smirk at the corner of her mouth as she handed the paper back with a caustically raised brow. "Hilts and McQueen? You two really are something."

"Hey, I helped, you know," the lawyer (that definitely wasn't a lawyer) piped up from the background, having wandered back over to the little kitchenette table that came with every room at the Aardvark Motel. He was flipping through pictures – what looked like mug shots from what Diana could glimpse – as he took a bite from a burger half out of its wrapper. The table was covered in a depressing mix of crime photos, weapons, and what apparently passed as dinner for Ghostbusters.

"Yeah? Why don't you tell me just how you did that." Diana levied the kid a look that had him gulping down the last of that burger, mouth too full to answer and a chipmunk-cheeked smile shown her way before he quickly ducked his gaze. "That's what I thought."

She turned to Sam next, who didn't look all that much more thrilled to be the center of attention. "I take it I'm Benson, then? I suppose I'm not completely insulted. What's with Del Toro?"

"Benecio," Sam supplied the actor's first name with a slightly more real smile as he took the note and tossed it on the table with the rest of the case. Dean must have watched *Way of the Gun* at least a dozen times, never shutting up about it for days afterward. It was one of those movies that just always seemed to be on TV and, back in the day before their lives had turned into horror movies themselves, Dean had enjoyed a flick with an ending where the main characters didn't pull through for once.

Sam had a feeling the version of his brother from 2016 likely had a different opinion of that kind of ending, now.

When Diana just gave him a quizzical look, the younger Winchester shrugged. "Yeah, my brother knows like a thousand movies, but they all star the same five guys. Consider yourself lucky Detective Sheridan didn't inspire a Jack Nicholson quote."

It wasn't much of an explanation, but the detective seemed to drop the question as soon as Sam mentioned her partner. She looked around, clearly uncomfortable with the fact that she was in the motel room of a fugitive and…whatever they called guys who impersonated lawyers and broke their fake clients out of jail.

Criminals. They just called those people criminals.

"How *exactly* does your brother know all of this? How does he know Pete's dirty?" Other than, you know, roughing him up and threatening to murder him in lockup. Could Pete use some anger management? Sure. But that didn't make him a murderer or a thief.

Diana moved closer to the table to see what it was Andy was flipping through. Those were definitely booking photos. And next to them crime scene photos these men should not have access to. She picked one of them up, unable to keep the incredulity – and accusation – out of her voice. "Where did you get these? These are *crime scene* photos. Booking photos!"

The supposedly gentle giant scoffed lightly, though his expression suggested it was more self-deprecating than anything else, as he took the photo from her. "You have your job and…well, I have mine." His voice trailed off, and Diana looked at him to see what had caused it, but Sam was staring at her wrist. Specifically, the bruise there. "Where

did you get that?"

Sam reached across the table to pull free one of the crime scene photos from Karen Giles' murder. He offered it to her, but Diana didn't need to take it to see the snapshot of a woman's wrist, with the exact same bruising. The detective pulled the sleeve of her blazer down to hide her matching mark, uncomfortable with the evidence of something she still wasn't quite ready to wrap her head around.

Diana glanced hesitantly up at the man her primary murder suspect told her she could trust. Little late to be doubting that, considering she was standing in his motel room. Still, this was all insane. "Your brother called it a… a death omen?"

"Yeah, he mentioned one in his note." The first Sam had heard of it, which meant Dean hadn't remembered before, but it was pivotal information now. If Sheridan really was dirty, and the death omen one of his victims, it would likely be the key to solving this case. "You saw it?"

Diana watched as the beanstalk of a man ducked his head her way, probably an unconscious attempt to make himself less tall – less looming – around her. She nodded, and Sam nudged Andy out of the way to take the photos he'd been going through and pass them to the detective instead.

"Here, look through these. I've been researching every girl that's ever died or gone missing from Ashland Street. Tell me if you recognize anyone."

The detective's eyes lingered – none too cheerfully – on him for another moment (and Sam may not have grown up with a mother, but damn if this woman wasn't trying to educate him in all ways of the patronizing mom glare), before Diana started flipping through the photographs. She stopped on the third page, hand stilling as she stared down at a blonde-haired woman in clear shock.

"This is her." She looked up, glancing between the two as Andy stepped away from the table to join them. "I'm sure of it."

Andy took the photo from her and reached blindly over to the table for a couple more sheets of paper. He shuffled through them before selecting one and scanning the lines of data. "Claire Becker. Twenty eight, disappeared eight or nine months ago. Was last seen on Ashland street."

"Ashland; that fits Dean's note. We got an address?" Sam asked. Andy handed him the paper even as he reached out to take it.

"Okay, but I don't know her," Ballard emphasized in the same beat, looking between the two like they weren't doing a great job of explaining something they both thought pretty clear. "I mean, why would she come after me?"

"It's probably not about you." Sam was scanning the missing persons report and talking at the same time. He paused long enough to meet the Detective's eyes, offering a sympathetic smile. "Death omens are warnings. Um…sometimes what they want is justice. If your partner killed her, Claire might be trying to lead you to the truth. Did Sheridan know her? Says here she was arrested twice for dealing heroin. Your partner ever work narcotics?"

Diana could only shrug one shoulder, crossing her arms in clear discomfort. "We both did. But I never booked her. Not that I remember."

"Doesn't mean your partner didn't." Andy smiled something of a grimace, which was probably supposed to be apologetic, but got stuck somewhere in between. Diana spared him an odd look (possibly wondering how this man had managed to convince an entire precinct that he was capable of practicing law…) before her face paled, realization hitting like a bag of bricks to the gut.

"Oh my god…"

"What is it?" Sam lowered the paper, reaching out a supportive hand, but Diana brushed him off.

"The heroin." She looked stunned, but more in the dreaded, just-realized-her-partner-was-a-scumbag sort of way. "Dean mentioned the drugs that went missing from lockup."

"Wait, what?" Sam glanced at Andy, but he shrugged. First he was hearing about it too. Dean hadn't said anything about drugs. Just that the dude cop was dirty and he'd killed his junkie girlfriend somewhere on Ashland street.

"About a year ago, some heroin went missing from an old bust. Obviously it was a cop." She dropped her arms, a look of frustration coming over her face. "We never found out who did it. But whoever did it would need someone to fence their product."

Andy's gaze dropped down to the mug shot of a drug dealer he was still holding.

"Someone like a heroin dealer," Sam supplied, a bitter grimace coming to his own face now as he stared at the picture too. "Somebody like Claire."

Diana tilted her head back with a deep, aggravated sigh. "None of this points to Pete, though." She looked back at both men, and while it was obvious she was truly starting to believe her partner was dirty, she wasn't wrong. "How do we know it's him?"

"We don't." Sam raised the missing persons report. "But Claire's our best lead for finding out. She was last seen entering 2911 Ashland Street. Let's start there."

Both men were on the move like a starting gun had gone off that only they'd heard. Ballard blinked at the flurry of movement – Andy gathering up their evidence and the last of their dinner to take on the road, Sam going over to a duffel full of (oookay, Diana was going to ignore the bag full of guns sitting on the motel bed) …*stuff* – and waved her arms to get their attention, feeling a little silly and a lot left out.

"What?"

"Uh, well, we gotta find her body if we're gonna prove your boyfriend's a murderer and Dean's innocent," Andy supplied oh so helpfully, like he wasn't talking to a woman who solved murders for a living. It did not help that he spoke through a handful of fries half stuffed in his mouth. Sam spared his younger partner a look that definitely said *'You're not helping'* and Diana wondered if she was looking at another brother in this insane family. Andy shrugged haplessly. "What? Dean said the guy bricked his ex-junkie-girlfriend up in a wall."

Related or not, the taller of the two men turned to Diana, who was now trying to process the *ex-girlfriend* bit, because she hadn't heard *that piece* of information yet. Sam tried for a calming smile as he paused in his gathering of (and nope, Diana absolutely did not see illegal firearms in the motel room. Plausible deniability) …*stuff*, to explain a thing or two about ghost hunting.

"We also need to salt and burn her bones." At the wide, blank look and single blink he received in response, the sheepish, apologetic look was back on Sam's face. "It's the only way to put her to rest."

Ballard just kept right on staring. Because of course it was.

-o-o-o-

Diana kept glancing between the road and her six and a half foot passenger sitting to her right. She, the beanstalk, and his fake lawyer were now on their way to what was apparently the scene of a murder. Because a ghost had told them. Or, well, left the breadcrumbs for them to figure it out.

"How exactly does Dean know all this, again?" The detective glanced at Sam – the brother – for the fifth time in half as many minutes. "You never really covered that."

"No, I guess we didn't," Sam hedged, and Diana knew a man avoiding a question when she saw one. The taller man glanced over his shoulder almost self-consciously to the kid in the back seat. Diana's hunch on a third brother grew worse. As did a seriously misplaced sense of humor; Sam checking in with his 'lawyer' before answering her question. "Dean's…uh… got a talent for knowing things."

Diana's look directly his way called absolute bullshit on that one, because, yeah, they'd said as much already, and it hadn't been any more true or enlightening the first time. Sam shrunk down like a chastised kid caught stealing a cookie.

"Like your lawyer buddy has a talent for starting fights and hypnotizing half my coworkers?"

The beanstalk managed to shrink down even further. Make that a kid with his hand stuck in the cookie jar, the thing so wedged in there they were gonna have to break the jar to get him free.

"Dean's psychic." Andy popped up between them, elbows propped up on the backs of each of their chairs, and Diana jumped. Sam's reproachful look didn't stop the kid from smiling congenially.

"Psychic." It wasn't a question. Hell, it wasn't even a statement. Diana didn't know what the hell it was, because…well, she didn't know what the hell kind of answer that had been to start with.

"Yep."

You know what? Sure, why not. Day she'd been having, Diana figured anything was possible. She flipped on a blinker and took the next right for Ashland street.

"Don't think we're not circling back to the part where you hypnotized half my coworkers." She glanced in the rear view mirror quickly enough to see Andy's sheepish, tight-jawed smile.

"Uh-mmm…I am pleading the fifth."

"Of course you are." Diana refocused on the road as the building numbers reached the first of the 2900s and she pulled over outside of an old supply store. It looked abandoned and was up for lease, sitting collecting dust.

Sam offered her an encouraging smile – it really wasn't all that encouraging – and climbed out of the car. Andy scrambled out of the backseat with a duffle bag of gear and weapons that was practically half the kid's size. Diana stared at the closed up building, dread somewhere between her stomach and her chest, and sighed. She checked the gun at her hip and climbed out of the car to join the two hunters on their search for a death omen.

-o-o-o-

Sheridan watched the three figures exit his partner's car from his own parked across the street. His partner, a fugitive, and the lawyer he was now pretty damn sure wasn't a lawyer, all entering the store where he had killed and buried Claire Becker. Together.

He hadn't wanted to believe it. That Dean Winchester was anything more than a conman blowing smoke up everyone's ass. He'd wanted to believe even less that he could have gotten to Diana. That Diana would take the word of a criminal and a scumbag over the word of her partner. Her lover. *Him.*

But when her car pulled up and she got out with *Sam Winchester* of all people, Pete's anger overrode the last of his hope. He reached into to the glovebox of his car, removed his gun from the compartment, grabbed the full gas can sitting in the passenger seat, and climbed out of the car.

As he crossed the street at a jog, Peter flicked the safety off with his thumb and entered the building after his wayward lover and two dead-men-walking.

-o-o-o-

The partially obstructed light shining through the old lettering on the store window – Ashland Supplies – cast a gloomy picture on the

opposite wall and gave them their little mystery word, complete with its extra letters. Ashland Sup. Dana Shulps.

Sam crossed the room, moving around dusty shelves and old equipment. The brick wall illuminated by the front window and their mystery word, looked different than the rest of the building. Newer. Sloppier. It didn't fit with the dust and disuse that had probably been a part of this building for at least a year now. He called to Andy, who tossed him an EMF scanner without needing the request verbalized.

"What's that?" Diana asked, joining the boys as Sam turned the thing on and started a slow wave across the brick surface.

"EMF," Andy answered, watching the more experience man at work. He'd used an EMF a time or two now, at least enough to understand the theory behind it. "Ghosts give off electromagnetic frequencies, so you can sort of track them with a meter, or at least know if it's a ghost you're dealing with."

"Some remains give off waves as well," Sam added as the beep-beep-beep of the machine started to grow more frantic, static growing with each increased beat. The two hunters shared a look and Sam turned the thing off, tucking it into his pocket.

"So, that thing's going crazy because Claire's body is in there?" Diana looked between both of them, but Andy had turned his attention to the bag they'd brought along, already rifling through it. Sam's smile, while grim, was encouraging.

"That's the theory at least."

Andy stood back up with sledgehammer in hand, passing it dutifully to Sam. Dean's note had said they'd find their body in a wall, so the two had come prepared. The taller hunter hefted the weight of the tool before he turned to the bricks. It only took a couple of good swings. The wall had been put together hastily, certainly not the work of a professional. Once he'd gotten a large enough opening, Sam stuck a flashlight and his head inside the hole. He drew back when he saw something a foot down, instead pushing his hand in and groping for what had looked like black plastic.

"Yeah," he muttered, hand grasping at what felt like a garbage bag wrapped around something hard and round. Probably a skull. "There's definitely something in there. Andy, see if you can find a crowbar."

He could probably take this thing apart with his hands if he had to,

but since they were in an old hardware shop, there was no reason not to look. Sam pulled at a couple of the bricks in the meantime, just to see if they'd come loose without much trouble, while Andy shuffled about in the rest of the store. Two of the bricks came off with minor tugs, and Diana joined in widening the hole.

Sam was about to tell Andy that it wasn't worth it, they could get through the wall without a tool, when the kid cried out in surprise. Both Sam and Diana whipped around, the cop pulling her gun in half the time it took Sam to reach for his.

Peter Sheridan stepped out from behind a shelf, hauling Andy in front of him like a human shield and kicking a gas can into the aisle with his foot. The sloshing of liquid was loud in the suddenly tense room. Sheridan's gun and focus was trained entirely on his partner, fist full of Andy's shirt, rucking it up about his neck in a painfully tight hold. Andy had his hands up, eyes wide and a fresh line of blood running down the side of his face. He was going to have one hell of a shiner from the butt of Sheridan's gun.

Diana's eyes hardened at the sight of her partner, her lover, hiding behind a kid. A good kid, it turned out, even if the detective had some suspicions about these boys' pasts.

"What are you doing, Pete?" She took a step in front of Sam, who had a hand on his gun but hadn't yet pulled it from his side. Two drawn weapons were plenty already for this Mexican Standoff. Pete's eyes glinted at the move, a tick in his jaw saying her protective measure hadn't been missed.

"I'm not doing anything, Diana."

She scoffed. "It's a little late for that."

Her eyes flickered to Andy. The kid looked terrified, but he kept glancing at Sam. Diana didn't have the bandwidth to check, but she could almost feel Sam beside and just behind her, shaking his head. She didn't know what it was with these two, particularly their hypnotic little lawyer, but she could sense the play they were trying to line up. She needed to buy them time and distract her partner before he killed again.

"I know about Claire."

Pete's jaw clenched, his hand twisting in Andy's shirt. The kid fidgeted, raising his hands a little higher. "I don't know what you're

talking about."

"You telling me I'm not going to find the body of a drug dealer in that wall?" She countered, tilting her head to the hole in the bricks, but her eyes never left her lover. Her gun didn't either. "You killed her. You stole those drugs." She reached up with one hand and pulled the necklace he had given her free of her blouse. "Am I going to find one of these on that body, Pete?"

His eyes shuttered, his whole face turning to stone, and Diana had her answer. Her hand went back to the gun.

"You bastard-"

Behind her, Sam suddenly shifted his foot to the left. Pete immediately retrained his weapon on the movement. Diana's finger tightened on the trigger of her own weapon, mind having all of half a second to contemplate if she was really about to shoot her partner should he shoot Sam. Andy took that half second – a distraction, Diana's brain filled in – to open his mouth.

"Put the gun-"

Andy's words disappeared in a yell and the deafening crack of a gun discharging. Pete had lowered his Sig Saur in one swift moment and shot the ground less than an inch from the kid's right foot. The bullet ricocheted off the cement and Andy jumped about a foot in the air, hands raising practically to his chin. The cop shoved his still smoking gun into Andy's jaw. The kid cried out as his flesh sizzled beneath the smoking metal.

"Not another word."

He was shaking, but Andy didn't say a thing. The look in his eyes, scared as it was, was fierce, and Diana regretted not taking the shot the moment her partner had lowered his gun. She wasn't going to get another chance like that and she'd wasted it hesitating.

"Put the gun down, Pete!" she shouted anyway, arms straightening with resolve and the preparedness of taking the next shot the moment it came.

Pete just hauled the kid even further in front of him, gun deep in his cheek. "Oh, I don't think so, Diana. You're fast. I'm pretty sure I'm faster." He turned to Sam next and gestured with his head. "Toss your gun over. Not you, Diana. You keep yours."

She could feel Sam's eyes on her, but the hunter did as he was told. He lowered his weapon to the ground in front of him cautiously, kicking it across the cement once he'd straightened. Pete kicked it further into the store and out of sight. Diana didn't lower her weapon, still trained on her partner, but she knew his demand for her to keep it was in no way good.

"Why did you kill Tony Giles?" Their one chance at this might still be their first play. Diana just had to keep Pete distracted long enough to find another opening. One that hopefully didn't get Andy killed. "What's he got to do with all this?"

"He scrubbed the money Claire brought in." Sheridan's voice remained cold, hard, and his fist in Andy's shirt seemed absolute. "He got skittish, wanted to come clean."

"And Karen?"

The cop rolled his eyes, as if it was obvious. "I'm sure he told her everything! She was a liability."

Diana's look was sour with regret, but Pete, the narcissist and psychopath that he was, saw it as something else entirely. He saw it as a flicker of hope, a flicker of understanding. Of sympathy.

"This doesn't have to be the end, Diana. I know it's a mess. I just panicked. But these guys?" He lifted Andy's fisted shirt, causing the kid to raise up on the balls of his feet with a gulp. "They're a gift. We can pin the whole thing on them." When his partner's eyes wavered in what he perceived as doubt, Peter continued, "Dean confessed; he told you where he bricked up the body. We came to investigate, only his fugitive brother attacked us. You shot him. It was self-defense."

Diana tensed as her partner wove his little tale. She could feel Sam at her back, exposed enough to be easily shot and killed, but staying impressively still. Diana regarded Pete with ice in her eyes, refusing to believe any more of his crap.

"So you can frame me, too?"

"No!" Pete's exclamation was desperate and his face morphed into that look he always gave her when he didn't get his way and didn't know how else to win an argument. She'd once found it endearing. Now it disgusted her. "We're in this together, don't you see? I'll kill this one, you take care of the brother. We'll deal with Dean when we get back to the precinct. An immediate transfer back to Sacramento. I'll drive

him myself; he'll have an accident along the way."

Diana stared at him in growing horror. She startled, ever so slightly, at the pressure of a hand to the small of her back. It was nothing, so subtle and slow that Peter probably didn't see it. But Sam was signaling her.

She swallowed and looked back at her partner, gun shaking ever so slightly in her hand.

"I still love you, Diana," Pete confessed, a light smile on his face, and she could see it. She could see the manipulation so clearly, the mental instability, the thought wide open in his expression that he'd won her over. How she'd ever missed it before, she didn't know. Maybe she wasn't such a good cop after all.

Diana lowered her gun.

Pete beamed. "Thank you. *Thank you*."

He lifted his gun from Andy's cheek, leveling it Sam's way. The moment his eyes left hers to focus on the man just over her shoulder, Diana fired two shots in the interim, gun back up in a flash, no hesitation this time. Pete took two to the shoulder and neck. Andy dropped like he was the one shot, hitting the floor and scrambling away from the dirty cop as fast as he could.

"Then why don't you buy me another necklace, you ass?" Diana lowered her gun, the scowl on her face etched from marble. She turned towards Andy, who was only a couple feet away from them, clearly messed up. Diana opened her mouth to ask if he was okay when Sam suddenly moved in her periphery.

"Diana!" he cried out, and she instinctually spun back to her partner's body, gun back up but not in time. She could feel it. Pete had his gun on her, still on the ground, one hand clutching his bleeding throat. But he had her, and she knew it. She'd let her guard down around him *again*, and it was going to cost her life.

She hoped it wouldn't cost Sam and Andy's too.

The gun went off with a crack at about the same time Sam's body collided with hers, but the bullet never hit flesh. Diana blinked in shock, her and Sam still upright but a tangle of limbs and precarious balance, at the back of a woman now standing between them and her partner. She wore white, the clothes more rags now than the dress

they had once been. Dirty, bloody blond hair fell in waves down her back.

Standing there, no more than a foot in front of the hunter and detective, Claire Becker looked as solid as any body Diana had ever seen. She'd apparently taken a bullet for them as well.

Claire garbled and bubbled, fresh blood flowing from her neck as she stared down at the man who had killed her. Who was bleeding out from the throat as well, so similar to her own demise. Justice. Peter Sheridan stared up at her with wide, horrified eyes. He thought he was hallucinating. That was fine. Claire did not care if her murderer believed this to be real. All that mattered was that she was the last thing he saw. The last thing he'd know in life before he was dragged down to Hell for his sins. For killing her, among others.

The death omen stalked towards her last victim. The last person she'd ever need to warn. Her slow, bloody smile left Peter Sheridan shaking, as he gargled and gurgled his own denial. Claire Becker's ghost faded away inches away from the dying detective's body as he took its last, drowning breath. The finalizing silence left behind two corpses, one in the wall, the other soaked in his own blood.

Sam let out a haggard sigh and Diana lowered her gun with a truly shaking hand now.

"It's over?" she asked hesitantly, glancing at the hunter as he backed off a couple of steps to give her space. He nodded.

They could probably skip the salt-'n-burn, too, Sam thought, as he glanced back towards where the body was still in the wall. Claire had found her own peace, and her remains would be paramount evidence in the case against the deceased dirty cop.

"Oh, thank god," Andy practically gasped, doubling over with his hands on his knees to heave a couple deep breaths. The poor kid. Sam crossed over to him as Diana holstered her gun. He put a comforting hand on the shorter man's shoulder. Andy looked up at him, something pained but knowing on his face. He nodded reassuringly, and Sam shared a sad smile with him.

These boys. The stories they must have. The horrors, too. Diana didn't envy them.

Staring at the growing bruise and burn on Andy's face, she moved over to the two and offered her own hand on the kid's shoulder. He

didn't look built for this kind of crazy, and Diana could not help but feel responsible. It had been her partner, her lover, who'd blindsided the both of them. "You alright?"

"Yeah," he reassured her, though she could still feel the slight shake of trembling muscles beneath her hand. "Just, let's not do that again, okay?"

"Sounds good to me." Diana couldn't agree more, actually. She turned to look at her partner's body, at the hole in the brick wall, and the entire mess her life had become in forty-eight hours. What on earth was she supposed to do now?

"So what now, detective?" Sam asked, the prodding in his voice a mirror to her own uncertainty. But, she supposed, she could start by helping to clean up the most recent mess Pete had made. She turned back to them, a hand on her waist, and chewed on her lip for a second of thought.

"Well, Pete did confess to me. He screwed up both your cases royally." She sighed and passed a hand though her hair. "I'd say there's a good chance we could get them dismissed."

Sam straightened in surprise, his face lightening, though his furled brow remained concerned. "You'd take care of that for us?"

"I hope so." Although, she had a feeling whatever the heck the kid in front of her actually was (and she did not want to know. Andy was a good old human in her book, and he was staying that way, so help her), he could probably 'take care of that' with a whole lot less paperwork. Diana grimaced, realizing that, honestly, these boys might not have a choice. They weren't the only police department looking for them, after all. "But the Sacramento kidnapping charges? That's another story. I can't help you."

Sam shared a look with Andy, the growing disappointment on his face tempered by what she knew was an already forming plan.

"Unless… I just happened to turn my back." Two sets of eyes locked on her, blinking owlishly. "And you walked away. I could tell them the suspects escaped."

Again. After all, it wouldn't be the first time with these guys.

Andy looked completely and utterly fine with that, just about ready to collapse where he was standing, but Sam hesitated. He turned a pair

of puppy dog eyes on her, full of worry and appreciation. "Are you sure? You could lose your job over something like that."

Diana drew in a deep breath, but she'd been sure of her answer well before she gave it. "Look, I just want you guys out there doing what you do best. Trust me, I'll sleep better at night." She paused for a moment, then turned towards Pete's body, already reaching for her cell phone to call it in. "Just, go get your brother and get out of here."

Andy practically grabbed Sam's arm like a child tugging a parent along at the sudden permission to leave the boring-ass-store-their-dad-had-dragged-them-to. Diana raised her hand to stop Sam from opening his mouth again, probably to protest good naturedly one last time.

"I don't want to know how you're going to do it. Just go." Diana offered a crooked smile as Sam's shoulders sagged, in both relief and regret, and he nodded. As he turned to follow Andy, she stopped him one more time. "Sam, you need to watch your back. They're gonna be looking for you now – all three of you. And get your gun on your way out. I've gotta radio this in."

Sam thanked her again, a farewell smile both sweet and bittersweet across his handsome face. Then the two headed deeper into the store for his dropped weapon and the back way out. Diana really hoped it was the last she'd ever see of those boys, a wish meant with only the best of intention and promise for them. Staring at her partner's body and the shattered remains of both her career and life, she sure as hell didn't have a great amount of either for herself.

-o-o-o-

Dean was long gone by the time Diana got back to the precinct. It was chaos. The organized chaos of trained professionals now trying to get a handle on a very fucked up situation, but still chaos. Diana had called in Pete's death, along with the murder of Claire Becker and what the disastrous truths her partner had confessed to. CSU and a whole band of officers, led by the Captain himself, were on scene within a half hour. Diana didn't touch a thing, in part to preserve the scene and give herself the best chance at a corroborated story, but more than anything, because she didn't want to see the remains of Claire Becker bricked up in that wall. Didn't want to confirm the necklace she knew hung around a skeletal neck.

She couldn't even look at Pete's body, so she sat outside on the stoop of the warehouse and waited for her coworkers.

The Captain took her statement, an air of authority, complete disbelief, and stunned disapproval wrapping up what was a half hour of exhausting misery. By the time Diana got back to the precinct, the news of Dean Winchester's disappearance was wide-spread, and the news of her and Pete – their relationship, Pete's crimes, her self-defense killing, him attempting to kill multiple suspects, you name it – was just as known. Diana kept her face like stone, ignoring any look sent her way, sympathetic or judgmental, and followed the officer escorting her to the very same interrogation room Sam had escaped from twenty-four hours ago.

All she wanted to do was sleep for a week and never think of the man named Peter Sheridan again, but Diana knew that wasn't how this would go. She had responsibilities, and they included interviews, interrogations, and paperwork for what was likely to be days. The next week, at a minimum, would be spent trying to prove her innocence in all this (based almost entirely on ignorance and being completely and utterly duped by a man she'd thought loved her) so that maybe, just maybe, she'd still have a job at the end of it.

If she even wanted it. Which, given the looks most of her coworkers were sending her way, she likely wouldn't.

Internal Affairs was called in, and Diana spent most of that first day with them and the Captain. Over and over and over again, she told and retold the series of events that had led to her shooting Peter Sheridan. No, she didn't know where the drugs were, if there were any left. No, she didn't know where the money was, but Anthony Giles had been responsible for laundering it. No, she didn't know if Karen had been in on it. One could only assume from the tone of Pete's voice that Mrs. Giles was an innocent bystander caught in the crossfire. No, neither of the Winchesters were involved in the money-making scheme, to her knowledge. No, the Winchesters did not play a part in Karen or Tony Giles' murder. *No*, Sam Winchester did not kill Peter Sheridan. *No*, she didn't know how either of them had managed to escape custody. *No*, she didn't know who the damn lawyer was outside of his first name. *No*, she didn't *god damn know* where they were now.

The second day was an exact repeat of the first, only with different IA agents, the Chief of Police, and the *Mayor*. Who, frankly, had no business being there, was pretty much useless as part of the conversation, and only drove Diana to further frustration.

The third day was worse. On the third day, the FBI showed up, called in by the Mayor who had clear plans to make an example of the

precinct as part of his campaign promises to clean up corruption. Probably all a part of that rumored gubernatorial bid next year. The FBI were somehow worse than IA, something Diana had not thought possible, as she found herself going over every second of those fifty-six hours with a comb that 'fine-toothed' was too loose a description for.

On the fourth day she was called back to the precinct, yet again, for another chat with the FBI. She couldn't imagine what else they could possibly hope to gain after yesterday's six straight hours of grilling. Whatever it was, she simply didn't have it for them. She didn't have much of anything left for anyone, at that point.

Diana entered the precinct and headed to her oh-so-favorite interrogation room for the fourth day in a row. With what few hours she had not spent in interrogation, Diana had gone home, which was only filled with reminders of how truly screwed up her life now was. Pete's toothbrush next to the bathroom sink. His shaving cream, razor, and shampoo in the shower. His clothes in her closet, his scent on her sheets. Diana had slept on the couch for those first two nights, if one could call it sleeping. Clean sheets hadn't been enough, even when she'd finally found the energy to change them. She'd thrown all of the rest of his things in the trash.

After the first round of questioning by IA, Diana had been suspended without pay for two weeks, pending their investigation. Following the results, she would either be charged, or her suspension re-evaluated. Diana's lawyer was confident she would be cleared of any wrong-doing, other than falling for the wrong man and being an oblivious and frankly pathetic detective. Her words, not his, but there wasn't much he or anyone else could say to the contrary. At least, not that she'd really listen to.

Diana sat down in the now-familiar and still-uncomfortable chair across from a man she didn't recognize. He was dressed like FBI, had the stony expression befitting of a Fed, and there was a thin manila folder on the table in front of him with the FBI logo stamped on it. So, likely a Fed. Diana could hardly gather the energy to wonder why yet another agent needed to talk to her when there were now multiple written accounts and every single detail, down to the least significant, had been pulled from her like a bad tooth.

"Look, whatever you want to know, you can find it any one of the reports," she stated, voice as hard and cold as it was drained. "There's nothing left to tell, agent."

"Henriksen," the dark skinned man introduced himself with a shark-like smile that put Diana instantly on edge. Not because it was aimed at her in any real way, but because this was a man with a bone, and Diana didn't know who – or what – that bone was. "And I'm not here about Detective Sheridan or your precinct's corruption scandal, though I can say it is an impressive one."

Diana stared at him, uncertainty and unease pulling her face into a stony frown. Agent Henriksen pulled out two pictures from the folder, passing them over. They were both from the precinct interrogation security footage. One was Sam Winchester being escorted out by Andy, the officer manning the door standing there with it wide open, hand over his eyes.

Officer Miller had not been able to explain his actions. He had not been able to explain anything about those one hundred and twenty seconds, only that they had happened and afterward he'd been left standing there, blinking, and asking himself if he'd dreamed them up. Because he wouldn't have done such a ridiculous, careless, and illegal thing.

None of the seven officers and two civilians who'd started a fight in the precinct that night or blatantly turned away from the escaping suspect could explain their behavior. And Diana never had gotten an answer out of the "lawyer."

The second picture was of Dean, having just stood from the chair, rubbing at surprisingly free wrists, handcuffs and chains pooled on the interrogation room table next what was clearly a set of improvised lock-picks. But what surprised Diana was who he was smiling at. She frowned at the second person in the picture, someone she didn't know. It was a woman, mostly turned away from the camera. She had dark hair and was wearing a trench coat. Diana had heard that an unidentified person had assisted in Dean Winchester's escape, but she'd just assumed it was Andy again. This woman, she didn't know.

The detective looked up to meet Agent Henriksen's bright and fierce eyes. He was watching her, likely to gauge her reaction to the two escaped fugitives. Two criminals who, before this case blew up in the Baltimore P.D.'s face, had only been a set of fingerprints and rough eye-witness sketches, sitting in a thin folder mostly forgotten on an FBI agent's desk.

"You see, Detective Ballard, I have no interest in you or your partner." Henriksen nodded his head at the two photos as Diana set them stiffly

back on the table. "I'm here for the Winchesters."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: And the FBI are now on scene! Okay, so fifty eight pages, twenty nine thousand words, and four friggin' chapters all so Andy could have a lip caterpillar *and* so we could get Henrikson on scene. Fine, Muse, you win; I guess that's kind of important.

Dean's note: If you don't remember from the episode, Hilts is Steve McQueen's character in The Great Escape. Benson is a reference to Det. Olivia Benson from Law and Order: SVU. I would have used an exorcist line for Linda Blair instead, but since she was a kid in that movie, nothing about that was going to come across as not-forced-as-hell, sadly. Benecio Del Toro was the first actor that came to mind when I tried to think of one who looked similar to the actor who played Peter Sheridan (who did not play anyone recognizable enough for Dean to quote, unfortunately).

Cas: Did I spend fourchapters with absolutely no angel only to have him be the one to get Dean out of the precinct without actually writing the scene? Yes. Yes I did. I figure if Dean grumbling in his head at Cas was enough to make you all happy, him smiling at a little jail break was gonna flat out break hearts ;) Plus, I kinda want Henrikson going after Andy and Cas too this time around. Or at least have them on his radar.

Castiel will be making a legitimate appearance in upcoming chapters. Like, a big, big, big, oh shit, oh crap, you are a mother effing dirty rotten author, Silence, you jerk, level appearance. It'll be over the span of, like, nine chapters because I am fucking verbose and it's *Croatoan*, but I promise it's coming ;D

And now I have to go get on a flight. Like, they're legitimately boarding and I'm sitting on the floor next to a plug typing like mad... Adios, until next time, all my lovely readers :)

Chapter 73: Season 2: Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Thanks so so so so so much for the reviews last chapter! I'm really glad so many of you told me you liked the last four chapters, since I was sitting there bashing my head about just how long that one episode was getting.

I am once more sitting in an airport next to a plug desperately trying to get this chapter up while they start boarding my plane. I'm cutting it even closer this time XD

Chapter Warnings: Chuck's sharing State secrets, Persephone's reminded where her loyalties are supposed to lie, Dean's getting unhappy hunches, Sam's being stubborn but not altogether wrong, and poor Andy's just dragged along for the ride he can't bring himself to get off of.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Drug use and judgment against that particular drug of choice. Due to this, I am going to post the following disclaimer: the below opinions concerning drug usage, both positive and negative, belong to the characters and do not reflect personal opinion on my part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 40

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

When Chuck opened his door Monday morning to the standard, three-rap knock of his no-nonsense Editorial Assistant, he beamed like a kid coming down the stairs Christmas morning. Stephanie just raised one eyebrow, and Chuck sheepishly admitted he hadn't been sure she'd come back.

"I told you I would," was all the woman had said, like that should have been enough from the get-go. She walked past Chuck, straight to his living room and her chair, which was still in its spot over by the window.

The writer, caught between further embarrassment and a touch of defense (it wasn't like he was used to people showing up in the first place, let alone sticking around long enough to be missed), closed his front door and followed after the blonde, who immediately demanded to see the progress he'd made while she'd been away. Chuck scrambled for the new chapters, Stephanie sat in her chair, and all was right in the world.

That was Monday. Today was Thursday, and Chuck and Steph were in the kitchen sharing a glass of lemonade while Chuck babbled on about the characters and their most recent experience with the Baltimore Police department. He'd managed to get two (*two!*) smiles out of her so far and even a partial chuckle (he was on a roll), when the woman suddenly hissed as if in pain, head twitching and tilting to the side like she had a bad neck cramp.

"Steph?" Chuck paused in his animated retelling of a Andy Gallagher role-playing a mustached lawyer, as his Editorial Assistant raised a hand to her throat and rubbed at the skin there until it was ringed red. "You okay?"

Whatever it was – a cramp, Chuck suspected, though how weird for it to come out of nowhere (perhaps she needed more potassium and magnesium in her diet?) – seemed to pass and Stephanie offered him a tight smile.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt." She set her glass of lemonade, barely more than a quarter drank, down on the counter beside her.

"Not at all-"

"I'm going to step outside for a minute," she continued, much to Chuck's confusion (and slight alarm, certain it was probably something he'd done, again). "I'll be right back."

Before she'd made it out of the kitchen, Chuck, who was definitely internally panicking because he liked his Editorial Assistant, yet kept getting the weirdest sensation he was going to lose her every time she walked out the door, blurted, "Do you wanna see something cool first?"

Steph paused on the threshold of the kitchen, raising that sardonic eyebrow in his direction. At least this time it was partially amused. "Right this second?"

"Sure." Chuck shrugged, laughing weakly at his own awkwardness. He

crossed the kitchen, passing her in the doorway and leading the way into the living room. "It'll only take a sec. I wanted to show it to you earlier, but kinda forgot."

The woman followed after him, so Chuck decided not to be too embarrassed by the poor and panicked attempt to keep her around. He set his own glass of lemonade down on his writing desk and shuffled through the multitude of papers there. It took a bit of scrambling, but he finally found the one he was looking for. "It's kind of like a deleted scene. I thought you might enjoy it."

She took the pages from him, nothing more than a small excerpt about a demon encounter the boys had had. Steph scanned the paragraphs quickly, while Chuck rambled on about what she was reading even as she read it.

"It's a hex bag that paralyzes demons! The idea just came to me." He moved his hands around as he talked, both in a nervous fidget and animated excitement that he so rarely got about his own story. Or, well, used to rarely get. He'd never really been a fan of his own writing; he always thought he'd like to write something else, sci-fi or mystery perhaps, but it was only ever flashes of *'Supernatural'* that came to him. However, it turned out what he'd needed was someone to talk about it with, someone who was both detached and also weirdly invested. Encouraging, at the very least. It was odd and out of his comfort zone, but considering this was the most human interaction Chuck had possibly ever had in his adult life and the best he'd ever felt about his chosen career, he'd take what he could get. "You can tie it to a string and wrap it around the demon and bam, instant paralysis! Cool, right?"

"Very cool," Stephanie replied in that sort of monotone way that always had Chuck questioning whether it was, in fact, cool at all. He was starting to figure out that was just Steph though. Like she knew the words to say but hadn't figured out the meaning behind them. Probably had to do with English being her second language, again. Not that Chuck had ever figured out what that first language was. "Why did you take it out of the story?"

She was reading the page again, which included a thorough description of how to make the bag, with all its ingredients and even the necessary incantation. Chuck didn't really know why he'd written it out in that much detail – he usually kept all the magic and hoodoo a lot vaguer – but it just seemed important at the time.

"Oh, it was too easy." He laughed another weak little laugh, rubbing at the back of his neck self-consciously. "Readers like it when the characters struggle, you know?"

Stephanie regarded him with that look again, definitely amused but also so, so harsh. "Didn't you give them a gun that could kill anything?"

The laugh that left Chuck's chest this time was entirely self-deprecating, as was the sheepish smile and red tinge to his cheeks. "Yeah…that had to go too. I think it's why I killed John Winchester, honestly. I guess I could have just had them chuck it or something…."

The eyebrow got worse. "Why would they throw away a weapon that valuable?"

Chuck's laugh got a little more nervous, his cheeks a little more red. "Yeah, you're right. Killing John Winchester was probably better."

Steph didn't agree one way or the other, she just handed the pages back. Even as she did, her expression pinched sharply, her head twitching in another spasm of pain, and her arm raised in an ultimately aborted move towards her neck.

Chuck's smile was strained but he pushed her hand and the pages back towards her. "Keep them. It's not like I'm gonna put it in the story."

Or even keep the excerpt. He hadn't been sure why he wrote it in the first place. His Editorial Assistant looked surprised for a scant moment before she folded the pages and walked over to her chair and the purse sitting beside it. Steph slid the papers inside and gathered the handles. She was rubbing her neck again, bag over one shoulder, when she returned.

"You have to go?" Chuck asked, and Steph nodded, reaffirming that she would only be stepping out for a moment. The writer smiled and tried to believe her. As he escorted her to the front door, he paused, hand on the knob, and glanced back at her. "You sure you're okay, Steph?"

The smile she gave was one of those rare real ones and it made the writer smile in return. The little knot in his stomach he couldn't explain but wrote off as a pathetic crush loosened ever so slightly.

"I'm fine, Chuck. I'll be right back."

With a weak nod he tried to have more faith in, he opened the door and watched his Editorial Assistant disappear down the steps and around the corner of his neighbor's hedges, like she did every evening at six pm. Only it was just after two and he didn't like the boulder sized rock in his gut. An identical set of eyes, set into the same face and similar in every way but for the age and knowledge in them, also watched the woman leave with a touch more suspicion and knowledge of real cause behind the knot in Chuck Shurley's stomach.

-o-o-o-

It was the yellow-eyed Prince of Hell waiting for her, this time, and Persephone regarded him with the distaste a demon of his caliber deserved.

"You are aware there is an *Archangel* attached to the Prophet, are you not?" she immediately spat as she came to a stop in front of him, glaring up as she shouldered the stupid bag that passed for fashion these days. The straps lay only an inch from the reddened, irritated skin of her neck, where an invisible, gold chain lay wrapped around her throat. A chain Azazel had enjoyed tugging on for the last seven and a half minutes. "Raphael may not be the most observant, but you are playing with *fire*, demon."

"I was going to say the same to you," Azazel returned with a lazy, toothy smile. He dropped the chain from his hand, or at least he did on the plane of existence he'd hidden the thing, and Persephone twisted and cracked her neck in annoyance as it was freed. The chain remained, but it was looser where it lay against her skin.

The demon crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the fence of some white collar family home. He'd considered spending some time with the woman and two children residing inside while he waited for his wayward asset. Just because he could (and because he hated waiting). However, Persephone had shown up before he'd quite settled on what he would do to them. Azazel regarded her now with the same smile he would have worn when he slaughtered those children in front of their mother.

"Tom says you're not being a team player, Princess. Didn't your parents teach you how to share?"

The twitch in her jaw and the aborted twist of her neck had nothing to do with the chain this time. Persephone bared her teeth like an animal. "What exactly are you expecting here? You told me to watch

the boys from afar and I am doing that. Providing you or your incompetent offspring with information is not why I am playing house with the Prophet. If you expected it to be, then you are stupid." She crossed her arms over her chest, a move Azazel was beginning to recognize as a tell. "Chuck doesn't even use their last name in his writings! He does not get more specific than that, demon. There has been nothing to share."

Azazel hummed, running his tongue over his teeth behind sealed lips. Reaching out with a lazy hand, he tapped a finger against the top of her head. "Oh, I don't know. I think your daddy sculpted more than beauty into that head of yours, Princess; you're not fooling me. You might not have specifics, but that doesn't mean you don't have information worth sharing."

She shoved his hand away with a hiss, eyes ablaze with a fiery green glow, and Azazel grinned all the wider. The woman seethed, but he knew she was quickly losing the control she desperately fought for.

"See, we need the boys to visit a little town in Oregon." He stretched out to muss her hair but this time she dodged him, taking a step and a half back and out of his reach. Azazel didn't bother following; he was content with the point he'd made. "So, put that pretty head of yours to use and get them there."

When her fierce gaze did not budge – all of that loss of control so clear beneath rage – the yellow eyed demon sighed dramatically.

"How about we skip the part of the conversation where I remind you that I dug you out of that hole-"

"You dug me out of that hole to bind with Sam Winchester!" she cut him off, anger and that famous temper of hers finally boiling over. Azazel's hand twitched for the chain once more but if Persephone noticed the threat, she didn't care. "Instead, you have be babysitting a Prophet right under an *Archangel's* nose."

Azazel did wrap his hand around the end of that chain, giving it a hard enough tug that Persephone bent practically double and lurched into the demon's waiting grip. Azazel could feel the thin links of metal beneath his hand, wrapped tightly around her neck, and he decided a little extra pressure was needed. A creature such as she could not be choked to death, but it was still rewarding to hear her struggle for the air she was compelled to take in.

"I dug you out of that hole to do as I say, when I say." The demon

lifted his arm until the tips of her toes were left struggling for purchase on the sidewalk. "You can start making yourself useful or you can go back to being chained up in the motel room twenty-four-seven until I do have use of you."

He released both her neck and the chain and she stumbled for footing, hacking through a partially crushed larynx.

"It's your choice, Princess."

Persephone hacked several harsh exhales, bent over with one hand braced on her knee, the other on her throat, before she was able to look up enough to glare at him. The first time she tried to speak, her voice broke before she'd finished the first word, and Azazel waited patiently through the second round of coughs. The woman straightened a second time and held out her hand as she took deep, even breaths.

"Give me your phone." Her voice was still rough, but she gestured with her hand when Azazel merely stared at her. "I know you have one. Give it to me."

The demon stared her down for another moment – a power play, she knew – before he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a slim smart phone. Persephone took it, unlocking the device and pulling up the virtual keypad.

"Bobby Singer's landline." It was a question in the form of a demand and she glanced expectantly from phone to demon. Those green beauties were *pissed* but also quite a lovely shade of defeated and Azazel rather enjoyed preening under that gaze. When he only raised an eyebrow in response, Persephone added, annoyed, "The one he uses as FBI."

"He has six," the demon answered, that lazy smile back in place. "We don't know which is which."

Her jaw clenched around tightly ground teeth. "The one with the DC area code."

Azazel hummed again, smile stretching smug across his face. He reached up and tapped his own head mockingly, waggling eyebrows at her. That jaw clenched even tighter. The demon rattled off the two-o-two number and she punched it into the phone.

The gruff voice of Bobby Singer answered after three rings. "This is

Agent Willis."

"Hello Agent Willis, this is Detective Diana Ballard, with the Baltimore Police Department." At her words, the yellow-eyed demon raised a languid eyebrow and Persephone kept right on glaring at him. "I'm trying to reach Agents Frehley and Simmons? Um…Sam and Dean?"

She dropped her voice at the end, tinged with uncertainty and the likes of a secret. She knew the second Singer picked up on it. "Of course. Everything alright, officer?"

"Yes, everything's fine here. We haven't had anymore, uh, problems since your agents left. But a friend of mine in Oregon called me. It sounded like they were having the kind of…thing your boys might be interested in?"

There was a shuffle in the background of the line as Bobby grabbed a pad of paper and a pen. "Well, I can get a message to them. This friend of yours got a name?"

"Rachel Williams." Persephone sent a glance Azazel's way. He was watching her indolently, but in response to a sharp look, mouthed the name of the town widely. "She's with the Rivergrove Sheriff's department."

"I'll send them her way."

"Thank you, Agent Willis." Persephone lowered the phone, ending the call and tossing it back at the demon. "It will take them a while. The Winchesters are in Mississippi."

"Oh," Azazel said offhandedly, tucking the phone back into the front pocket of his flannel with the flair of a man purposefully acting nonchalant. "Their location we already know."

Persephone's glare darkened, realizing he'd been testing her in more ways than one, and she shifted her weight in the face of his purposefully obnoxious smile. "We done?"

That expression shifted even more so, now the cat who'd caught the canary, and Persephone wanted to rip it off his face. The chain around her still-irritated neck was a painful reminder that she could do no such thing. The demon tapped the phone against his palm. "We're done. But I'll be checking in on you again real soon."

Without bothering to respond, she turned her back on the demon and

headed for the Prophet's house, hand wrapped tight against her purse and the pages within that Chuck had given her.

-o-o-o-

Dean hung up with a quick, "Yeah, we got it. Thanks, Bobby," and tucked the phone into his pocket, leaning back in his seat to do so. Across from him, typing away on his computer in the internet café they were camped out at, Sam raised a brow.

"Detective Ballard called him," Dean answered the unspoken question, reaching out to grab his coffee, giving it the side eye when he realized it wasn't the beer he wanted it to be. Stupid coffee shops. Bars had wifi, too. Of course, bars weren't usually open at ten in the morning. "Said she's got a friend in Oregon with a possible case."

Oregon would be quite a trek, having just wrapped up a case way down south, but if that's where the next job was, that's where they'd go. Besides, Diana had done them one hell of a favor letting them just walk like that (again). They owed her, and this time if she'd come to collect, they were sure as hell going to answer.

They'd have to wait for Andy to get back from wherever he'd gone. The hunt hadn't been an easy one for him. Back to back, really, what with getting held hostage with a gun to his head in Baltimore. Hell, the kid still had one hell of a shiner from that encounter, the thing now an ugly yellow-green across his eye and temple. But this case… Dean shook his head. Crossroad demons were a piece of work, that was for sure, and the one they'd gone and summoned in an attempt to save Evan Hudson's life had certainly worked the angle on the poor kid.

Dean, having the more experience with the bastards, had planned to go to the crossroads alone and bargain for Evan's contract once more. It was a stupid play, really. Yes, they were hunters, but Evan had made his choice ten years ago. Risking everything – the damn apocalypse – on something like summoning and chatting up a crossroads demon just to save one man…

It was Winchester level stupid. Which is probably why they did it, because Dean Winchester was not capable of looking a person in the eye, knowing firsthand the fate they were about to suffer, and turn his back on them. There wasn't a person on the planet he wouldn't try to save from a lifetime on the rack downstairs. That was just one of his crosses to bare.

So he'd gone, but he'd had an unexpected tagalong. Andy had spent the case growing quieter and quieter, to the point where both Winchesters were sharing worried glances behind the kid's back. When it came time to split up, Sam buying some time against the hellhounds and Dean off to the crossroads, Andy had been insistent he go with Dean.

The hunter should have known better.

He'd just about wrapped the deal with the devil-trapped hell-bitch – her continued non-exorcised existence for Evan's contract – when she'd turned red eyes on the kid and asked, "What about you, handsome?"

Before Dean could shut it down, he knew they were neck deep, a mile up a certain creek without so much as a floaty, let alone a paddle.

"What about me?"

"You miss your girl, don't you?" Andy went paler than any ghost Dean had ever seen, and that was no simple challenge. Damnit, he needed to put an end to this *right friggin' now*. "I could bring her back."

"Don't, Andy," Dean hissed, turning his back on the demon to face Andy, whose wide, horrified, and so, so desperate eyes stayed locked on the woman in the center of the devil's trap. "Believe me, kid. It's not worth it."

Andy's gaze turned his way, but it was numb and glassy and Dean's stomach sank down to the dirt floor. "I got her killed, Dean. If I could bring her back-"

"And what? Tell her you sold your soul for her? Ten years, if you're lucky, and then a lifetime of pain until you turn into one of those?" Dean tossed his head in the direction of the red eyed bitch behind him. "You think Tracy would want you to become like her? Tricking other people into trading away their souls for the thing they want most?"

Andy's eyes dropped and they took Dean's heart (the one he usually wouldn't admit to having) with them.

"I get kid. I *do*." He put a hand on Andy's shoulder and squeezed, hard enough to remind the kid that he was still alive. "I've been there, I *did* that. And I've been the reason someone else did that. I will tell you right now, you don't want to do this. Tracy won't want to be the

person left behind, knowing her life cost you yours. *Trust me*."

"You should let the boy make his own decisions, Dean." The demon, head cocked to the side, desperately trying to listen in, smiled sweetly when she recaptured Andy's gaze. "I'm not talking you into anything, honey. I'm just putting all your options on the table."

"Yeah, sure you are." If they'd had the Colt, Dean would have shot her right between the eyes.

Andy lowered his gaze, fists clenched by his sides, but he didn't speak again. The demon sighed, but turned her attention back to the Winchester, and they sealed their deal without a part in it for Andy.

Afterward, she smacked her lips with thinly veiled distaste while Andy dug his heel through the dirt-drawn devil's trap. "You taste like righteousness, honey. It's disgusting."

"Yeah, yeah," Dean wiped his own mouth with the back of his hand. "And you taste like roses. Now beat it."

The demon scoffed but was gone with the parting words of, "Gotta love a man with manners."

Andy didn't say a word on their drive back, Dean calling Sam to make sure they'd pulled through the hellhounds attack. The kid they knew didn't resurface, even when Dean tried to pull him out of that dark, dangerous headspace he knew only too well. They'd gotten back to the motel, Andy going straight to bed without so much as a mumbled, 'night', leaving Dean to drag Sam outside and give him the recap.

The kid hadn't been much better in the morning, though at least he'd been speaking. The jargon that came out of his mouth had been another language, at least to Dean, but the context gave was sufficient to figure out the mumbling was pot-related. Andy was planning on finding a score, which was reason for enough for Dean to wave his hand and tell the kid to get lost, come back when he was done. Not like they couldn't all use a little time apart.

Although, currently, the two brothers hadn't exactly gotten more than a foot and a half between them yet. Sam wanted internet and Dean didn't have anywhere better to be, other than morosely finding the bottom of a bottle after a case involving Crossroad deals, especially one hitting so close to home for one of their own. But that seemed like a terrible idea to do alone and he'd been better in recent years. Or, at least trying.

"Did Bobby say how she was?"

Dean glanced up, blinking at his brother as he was brought back to the conversation at hand. Sam spared him a telling glance over the top of his laptop before he went back to typing. Dean didn't even know what he was up to over there. They'd wrapped the case, saved the guy who'd been stupid and desperate enough to make a deal ten years ago. Nothing more to be clack-clacking about.

"Uh…why would he?"

Sam sent him another one, not quite a bitchface, but a key building block: exasperation. "He wouldn't, it's just… you know, Diana really stuck her neck out for us. Something like that could cost a cop their career."

Like Dean needed the reminder. Perhaps Diana Ballard's willingness to look the other way hadn't ended up as live-saving for him this time around as it had for Sam and Andy, what with Cas having not been up to much and amenable to an earth-side assist when Dean sent an *if-you-happen-to-be-free* prayer heavenward. But he remembered what she'd done for him the first time. She and Sam saved his life, and her letting them go had been far more a save for Dean, who would have been sent back to St. Louis on murder charges. It didn't matter that that's not what had gone down this time; he owed the detective for both, regardless.

"Yeah, well, I kinda doubt she shared her life story with Bobby." Dean played with the straw of his to-go cup, iced coffee growing pretty watery by now. He shoved the thing in out and out of its top, making an obnoxious, plastic screeching that earned him a glare from his brother.

Sam couldn't really refute Dean's point. Still, he wondered how the detective was fairing. Her life had been turned upside down, although for once on a case it was largely not due to the Winchesters. There wasn't much to do about it, however. The woman probably wanted them out of her life completely, sans sending them in the direction of a hunt. Sam sure would.

Dean set his cup down another minute later, a frown on his face. Sam wasn't really paying attention, having gone back to researching Crossroads Deals. Dean had told him plenty on and off, but Sam found control in researching something for himself, and that control offered the kind of comfort his big brother just couldn't. The recent case

hadn't just struck a nerve for Andy; Sam was plenty unnerved himself. The deal Dean had made and Evan Hudson's narrowly avoided fate drudged up the still-recent death of their own father. As if that wasn't enough emotional turmoil to trudge through, it was a reminder of what, according to the world Dean had already lived through, would be Dean's fate in less than a year's time.

But his brother didn't need to know that was what he was researching.

"Did you give her Bobby's number?"

Sam paused at the question, blinking at Dean's tone. And now his face, which had grown serious in the *oh-shit* sort of way that never spelled anything good for them. Sam shook his head. He'd thought it after he and Andy had left the supply store on Ashland, regretting not leaving Diana a way to contact them. A cop with knowledge of the supernatural and a hunter's number in her back pocket could be huge for getting on cases quickly, before multiple victims piled up. But Sam had been focused on getting Dean out of the precinct before Diana called in Sheridan's deeds and death.

Not that he'd need to, of course. No, the jerk had been back at the motel all along, Cas having gotten him out almost twenty minutes earlier.

In the end, though, it was probably for the best that they hadn't left any traceable ties to Diana Ballard, in case her department went heavy on the investigation into her involvement.

Dean's eyes were narrowed now, jaw tightening in a way that made Sam close his computer, full attention on his brother. "I didn't, either. So how the hell did she get Bobby's number?"

Huh. Okay, so maybe that was a little weird, but Sam didn't really think much of it. He shrugged. "We're in the system now. Known associates are something cops keep track of." Dean still didn't look convinced – how would Bobby have even popped up on their radar? – but Sam continued, "Diana knew all about me. The house fire, dad dragging us across the country. They probably knew about Bobby, too."

The older Winchester was shaking his head. "Something doesn't feel right. What's she doing calling us about some small town in Oregon? She just happens to have a friend out there who calls her about a mysterious case and our number on hand, which we *didn't* give her? Nah, something about this stinks."

Sam watched as Dean fidgeted, pulling at his t-shirt like it was too tight across his chest, despite the fact it was the same size as every shirt his brother owned. The first swirls of unease stirred in his gut as he stared at his sibling's agitated tell. "Is this a timey-sense thing?"

"I don't know. But somethings up." Dean abandoned the pretense and just flat out rubbed at his sternum. Cas was fidgeting in there as much as he was, and something ugly – like suspicion – was building in Dean's gut. His stupid chest angel only ever reacted to two things: Dean's own self-loathing and demons. While the recent case and dealing with those red-eyed bastards had stirred up some seriously unpleasant memories, Dean had a feeling that had nothing to do with the tightness behind his ribcage now.

In fact, the hunter had a growing hunch.

Dean dug his phone back out of his pocket, dialing Bobby's number. The phone rang three times before the older hunter answered. "Hey, Bobby. That woman you talked to, did she have an accent?"

Across the table, Sam's brow pinched. Diana Ballard didn't have an accent. At least, not much of one. What was Dean getting at?

Whatever Bobby's response was, it turned Dean's face stone-cold blank. He thanked the older man and hung up again.

"What'd he say?" That knotted unease was full-well on its way to dread.

"Lady had an accent. Bobby thought Jewish, maybe Arabic." Dean tapped his cell on the tabletop, his glare deadly but not meant for Sam. "Sound familiar?"

It took only a moment, but the younger Winchester's frame tensed with an unpleasant memory. "The wrong number call. The one Crowley warned us about, that Hell had traced."

Dean's tight-lipped smile was anything but friendly. "Azazel's girl."

Sam glanced down at the top of his laptop, thinking about the implication. "Oregon's a trap."

His brother swore, tossing his phone onto the wood. Its clatter made Sam twitch, but he covered it well. "We need to know everything about this Rivergrove place, and why Azazel wants us there."

But Sam's thoughts were on another trap. The motel in that college town where Crowley had found them and warned them Azazel was coming. The bar they'd gone to afterward, hoping to trap a demon trying to search their room. The utter nothing that had come out of it all. And a woman he'd met who had a strange accent.

"What's with the constipation face?" Dean was staring at him, and although his words were pure snark, the look on his face was serious.

Sam ignored the quip, shifting in his chair, jaw squared with growing realization. "Both of those are Semitic languages."

The older hunter just stared at his kid brother. "…yeah, so?"

Sam chewed on the left side of his cheek, grinding his teeth together not out of anger but indecision. "Semitic languages, that alphabet, they all came out of the same place, Dean: Phoenicia. You know what else they call the Phoenician alphabet?"

"I bet your gonna tell me."

"Proto-Canaanite."

Dean stilled at the word. It wasn't immediately familiar to him – he never was and never would be the geek genius his brother was – but he'd heard it before, from the kid's own mouth, even. He closed his eyes briefly as it hit. "The green-eyed lady in your vision."

Sam didn't look any happier about it. "Azazel was in that vision too."

"Great." Dean leaned back in his chair harder than was probably necessary, glaring at the table like it was a physical representation for the mess this was turning into. "So now Yellow Eyes has some mystery monster playing phone tag with us, leading us wherever the hell he wants. That's just great."

The younger Winchester fell quiet again, thinking about the bar and the woman he'd 'bumped' into. He went back to grinding his teeth in indecision once again. "There's something else." When Dean looked up, an unhappy expression on his face that didn't actually have a whole lot to do with Sam (yet), the younger Winchester continued. "There was a woman. I met her in the bar that night, after Crowley."

That expression shifted from 'you dog!' into 'you've got to be kidding me' so fast it was impressive Dean didn't get a headache. But Sam couldn't help but take offense to where that look ended. He wasn't

stupid; he hadn't done anything with her. They'd just talked. Well… and that one other thing.

"She didn't look like the lady in the dream. She was blonde and had blue eyes." Although, thinking back on it now like he certainly hadn't been then, the two had been about the same height and build. "She had an accent. I thought it was maybe Yiddish, but it easily could have been one of the ones Bobby mentioned."

His brother was looking more and more grumpy, and Sam hadn't even gotten to the bad part. He was stalling, and he knew it.

"She bumped into me while I was getting a beer. Spilled her drink." The hunter looked down at his hand, the cut having long ago scabbed over and faded. He couldn't remember what had happened to her glass. Sam thought maybe it had ended up on the bar, but really, that only meant anyone could have taken it. The younger Winchester didn't want to meet Dean's eye. It was stupid. *Careless*. To let a demon – or someone working for a demon – so easily trick him with a cute smile and batted eyelashes. Damn it, he was so much smarter than that. "Her glass cut my hand."

Across from him, Dean went still. Terrifyingly still. "So…they have your blood?"

"Yeah," Sam answered, voice cold and quiet. "They could."

"Great, Sam. That's *great*. Are you kidding me?" Dean slammed his hand down on the table, causing his kid brother to jump, however little, and several other patrons to glance their way. They were lucky it wasn't peak coffee-shop hours, but that didn't mean the place was empty.

Dean knew it wasn't actually Sammy's fault, and the kid certainly looked like he was stewing in enough guilt and self-loathing to not need his brother's help there. The older Winchester let out an aggravated sigh, never having been much good at biting back his temper or assuaging the guilt when he inevitably failed. Damnit, he remembered the way Sammy had looked at the bar, suddenly relaxed and, dare he think it, almost happy. He'd known in a second the kid had found some cute thing that raised his spirits, and he'd been *proud* of him.

Whoever this lady was, she was good as dead in his book.

"There's nothing we can do about it now," he growled out instead and

reached for Sam's computer, spinning it around to his side, flipping it open. "Let's find out what the hell is so important to that Yellow Eyed bastard in Rivergrove, for starters."

It wasn't much of an olive branch, and it certainly wasn't healing any wounds, but Sam took the out as Dean googled the town and waited for the crappy-ass wifi to finish loading the images. When it did, he swore a blue streak that had even Sam staring at him in surprise, let alone the rest of the patrons near them.

"What is it?" Sam grabbed the laptop and turned it around, but the only pictures on the screen were of a quaint little mountain town. Nothing worth the words coming out of his brother's mouth or the look on his face that Sam couldn't even quite place.

Dean didn't do scared, otherwise that's what Sam would call it.

"What's in Rivergrove?" he asked, kind of dreading the answer.

Not that the answer, when Dean gave it, made any sort of sense to him.

"Croats."

-o-o-o-

When Andy eventually made it back to the motel, blessedly high off some pretty good shit, it was to the middle of one hell of an argument.

"We're not going!" Dean was shouting at Sam, the volume of his voice and aggravation in it a readable measure of how long this fight had apparently been waging. "What part of walking into a trap are you not getting?"

"The part where we leave an entire town to die, Dean!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Andy interrupted, standing wide-eyed, utterly stoned, and very, very lost in the doorway of the motel. "What'd I miss?"

Sam huffed something between a sigh and a scoff, but at this point in their relationship, Andy was used to being the kid, kid brother. Sam had never gotten to be the older one, so he had a tendency to be a little condescending. But Andy had never had a brother either, so he figured they were both overdue. Dean, meanwhile, just crossed his arms and refused to talk, so the duty fell to Sam to explain just what

the hell was going on.

Hell being the key word there.

Andy sank onto one of the mattresses, desperately chasing a high that, while still chemically existent in his body, suddenly felt a lot less blissful.

"Zombies." He blinked slowly at the two brothers. "You're telling me we just got an SOS from a town in Oregon, but it's a trap-" and here he turned from one brother to the other- "because it's full of…angry zombies. Reavers. We're going to a town full of Reavers."

Sam dropped his arms with a heavy sigh. Which was apparently a yes.

Andy looked down at the backpack he'd left the motel room with earlier, woefully empty at the time and now happily holding enough weed to last him till the next time they had enough downtime after a hunt to hunt down a dealer. It sat on the bed beside him, staring up at him, beckoning him with oblivion that he only just realized how badly he needed.

"I'm not high enough for this."

Dean rolled his eyes, throwing up his hands from where he was leaning against the tv-stand. Whatever he might have been about to say, though, was silenced by a look from Sam. Andy had been shaky since Baltimore, to say the least, and yesterday's case had not helped. The kid was toughing his way through it, (smoking his way through it, more like), but the brothers had both noticed the change well before they'd made Mississippi. It wasn't that they disapproved so much as it wasn't either of their pick of poison when it came to forgetting the hell that could be their lives. Besides, Winchesters were so much better at worrying about each other than taking care of themselves.

"Maybe you should sit this one out," Sam suggested, offering an understanding smile, though Dean still thought it looked judgmental. Pitying, if nothing else. Not that any expression Dean had had around the kid when he was high lately had been much better. He wasn't the greatest at being non-judgmental in general. At least not with vices, hypocritical as that may be.

"We're all sitting this one out," Dean countered before Andy could take Sam up on his offer or decline it, as he had once again on the crossroads case. Much to his regret and now Dean's sense of smell. He was so not letting Andy in Baby like that. Kid stank. "Because

we're *not going*."

"It's fine. I'm good," Andy said, voice about as vacant as his eyes, but Sam was already arguing back, neither of the Winchesters really hearing him.

"We can't just ignore this, Dean. You said we wouldn't run from everything!" Sam wasn't going to back down on this. It was a whole town of people – over three hundred from the city census – and according to his brother, they were all about to suffer pretty horrible fates. "You talk like Time is going to screw us over, but maybe we're *supposed* to go! What if it's been pointing us in the right direction all along?"

Dean could only stare, dumbstruck. "Are you serious? This is not a direction we wanna go, Sammy!"

"Well, we're supposed to be sticking to the timeline."

It was kind of a dirty trick, bringing Cas's words into this, but Sam was ready to pull out any of the tricks, including using Dean's sentiment for the angel against him.

"No," the older Winchester argued right back, pointer finger jabbing at Sam even from across the room, "we're supposed to be sticking to you-not-getting-yourself-killed!"

Sam held out his arms mockingly. "Did this kill me last time?"

Dean gritted his teeth, because the smug bastard already knew the answer to that question. "It tried its damnedest, Sam! Besides, there was no woman last time, therefore, timeline's already broken!"

Silence fell for half a minute, Dean temporarily in the lead but far from victor. Sam dropped his arms, staring at his brother with a heavy rise and fall of his chest.

"What woman?" Andy looked back and forth between the two of them, but neither brother answered his question.

"Then how did it happen?" Sam's question was posed innocently enough, even if it made Dean bristle with aggravation. He ran a hand through his hair, actually having to think about it.

When the answer came to him, he wasn't happy any more happy with it than he was with anything else in this discussion. "A vision."

The younger Winchester frowned, working through the differences in the timelines. "So, Azazel then. It was a trap last time too, Dean. Only this time, we blocked his ability to give me visions, so he found someone who could dial a phone."

The sarcasm wasn't helping Dean's non-existent calm. "Someone *new*, Sam. And new is bad!"

He hated the expression that overtook his brother's face. It was the one he got any time he'd managed to back his brother into a verbal corner. It was the *lawyer* look. The man from the future *hated* that look. Actually, just about every version of Dean hated that look.

"Not going to Rivergrove would be new."

"God damn it, Sammy." Dean threw his arms up again, shoving off the tv stand. "Stop twisting my words around. We are *not* going!"

-o-o-o-

Baby sat idling in the middle of the forest road, her driver white-knuckled on the steering wheel, staring at the last bridge between them and the town of Rivergrove, Oregon.

"This is a bad idea. This is the definition of a bad idea. In the history of bad ideas, this is right up there with not killing Hitler as a baby."

Sam glanced sidelong at his brother, who'd practically slammed on the breaks when they'd rounded the last bend and come across the bridge. A bridge Dean remembered crossing only once before. He'd tried for twice, but the damn thing had been barricaded with armed men, all of which had opened fire on him and one of which had tried to tag along for a ride through his window.

Dean really hadn't been okay with any of this for the entire two day drive. Sam was expecting him to eventually collapse into the grumbling older brother who didn't like it but was going along with it because he couldn't stop Sammy from doing it. And hell if his baby brother was going alone. But Dean never made it to that stage, and Sam hadn't ever seen him quite like this. Not much scared his big brother. Sure, the idea of losing Sam, the way they lost John, even losing Jo or Cas; those were the sorts of things that scared Dean. Intangible things beyond his control.

But not monsters. Not even zombies.

There was something about these 'croats' that had Dean pretty shaken up and he wouldn't really talk about it. So far, despite all the information he'd given them about the event itself, he'd only said the creatures were bad mothers: quick to spread, difficult to kill, and the version of the virus waiting for them in Rivergrove, Oregon was difficult to spot in innocents until they turned on you. Sulfur in the blood was the only way they'd figured last time, and the incubation period could take hours.

Still, there was something more going on that Sam couldn't place. Something about the familiarity with which Dean used the slang term. Like he hadn't dealt with them just once, but a lot. It was the kind of future that fit right in with a coming apocalypse, and the kind of thing Sam needed to know, but really didn't want to ask. A reality too terrible to even imagine. One he was starting to worry Dean had lived through.

"Well, we're here," Sam said, but not harshly. "So we might as well check it out."

"Not with Baby, we're not." Dean continue to idle in the middle of the road, staring at the bridge. Sam frowned, but his brother was already switching to aggravation again. "They put the town on lockdown shortly after the breakout. Roadblocks at all the bridges, armed croats stopping anyone from leaving. No way out except on foot."

Dean put the car in reverse, spinning the wheel to turn her around. "If we're doing this, we're going in on foot because it's the only way we're getting back out if it all goes to hell."

Which it would. This was them they were talking about, after all.

Sam hesitated, the first inkling of just how bad an idea this really was setting his nerves on edge. Not that Dean hadn't warned him in every single way, using every possible word combination in existence, and all of the adjectives over the last thirty six hours. Sam had heard every single one, even accepted them, but he was still adamant that they need to do this.

Three hundred and twenty seven people lived in that town. Three hundred and twenty seven lives that needed saving, and only they could save them.

Still, as they drove about a half mile away from the bridge and pulled onto the shoulder, as much into the trees and bushes as they could, Sam did wonder how ill-conceived his notion of saving this town was.

The road to Hell was paved with good intentions, after all, and they were quite literally walking into Hell's waiting hands.

But, like he'd said, they were already here, and they had a job to do.

The three hunters took several minutes to arm themselves, filling packs with guns, plenty of ammunition, holy water, rosaries – the works – before they covered Baby with some cut branches, hiding her among the growth as much as possible. Then they shouldered their bags, turned down the road, and started the hike into Rivergrove and whatever was waiting for them there.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Dun-Dun-Dunnnnn! Hehe, I've been waiting to write Croatoan for months, guys. Months! And it just gets better from here on out :D Oooh, you all are gonna hate me and I *can't* wait. ….There may be something very wrong with me…

Cas: Hang with me, he is coming. I'm just incapable of writing anything less than three chapters for every one episode. So, I promise, he's coming, but we've got to set the stage first ;)

Reviews: Thanks so much to everyone who has been reviewing or commenting. I love hearing from you guys and it really keeps me going! So keep those thoughts, words, all out screaming, you name it, coming :)

Delay Question Mark? Okay, so I'm off to meet my infant niece for the first time ever, which is very exciting, but also one giant question mark in terms of writing. Will I have time to write? Will I have time to edit a chapter? Will I even be getting enough sleep to function properly? That last one's probably a no… which means there is a good possibility I won't get a chapter up next weekend. It'll be a two-week delay at most though, so hang tight if you don't hear from me by next Sunday! I will do my best (I'm sure hoping to get some writing time on this 'vacation' but I imagine it just might not happen…)

Chapter 74: Season 2: Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

A/N's: Okay, obviously I did not make last week's post but I'm not making you wait till Sunday, either. Thank you all for your patience, understanding, and the many versions of "shut up, lady, we're here till the end, just post when you post and stop being such a worry-wart" (all versions of this were actually so much nicer than that but my internal comedian thinks self-deprecation is *hilarious*)

For real, though, thank you for all the support! It really keeps me going.

Chapter Warnings: We're checking out the quaint little town of Rivergrove, Oregon, which is about to get a whole lot less quaint. The boys have a plan - okay, the boys have *half* a plan - but Hell and a Zombie Apocalypse aren't gonna make it easy for them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 41

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean remembered the 2014 that was and never should have been. He'd had nightmares about the future Zachariah sent him to for years after he'd come back. Long after the apocalypse ended and with it the potential for that future. It wasn't until the actual year of 2014 had come and passed with no Croats in sight that Dean's mind was finally able to let go of that residual fear and the dreams stopped.

Now, the man from the future was once more facing the very real possibility. Yet again in his lifetime there was a not-insignificant chance of that world coming true. If they didn't stop Hell from starting the apocalypse, the 2014 that had caused so many sleepless nights would be back on the menu of potential ends, and here they were, walking into the very start of it all.

Dean had a feeling his subconscious would be starting those dreams back up again, not that he was planning on sleeping anytime soon.

Rivergrove was quiet as the three hunters hiked into the forest town. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary (but then, nothing ever did with these things). It was the standard fare of a late afternoon in small town America: a car passed down the main street now and then, a trio of older women stood chatting outside the local theatre, and a man on the porch outside the general store was cleaning a dismantled fishing pole.

"It seems pretty quiet," Sam commented, obviously going for calm and reassuring, given how tense Dean was beside him, eyes everywhere and hand a little too tight on the shoulder strap of his duffle.

"Yeah, that's how it starts," the older Winchester growled, but, at least for the moment, he didn't look like he was about to pull his gun on the as-far-as-they-could-tell innocent civilians. His eyes lingered on the clean-shaved, dark-skinned man polishing that fishing pole and Sam recognized the particular stink eye that meant Dean seen something just like it before.

The younger Winchester spared the man an assessing look. He was eyeing them with just as much suspicion, which wasn't all that uncommon in a town whose population size meant everyone knew everyone, and nobody knew them. But Dean turned away: away from the man sitting outside the general store, away from the center of town, and started in the direction of what looked to be residences. Andy and Sam followed quietly, Andy walking backwards a couple of paces, keeping his eyes on the fisherman fellow with about as much tension as Dean, but for entirely different reasons.

Dean had said these were smart zombies. Fast zombies. If Andy had learned anything from the remake of *The Dawn of the Dead*, it was that you did not take your eyes off of fast zombies.

Sam caught up to his brother, shouldering his own bag a little higher. He glanced surreptitiously around, but they were quickly getting away from the main drag and into houses set back in the woods. There were even fewer people milling about. Still, Sam kept his voice down as he asked, "Do you want to call Cas?"

The look on his brother's face said yes. Yes, absolutely, he wanted to call in Cas. But what he responded with was narrowed eyes and a straight-forward gaze. "Phones are out."

Not that thathad been what Sam was remotely talking about, but the younger Winchester still startled. He stopped walking long enough to pull out his phone and stare at the zero bars up in the left hand corner. Great. Yeah, you know what, if he was going to murder an entire town, that would probably be his first step too. The younger hunter took a deep breath, physically willing away the tension that pulled at his shoulders and neck. When he got moving again, Sam had to jog several steps to catch back up with his brother, who continued on up the road like he hadn't just dropped a major bombshell.

"You can still pray to him."

The side-eye Dean sent his way might been followed any other day with a comment on why was it always Dean's responsibility to contact Cas, considering Sam could pray to him just as easily. But, given the current situation, it wasn't really the right time to rehash that discussion. Dean was still too oblivious about his connection with the angel (particularly over Sam and Bobby's infant relationship with Castiel) to listen to his brother's reasoning anyway.

"No. If Azazel planned this whole thing, than he's got eyes here. I don't want him knowing we got an angel on our side any more than he already does."

He very specifically did not want that yellow-eyed bastard to know Cas's name. A speck of grace in his chest was one thing, but a live angel would become target number one on Azazel's to do list, and you could summon something once you had its name. Over Dean's dead body, of course. But the Winchesters already had one over-Dean's-dead-body problem coming up in the rapidly approaching future. They really didn't need another one. No, Dean was going to keep Cas out of this until he absolutely couldn't. Until it came down to life-or-death. Which, given what they were walking into, was a very real possibility.

"Like you said," Dean grumbled as they started up a hill to a destination Sam didn't know, "we survived this the first time around. We can survive it again."

The younger Winchester didn't exactly like his own words being thrown back at him – words that were intended to save three hundred lives, even at the risk of their own (a reality Sam was not blind too) – but it was too late to change their minds now. Not that Sam would. Sure, he felt a certain level of guilt having talked Dean into this, especially now that he was seeing firsthand how badly affected his brother was. But Sam chose not to respond to the curt words. Partly

because he really did believe they would survive this again and partly because if they could survive it, then they owed it to these people to try.

"Not to rain on this already soaked parade and all, but where are we going?"

Andy had been surprisingly quiet on their trek into town, a worrying oddity that had the Winchesters exchanging more than the occasional glance. When they had finished concealing the Impala among the foliage on the side of the road, Dean suggested the kid stay with the car. And, as it was usually Sam making that particular concession, it was a big deal. He even tried for the angle of making sure they had a getaway vehicle warmed and ready to peel out of there. But Andy hadn't taken the bait. Honestly, Dean didn't even know why, anymore. Ever since Mississippi and the crossroads, he'd had a bad feeling in his gut that said to keep an eye on the kid. Dean was starting to worry that Andy's continued participation was more of a death wish than a sense of duty or even curiosity.

He didn't blame the kid. Dean had lived – and not lived – through more than one of those times himself, but he wasn't sure how to help him, either.

"This is the first place we went last time," Dean answered Andy's question, pointing up to a house on the right as they crested the hill. "The kid from Sam's vision lives just up there. Something Tanner. Don't remember the first name, but it was dorky."

"This is the kid you shot?"

Dean offered his brother a defensive look. "*Considered* shooting. And I didn't do it, alright? We thought he was infected."

Andy had to jog a bit up the hill to catch them, finally having given up watching the man outside the general store now that they'd rounded a bend, well past the point where visual range would actually do any good if the guy was a zombie. The three slowed as the incline evened out and they were left staring at a perfectly normal and seemingly calm house less than a hundred feet away. Andy thought the thing looked ominous just by default.

"And he lives here?"

"He's not home. Camping trip or something." Dean dropped his duffle, reaching inside for a gun which he tucked in his waistline, a Bowie

knife that he hooked to his belt, and two extra clips of amo that went in his front pocket. Beside him, Sam and Andy took the cue to do the same. Andy still wasn't much good with handguns, faring better with the wider blast of a shotgun, but he tucked one under his shirt all the same.

Dean eyed the quiet suburban home, shouldering his bag once more as the other two finished arming up. "His dad and brother are in there. They've got the mom tied up. They were cutting her up, bleeding in the wounds."

Andy stilled, arm at an awkward angle halfway through getting his backpack back on. He swallowed, then shouldered the straps, clinging to them tightly. His eyes locked on the home. "Spreading the virus. They're infected."

"First ones we knew of." Which didn't mean they were the first – or only – ones in town, but given how Azazel had apparently set this all up, Dean was having all kinds of new doubts about just how orchestrated the events last time had been. Things that hadn't made sense on that insane, terrifying night – the two of them just happening to stumble on the first infected family right before the mom had turned, the nurse who'd been one the whole time, her patience in waiting to infect Sammy and only Sammy, and the way the whole town cleared out as soon as she'd gotten the job done – were all beginning to settle into startling clarity. An ugly, terrifying clarity.

Dean glanced over his shoulder, back towards the bend in the road and the main town beyond. If things went like they had the first time, they'd be back there soon enough. By then, though, it would be a ghost town. "The Master Sargent back there - the one with the fishing pole? Same spot, same action."

Sam straightened at that, catching his brother's eye. "You think this is the same day as last time?"

"Don't remember the date. Timing's about right, I think." Dean shrugged, glancing up at the grey sky as if reading a clock. He turned back to face the house and the Croats he knew were inside. A bullet to the brain would take them down, but something told the hunter stopping this town from becoming a repeat of the Roanoke colony wouldn't be so easy as killing two infected civilians. "But unless the Sarge does that every day, hours on end like some twisted version of the Truman Show – which I doubt, cuz he was clean last time – I bet Azazel figured out how to get us here right on time."

Sam fought back the second round of doubt over forcing the three of them to come, and instead turned that energy towards resolve. They had a job to do, the whole point of coming in the first place. He threw the strap of his duffel across his chest, game face on. "So what's our plan? How do we contain an entire town before the infection spreads?"

"I doubt the Brady Bunch in there is the only contingency Azazel has." Dean gestured with his chin towards the house. "We kill those people, Hell's probably got another three, four already infected, waiting for the cue to turn."

"We could evacuate the town?" Andy offered, but frowned almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "Course, then we'd have no way of knowing if we were sending the infected people out too."

"Or a way to do it, anyway." Sam wore an almost identical frown. "Evacuating a town takes time. Planning. Authority. We'd have to get a town council to agree, or a mayor if they have one. Even if we could talk them into it-"

"Or force them."

"-we don't have that kind of time." Sam ignored his brother's more violent suggestion, since the entire point they were arguing was moot to begin with

"They were more organized than that, anyway," Dean countered. "They had roadblocks, contingencies for anyone leaving town. This place didn't even make the news, even after everyone disappeared."

Which was weird, thinking back on it. Both the Sarge and the kid had made it out, and the Doc said she was heading for the next town over to get the authorities. But there'd been no report, and Dean didn't remember ever hearing about Rivergrove, Oregon again. Not that any of that mattered right now.

Dean shook his head. "Hell's too prepared; we're not going to be able to just sound the alarm."

"So what do we do?" The two turned to Andy, though they didn't have any answers for him. "What about some sort of quarantine?"

"Like a disease?" Sam asked, brow pinching in thought. "That might work. If we can't get everyone out of town, we keep them locked in. If people to stay in their homes, avoid contact with each other, then the

virus can't spread."

But Dean was shaking his head for new reasons now. "No one with the authority to control this town will listen to will us without credentials, and we don't exactly have time to build a back story, here."

"Andy can do it," Sam interrupted, but Dean wasn't done.

"We can't just go knocking on every door, finding peopled one-by-one for the kid to talk to."

While the idea of Andy encouraging civilians to lock themselves up had some potential – it would at least buy them time to figure out their next step – the Winchesters didn't have the time it would take to find everyone individually. It might take an hour, if not more, and if Hell had more than one infected lined up, as Dean suspected given how quickly the virus broke out last time, they would just turn and start this thing well before they could get all the civilians contained.

Still, even if they only saved half the people of the town that way, it would be more than had survived last time.

"What if we could talk to everyone at once?" Andy reasoned aloud, rubbing at his chin. "If I could make some sort of blanket announcement, we could get to everyone in time."

"How do we get them all in one place?" Sam countered. "We could get a town meeting called, but again, it would take time to get the word out, time for everyone to gather."

"And we do not want everyone gathered in one place," Andy realized with horror, shaking his head as he thought about the chaos of an outbreak while everyone was essentially locked in a gymnasium or town hall. "Zombie apocalypse rule number one. Okay…what about announcing it through the streets, like cops used to for tornado warnings and hurricane evacuations? It's not a big town."

Dean glanced at Sam and Sam shrugged, those hazel eyes deep in thought. "It would still take time."

"Yeah," the older Winchester agreed, "but it would get people locked in their homes before any infected in the area could start something, right? We might not make it to everyone in the town, but we'd make it to some."

"And if the infected people are subject to Andy's powers, we might be

able to keep them from turning," Sam reasoned, the first light of a plan taking shape on his face.

"Would that work?" Andy glanced between the two. "I've never exactly had a chance to test my powers on zombies."

"Well, now you're gonna get to." While said in jest, Dean's words didn't get a laugh out of any of them, the truth hitting far too close to home. "We might as well try. We tell people to stay in their homes and we tell the infected not to turn."

They would have no idea if that plan worked until shit hit the fan, but it wasn't like they had anything else better, either.

"We should tell the infected to lock themselves up," Sam changed course with a thoughtful look. "The virus may not be something they can consciously fight. Even if Andy's powers work on them while they're calm, the turn itself might break his control. So…If you think you're infected, tie yourself up."

"Or report to the local jail." Andy was grinning. "We'll lock 'em up ourselves, we just need to get them to come to us."

"That's not bad," Dean agreed. He eyed the house just down the lane from them and suddenly nodded, decision made. "Let's do a test run. See if a Croat will even listen to you."

Sam and Andy followed his gaze, and Andy, who up until that point had gotten lost in the ease of brainstorming, swallowed difficultly. He hadn't really thought about actually walking up to a zombie and telling him to *listen*. But, by then, Dean was already headed for the little suburban home, and Sam and Andy had to jog after him to catch up.

The hunter didn't go for subtlety this time. He approached the front door, gun drawn. Once all three of them were on the large porch, decorated in the glory of kitschy signs about fishing and small town life. Dean turned to Andy. "I'll cover you. If this doesn't work, it's gonna go down fast."

"Do we have a plan B?" Sam asked cautiously, casting a quick glance at Dean before refocusing on the house, drawing his own weapon.

"Plan B is we figure it out as we go," the older Winchester offered, which was less than reassuring, but what more could they do? It was what they'd done last time, and it worked out in the end (sort of).

Andy nodded, releasing a quick breath before raising his fist. With a slight tremor in his fingers, he knocked on the large glass pane of the front door. It took only a moment for someone to answer. It was a kid, a year or two younger than Andy himself, with a wide and friendly smile. Very Stepford Smile, if you asked Dean. But then again, he already knew this guy was trouble.

The look immediately disappeared when the young man took in the nervous psychic knocking on his door and, more so, the two taller, much scarier looking men standing just behind him, both with guns.

"Uh, can you do me a favor and knock yourself out?" Andy's voice was deep – commanding – but his body language was that of a prepubescent girl shying away from a spider. Again, not that Dean blamed him, but in better circumstances he certainly would have been holding it over the kid for hours to come.

The Tanner boy standing in the doorway blinked at the command, mouth twitching between a smile and a frown for several long, terrifying seconds, before he turned almost robotically towards the doorframe. He wrapped his hands around either side of the thick slab of wood and then slammed his head into it as hard as he could.

Andy jumped back with a yelp at the sudden violence. Dean definitely would have made fun of him for that if he wasn't busy watching the Croat's body slump to the floor in an unconscious heap. The older Winchester looked at Sam with raised eyebrows.

"Holy crap."

Dean couldn't believe it actually worked and, by the look of it, neither could Sam.

"Jake? Who is it?"

The brothers both raised their guns once more at the older voice calling from within the house, followed shortly by approaching footsteps. The dad. Dean gave Andy another nod, and as soon as Mr. Tanner came into view, the psychic yelled at him to do the same as his son. Mr. Tanner seemed able to fight it for a second more than Jake had, turning away only to twitch and switch back towards them. Dean was ready to fire a shot right between the man's eyes, thinking their luck had been too good to be true, when Mr. Tanner let out a garbled yell and charged head first into the hallway wall like a WWE wrestler going for the money shot.

Mr. Tanner's head went straight through the drywall, burying him up to his shoulders, and the rest of his body went limp, hanging out of the hole like some depressing marionette show gone very wrong. The three hunters stood on the porch, staring at the unmoving body.

"Heh," Dean turned to Sam, a grin in the corner of his mouth. "It's the Juggernaught, bitch."

The younger Winchester rolled his eyes, but even Andy, still trembling ever so slightly, cracked a laugh. That was before the woman in the dining room, tied to a chair, gagged and bleeding, started screaming her head off, of course. Or, well, as much as she could through the kitchen towel wrapped around her head and gagging her mouth.

The three hunters untied her, but Dean was eyeing the bleeding cut to her shoulder with worry and, mostly, suspicion. "Did they bleed on you?"

She was too shaken and confused to answer, so Andy asked her again.

"Yes," she whispered, eyes wide at the trauma of her husband and son tying her up and beating her. Or maybe it was from the unwilled compulsion to answer the young man's question.

"Damnit," Dean swore. They hadn't made it in time. What else was new? He caught Sam's gaze, turning away from the traumatized woman. His voice low when he spoke. "She's infected."

"What do we do?" Sam watched Mrs. Tanner, those eyes in full puppy dog mode over the poor woman. Andy was crouched beside her, using the same towel her family had gagged her with to put pressure on the wound.

"We have her go to jail with the others." It was Andy who answered, looking up from the woman who was too dazed at the moment to try and run (which would be futile, given the Jedi kneeling next to her, but she didn't know that). "And then we warn the rest of the town. We know it'll work now."

Even as he said it, Andy's eyes slid to the body of Mr. Tanner, foot just visible from where they were. Mrs. Tanner asked them several times about her husband and son, but Andy decided it was for the best she didn't worry about it. He told her not to, so she didn't. It wouldn't last forever, but considering she was infected, it probably wouldn't matter to her ever again, either.

"Alright," Dean conceded, not liking that they didn't have the second part of this two-part plan formed. But getting the infected into a locked up location was a good first step and they were on the clock. "Do it."

"I want you to go down to the police station and have them arrest you. Stay in lockup until, uh, dawn."

"What will they arrest me for?" Her eyes were still wide, almost unseeing.

Andy floundered for a second, glancing at the other two before just sort of making it up as he went along. It seemed to be the theme of the day, after all. "Just tell them something that will get you locked up, alright?"

"I can do that." With those words, Beverly Tanner rubbed at her freed wrists, turned almost robotically for the hall, and took three steps before Sam stutteringly called out.

"Uh, use the back door!"

Andy repeated the command quickly before Mrs. Tanner walked far enough to see her husband's body stuck in the wall or her son collapsed by the door. She might be infected and the hunters might have to kill her before it was all over (they weren't really sure), but on the off chance Mrs. Tanner survived this, that wasn't a sight any wife or mother needed to see.

"I can do that," Beverly said again before she turned on a numb dime, walking past the three men as though they weren't even there. She opened the screen door just off the kitchen and the three watched through the dining room windows as her bobbing head disappear around the side of the house.

Silence reigned.

"Alright," Dean tucked his gun away and slung his duffle off his shoulder once more. "Let's get to work on the rest of the town."

"What about those two?" Sam gestured to the unconscious, infected men in the hallway. "They could wake back up."

Dean grinned, elbow deep in his bag, and pulled out a coil rope and a roll of duct tape. He tossed one to Sam, who got to work pulling the husband out of the wall.

"How are we going to get the message out?" the younger Winchester asked as he tugged at Mr. Tanner's body. Bits of drywall crumbled around the man's torso. Sam's voice was raised so that Dean and Andy, hauling the youngest Tanner man towards the chair last occupied by the kid's poor mother, could hear him. "We can steal a car, but we're going to need a megaphone or something."

"We grab a cop car."

Dean stopped pulling just shy of the chair to stare at the kid across from him. Andy grunted as he suddenly found himself hauling all the weight alone, almost toppling atop Jake's body from the unexpected shift.

Sam's head poked in from the hallway. "What?"

Andy glanced between the two of them. "You guys definitely didn't grow up in a small town. Cop cars have megaphones? It's a great prank when you're, like, sixteen and drunk."

His grin was positively mischievous, and Sam turned both a concerned and amused expression to his brother. Dean just grinned back.

"Whose idea was it for him to tag along, again?"

-o-o-o-

They didn't even have to go find one. Two fine members of the local sheriff's office pulled up in a brown-and-tan unit seven and a half minutes later. It turned out that Mrs. Tanner showing up at the station with a story of Jake and Mr. Tanner tying her up and torturing her required a police response. Her follow up story that they needed to lock her up because she'd *killed* them both, well, that required a *hasty* police response.

Andy took care of the officers, one being the Sheriff himself. He told each of them to walk home and lock themselves indoors, no contact with anyone until morning, unless they were infected with a virus. The hunters weren't stupid; they'd have been surprised if there wasn't an infected among the police ranks. Both men took off at a decent clip down the hill, the Sheriff turning onto a side street, the other officer heading back to town. It wasn't clear if that was because he lived on the other side, or if he he was infected.

As soon as they were sure the men had listened, the three hunters climbed into their borrowed car. Andy took the passenger seat upon

Sam's insistence, since they would need him on the speaker, and the giant of a man folded himself into the back.

"Attention citizens-" Andy oofed into the microphone as Dean elbowed him. "Attention town-folk."

Andy looked over at Dean to see if he was going to get hit again as the older hunter drove their new ride through the winding residential streets. Their plan was less likely to be noticed and therefore interrupted if they started outwards and worked their way in towards the main drag.

"Listen up, cuz we're cops, and you trust cops-"

In the backseat, Sam's head fell back against the headrest a little more dramatically than necessary as the kid's transmission broke off when Dean elbowed him once more.

"Lock yourself in your homes, in individual rooms, until dawn. Do not go out, do not let anyone else in. Do not interact with anyone." Andy glanced at Dean again, who just gave him the *what-are-you-waiting-for-keep-going* look. The kid raised the mic back to his mouth. "If you think you are infected with a virus, report to the police station straight away."

Sam watched the residents as they wound their way through the streets of the forested town, repeating the message again and again. Those out on the sidewalks or that he could see through screen doors and undrawn windows were first surprised or confused by the broadcasting police car, some even coming out of their homes at the message. But one by one, each person turned and headed indoors, drawing their curtains, or closing their windows and doors. Sam saw only one man turn and head down the street, away from the residential area and back towards town.

It looked like their plan might just be working.

Even rolling along at ten miles an hour, they covered each of the residential streets and the main drag in under twenty minutes. There were no surprises. No Croats suddenly flooding the streets, no zombie apocalypse as Hell opened the floodgates of their plan for this tiny little town. Nothing. The boys got to the main drag, which was quickly emptying of all people as the townsfolk heeded Andy's words without choice.

When they reached the police station a block past Main St, they

parked their stolen vehicle in the empty spot between two more just like it. The three hunters climbed out of the car, not bothering to hide their weapons. There was almost no one left outside to see them, after all. They headed into the station to a truly bizarre dichotomy of chaos and calm. Having cut their broadcast before the station, the two cops inside hadn't heard any orders to go home and were still attempting to do their jobs as eleven civilians and one officer crowded within the limited space, demanding to be locked up. There were three uniformed cops in the building – a female desk jockey and two male officers – but only two of them were still operating under their own faculties, currently trying (rather frantically) to handle the confusing situation.

As it was a small office, just one large room with a front desk, waiting chairs, a holding cell in one corner, and a few rooms along the back wall, the chaos came more from the number of people trying to assert their personal need to be detained. The poor desk jockey was handling the civilians the best she could while the lone officer tried, probably for the tenth time, to tell the third cop – the one that had shown up at the Tanner residence – that he didn't need to be locked up. It was clear these two unfortunate souls were unequipped to handle eleven of their friends and neighbors suddenly turning up to be arrested.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Andy called out as the three hunters entered the precinct, each man geared up like they were facing a zombie apocalypse. (Which they were.) The infected townsfolk quieted, though the several who had taken it upon themselves to fulfill Andy's command without police assistance didn't stop trying to lock themselves inside the one holding cell.

The two cops looked up, harried confusion clear on their faces until they took in the three men, armed to the teeth, standing in their office. Then the female officer was dropping her paperwork for the gun they kept in the desk drawer, while her far more prepared coworker pulled his weapon immediately. But Andy was way ahead of them.

"You don't need your guns, put them down, you don't want to shoot us. What you want to do is lock up those eleven – er, twelve – people. They're very dangerous and need to stay locked up till morning." Andy smiled congenially, standing back as the two cops stiffened, then moved on autopilot to herd the rest of the infected over to the holding cell. The infected already inside were milling about, trying repeatedly to close the barred door to the cell. Without the key to lock it, the door just slowly swung back open each time, and the infected tried

again and again in a calm, dulled, and freaky manner that reminded Dean of Leviathan victims.

The man from the future shuddered, but didn't say a thing.

The desk jockey withdrew the ring of keys from her belt, sliding one into the lock while the rest of the infected were herded one after the other into the small cell. It was quickly becoming cramped in there.

Once he was sure things were under control, Dean walked back over to the main doors, sliding his duffle off his shoulder. He dropped the bag of weapons and amo next to the entrance, ready to grab it on their way back out. The hunter did a quick visual sweep through the glass portion of the station doors, looking down the street for any movement or change. It was all quiet as dusk fell on the little town. Dean tucked his gun into his waistline and headed back to the others, rubbing absently at his chest and the low ache there.

"Uh, hold up." Sam, who was overseeing those going into the cell, grabbed the elbow of one woman before she could dolefully put herself in with the others. Dean hurried the last few steps, coming up between his brother and the two Robo-Cops, but he didn't immediately see anything alarming. The lady in Sam's grip was clutching a handful of tissues, her eyes and nose were red and puffy. As she sniffled, Sam grimaced with realization. "Are you, uh, sick by chance?"

"Yes," the woman replied, wiping at her dripping nose. Her eyes had the blank, glassy quality of all Andy's puppets. "I have a virus, but I'm on antibiotics."

Dean turned towards Andy with the kind of look that had the kid immediately holding up his hands, asking how this was his fault. The older Winchester took the sick lady by the bicep, pulling her away from the holding cell and back towards the doors of the station. "You go home and lock yourself in the bathroom, kay?"

She continued resisting, trying somewhat tamely to get back to holding until Andy repeated Dean's words as a command. The lady went still, then turned and headed to the doors with the customary, "I can do that."

Once she had exited the building, Dean leveled the look at Andy again.

"What? We said anyone who thought they were sick!" The kid

shrugged sheepishly, fingering the edges of his hoodie like a little kid. "We're lucky it's not full-swing flu season."

The hunter just rolled his eyes as Sam closed the cell door. The desk jockey locked the infected inside with a turn of the key while her partner stood several feet away, staring at them both with blank eyes. Upon Andy's request, she handed the jingling mass of keys to Sam, and their resident Jedi addressed their two uniformed helpers.

Dean rubbed at his chest as the ache got bad enough that he finally took notice of it. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the station doors.

"Alright, guys." Andy clapped his hands together, a grin of success spreading across his face. "Great job! Now it's time to head home. Make sure to lock yourselves in your houses, don't let anyone in, don't talk to anyone or come in contact with anyone. Sound good? Break!"

The woman turned on her heel with a nod and immediately headed for the station doors. She passed Dean on her way, the hunter momentarily distracted by the movement. He stepped aside to let her pass, eyes tracking her as he rubbed at the burn just beneath his sternum. The other cop, however, didn't move. He remained standing, staring at the three of them, more of a statue than the robot he was supposed to be enacting right now.

"Hey!" Andy complained with a frown, starting towards the man who wasn't listening. Sam looked up from the keys and Dean turned back from the station doors towards the apparent problem, worry spiking. "I said-"

A gunshot broke through the relative peace of the station and Andy cried out in shock, stumbling away from the cop who stood, gun drawn and eyes black. Andy's back hit the cell bars with a pained grunt, muffled through clenched teeth. His hand was curled around his shoulder where blood spurted between clenched fingers.

"Andy!" Sam started forward but a second gunshot had him jumping back, releasing the keys as they were ripped out of his hand by contact from a bullet. The ring of metal hit the floor in a jumble.

A third shot went off, fired wildly, as Dean tackled the demon to the ground, the two hitting the linoleum with force. Sam bolted for Andy, but the gunshot had done more than just injure the psychic; it took a bunch of peaceful, calm, obedient Croats and flipped the 'zombie' switch to 'on'.

Andy screamed in terror as hands grabbed at his backpack, hoodie, and arms, pinning him to the bars, pulling at his hair and clothing. Sam grabbed his good arm, trying to haul him away from the cell and the teaming bodies within, but he was too late. He saw the flash of metal before he could do anything about it. It was Mrs. Tanner, the woman they had first sent to the police station, taking a switchblade to her own hand, leaving the steel stained red. Andy cried out as she struck, slicing up the back of his already injured arm. More blood soaked into his sweatshirt, spilling down the bars as she opened a four inch strip of flesh with the bloodied blade.

Realizing they weren't getting him away from the Croats with force alone and that most of those grasping clinging hands were on the kid's pack, Sam brutally shoved Andy's good arm through the strap of his backpack and then *pulled*. The two stumble free of the Croats, the poor kid's bleeding limb ripped loose from the final strap with a strangled cry, and they hit the floor several feet away. The Croats hissed and screamed and thrashed, pulling at Andy's backpack like wild animals until it finally slipped through the bars and disappeared into the teaming mass within

Andy was shaking in Sam's arms. The younger Winchester could hear his brother struggling with the demon – a strained exorcism interrupted by grunts and fists striking flesh – and Sam flinched as a fourth gunshot went off, striking something at the other end of the room. He didn't have time to look; Andy was bleeding badly. He pushed the kid onto the ground gently as possible, rolling onto his hands and knees to assess the damage. Sam clamped his fingers around the bullet wound, not having enough limbs to cover the entrance, exit, and strip of shredded flesh in the back. Andy needed stitches and he needed them *now*. His skin was losing color at an alarming rate, but the med kit they'd brought with them had been in Andy's backpack.

Along with several guns and knives.

"Dean!"

"Little busy!" the older Winchester growled between taking a fist to his solar plexus and the next line of the exorcism. The possessed cop was leaking smoke left and right, but he just wouldn't let go of his damn meatsuit.

The jingle of keys and metal against linoleum drew Sam's attention away from Andy, and hazel eyes grew alarmingly wide as he took in

the cell full of Croatoans. The keys that had been knocked from his grip lay only a handful of feet from the bars, and multiple Croats were scrabbling for them. Arms stretched through the bars, shoulders slammed into the barrier again and again and again, as nails scraped across the floor, fingertips just hitting the ring of metal.

Sam released Andy's bleeding shoulder in a mad dart for the keys before they got them, but he didn't make it.

"Oh shit," he whispered as the ring of keys disappeared into the undulating mass behind the bars. Sam scrambled back. The Croat nearest the door suddenly stuck his arm out, key ring jingling in his fisted grip, and shoved a key into the lock. There were a dozen possibles on that ring, but it was only going to be a matter of time. The younger Winchester pulled his gun and shot the man in the head. Even as he fell dead to the floor, another took his place, reaching her arm through the bars to grab the keys sticking out of the lock.

Sam shot that one too, but his aim was off as he scrambled to his feet and grabbed Andy by the uninjured arm. The kid hissed in pain, weakly keeping pressure on his own wounds, but made it to his feet. The hunter fired a third shot and this time the infected woman toppled, dropping the keys. Hands snatched at them from the bottom of the bars and they disappeared once more into the mass of men and women. Sam hauled Andy back behind him as he fired again and again. Another Croat went down, but two more took his place at the door, keys back in hand. The hunter was going to have to kill them all to keep them from escaping.

The click of the lock opening ended that decision before he could make it.

"Dean!" Sam fired again, killing the fourth infected madman, but then the tidal wave was upon them and Sam was running, dragging Andy behind him. He fired haphazardly across his shoulder, but a hit to the chest wasn't enough to take a Croat down. As the two hunters made it to Dean, still rolling on the floor in a struggle with the demon, Sam lowered his gun and shot his last two rounds into the black-eyed bastard's head.

It wouldn't kill the demon, but it was enough to make him release the older Winchester. Dean took the opening and jumped to his feet as Croats came screaming at them.

"Go, go, go!" he yelled, like Sam didn't already know that, and shoved

his younger brother towards the doors, following just behind.

Dean made a grab for the duffel full of amo he'd left by the entrance, but the ghost of fingers across his back, snatching at his jacket and just barely missing a good handhold, was cause enough to abandon the attempt. He wasn't immune and couldn't risk getting caught. Dean burst through the doors a half dozen feet behind his brother, the Croats right on his heels.

The older hunter caught back up to Sam quickly, what with Andy slowing the long-limbed Winchester down significantly. Dean ducked under the ailing kid to take the other half of his weight without much thought beside getting the hell out there a lot faster than they were currently going. Andy screamed as Dean hoisted his arm up and over his shoulder, and the older Winchester almost tripped on his own feet at the sound. His hand came away soaked in red, and Dean stared at it in growing realization even as they ran.

Behind them, the Croats spread out. Only one maintained the chase as the eight split up and tore through the rest of the town. It wasn't long before they heard gunfire and glass breaking; the infected had the weapons they'd been forced to leave behind. One handed, Dean drew his gun, Andy's blood staining the ivory grip red, and took out the only one still following them. The body hit the ground mid-run, rolling over itself in a sickening tumble of dead-weight and limbs.

"Take a left. I know where we can go." Dean spoke forcefully as he faced forward again, doing his best to hold Andy up with only one arm and keep his gun in the other.

The three men rounded the next corner back onto the main drag and headed for the medical clinic Dean remembered well.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: So I'm now home from vacation (my little niece is beautiful and actually a really good baby), and catching up on sleep. But in the meantime, the muse took total advantage of my exhausted state to casually mention a couple days ago, "Hey, you know that Croatoan arc you have fully written up, finished all neatly with a bow and almost ready to post? Yeah…what if we doubled it in length? You only have to re-write the end of this chapter to make it happen! And, of course, the other seventeen pages of new material. What's the big deal, am I right?"

This is what happens when I take two week breaks. My brain

thinks it has a whole extra seven days to make last minute, drastic changes.

And yes, I absolutely did re-write the ending of this chapter and the next seventeen pages after it in the last four days, because damnit, my muse is friggin' good at her job (the bitch).

Reviews! Thanks so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter. I will be trying to get around to you guys today, but I am terribly bad at this part. If you don't hear from me, please know that I read your comments several times while on my vacation and anytime I didn't feel like writing. You all really do help carry this story and give me all the warm and fuzzies. Especially those of you who just flat out yell at me. Warm, fuzzy, and laughing my ass off :D

Alright, we are totally picking up steam now and are getting in the thick of it! Let me know what you thought of the action this chapter. It's only going downhill from here, guys XD

Also, poor Andy…I'm really not nice to that boy.

Chapter 75: Season 2: Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

A/N: Twenty one pages. It ended up being TWENTY ONE EXTRA PAGES, GUYS. And damn it, I can't even break it into two cuz it's just not a good chapter for that. So I present to you the Mother of All Chapters because my muse haaaaates me. Seriously. Does she even know I have a social life?!

(I'm just kidding. I don't have a social life.)

head thud *head thud* *head thud*

Chapter Warnings: Oh for the love of- it's the end of the world, what else is new?

Actual Chapter Warnings: Croats are being Croats (aka, zombies, reavers, crappy next door neighbors, you get the idea), Dean is being Dean (aka, two steps forward, one step back), Hell is being Hellish (aka, did no one explain the first two seasons to them? There's only supposed to be, like, one of them out and about at a time), and poor Sam and Andy should never have come along for this ride (aka, when your brother from the future tells you it's a trap, it's a mother friggin' trap!)

Actual Actual Chapter Warnings: Um...lots of death in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 42

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

They rounded the corner onto Main Street, not two blocks to go to the medical clinic, when Dean drew up short, gun raised and trained on the newest threat, the barrel of a Remington Model 700 bolt-action rifle looking him dead in the face. The older, dark-skinned, defensive face behind it was a familiar one.

"Easy there, Sarge," Dean said calmly but firmly, slowly pulling away

from Andy so he could step in front of the bleeding kid defensively. As soon as his arm was free, he kept a two handed grip on his weapon, trained on the Master Sargent standing in front of them, blocking their path to the clinic. The man from the future had to hope that Time – the same Time that wanted to stay the same – wasn't fucking with them right now. The sergeant had been clean last time. And Dean was about to take a mighty big risk assuming he was clean this time, too. "Put it down, big guy."

"You first," the Sarge responded, jaw squared and finger tight on the trigger. "How the hell do you know who I am, huh?"

Dean took one hand off his gun, still coated in Andy's blood, and held it up placatingly. He didn't lower his weapon but he at least he made it clear it would only be fired in self-defense. The hunter nodded at the man's arm, sleeves rolled up past the elbow. "Your tattoo. My dad was in the Corps. Now look, man, I know, you've probably seen some weird shit tonight, but we're not the enemy here."

Sergeant Master Mark Vago stared down the unknown and armed man in front of him, before his eyes darted to the two men behind the blond. The taller one was holding up the other, a flagging kid with a blood-soaked right arm. Mark hesitated, realizing that the kid, at least, was no threat. Making a tactical assessment, the Master Sargent released the trigger and raised his gun to port arms, barrel resting against his shoulder. Across from him, the blond lowered his weapon as well.

"What the hell is going on?" Mark asked, not taking his eyes off the three, still weary of the strangers who'd shown up in town just shortly before this all went down. "I can't find anyone. It's a ghost town. The damn coffee mugs were still steaming in the Diner, like people just-"

"Up and vanished," the blond in front of him finished for him, and Mark stared at him. Uncertainty warred against the illusion of comfort that came with no longer being alone in a ghost town that, hours ago, had been his friendly, happy home.

"What the hell is going on?" he repeated, hand still tight on his rifle. He used it to gesture to the ailing member of their group. The kid was bleeding from what could be a gunshot wound, but these two were the only ones left around to do any shooting. "What happened to him?"

"A cop turned on him," the taller one supplied, adjusting his grip as the kid leaned more heavily into him. He was bleeding pretty bad.

Mark knew they weren't far from the Doc Lee's office and wondered if that's where these boys had been headed. "Tried to kill us."

"No," Mark shook his head. "No way. I know every cop in this town. They're good people."

The blond suddenly tucked his gun into the back of his pants, apparently deciding the Master Sargent wasn't a threat worth dealing with, and pushed past him. "Not tonight, they aren't."

The taller one took it as his cue and followed after, helping the bleeding kid along. Mark watched them past, not ready to take action against the only living souls he'd seen in the last twenty minutes, but also not ready to trust them.

The ragtag group didn't make it five feet when hurried footsteps coming from behind them all had everyone, Mark included, spinning around. The blond redrew his weapon in a grip as tight as Mark's as the Sarge trained his rifle on the unknown threat. The street in front of them was empty, but it didn't stay that way for long. The pounding feet got louder and a man in an officer's uniform rounded the corner, coming to a halt as he spotted them.

Mark blinked, pulling his head from the sight of his gun to stare at Officer Kyle Mason, staring them from a dozen feet away with wide eyes. They were black. His eyes were completely black, there was blood on his face, and he was glaring at them with lethal intent, none of which made a lick of sense. Mark didn't mean to lower his gun, but he was clearly seeing things. There was a god damn bullet hole in Kyle's head, for Christ's sake, yet there he stood: chest heaving, murder in his impossibly black eyes.

"What the hell…"

"Where do you think you're going, Winchesters?" the thing that was not Kyle Mason seethed, a tight and wrong grin stretching across his face.

The blond with the ivory-inlaid gun – Winchester, apparently – opened his mouth and started speaking nonsense. Another language. It made Kyle twitch and shudder, and that look in his black eyes got, if possible, a thousand times darker. Then Officer Mason was charging, and Sarge fired before he could think about the consequences of killing a man he'd known his whole life.

Kyle took two to the chest and one to the neck (from Winchester's

gun), but he just kept coming.

"Get out of here!" the blond yelled, seemingly at the charging officer, but it was his companions that took off down the street, right before the black-eyed man was on them. Winchester took the tackle to the ground and for one, single, long minute, Mark just stared at the two men grappling on the sidewalk.

He'd shot Kyle Mason center mass, and yet there he was. Wrestling this stranger with clear intent to kill.

Mark raised the butt of his rifle and slammed it into Kyle's back, part of him apologizing even as the man he knew well spun at him and hissed like some kind of wild animal. His eyes were jet black, no whites to wait for, and the Sargent stumbled back in pure shock.

Then Kyle was twitching again, face convulsing in micro-spasms. Those black eyes turned down the street, where Winchester's companions had stopped a few yards away. The tall one was still supporting their injured friend, but he had picked up the babbled jargon the other Winchester had dropped. Latin, Mark realized, recognizing the odd word among the ramble of sounds.

Kyle's eyes narrowed dangerously, but Mark was too busy staring in horror at the black smoke leaking out of the corners of his mouth and eyes. The Master Sargent took another step back, gripping his gun and raising it up, prepared to fire once more even as the logical part of his brain, the part trained by years in the Corps, told him if it hadn't worked the first time it sure as hell wasn't going to work the second. Waste of ammo.

But then the thing that wasn't Kyle Mason threw back his head and billows of black smoke flew out of him like a miniature tornado. When the last of the smoke had fled him, Kyle collapsed, and Mark didn't need to check his pulse to know he was dead.

"What the hell," he muttered in horror, grip on his gun white-knuckled at best. Pushing off the corpse of a man Mark had joined on the baseball pitch more than a dozen years running, the blond let his head fall back against the pavement, rubbing at his chest as he caught his breath. "What the hell is going on!"

Winchester rolled onto his stomach and climbed to his feet quickly. "More than we got time to explain." He grabbed his gun from where it had clattered on the ground in the firefight and straightened up. He nodded to his companions, who stood a half block away, alert and

cautious of the now-quiet street around them. "I'm Dean, that's my brother Sam, and the kid needs medical attention, *now*. You can come with us or take your chances."

With that, Dean Winchester pushed past the Sargent to join his companions and the three headed the last block towards the medical clinic. Mark hesitated only a moment, looking down at the body of Kyle Mason for an excruciatingly long minute, before he followed after the boys.

-o-o-o-

The Clinic doors were in sight when movement on their peripheral had Dean and the Sarge training guns on a pair of figures across the street and a block up, walking their way. It was a leisurely pace, but nothing about their body language said evening stroll and Dean found himself backing towards the clinic. Beside him, Sam reached for the gun Andy muttered was under his shirt, pulling it and training it on the pedestrians.

"I know them," the Sarge said in recognition, straightening from the rifle sight but not lowering the gun. He'd known Kyle Mason, too, and look how that could have turned out.

"No, pal, you really don't," Dean grumbled as he reached behind him for the door handle. Just as he hooked his fingers around the metal, a figure stepped out of the doorway of the next store over.

"Mark!" the man in a green wind breaker and blue jeans greeted jovially, like it was just another cheery Saturday afternoon. His eyes were normal – circles of blue surrounded by pure white – but something else about his face in the descending darkness was all wrong. He was holding an object down by his side, and Mark realized belatedly it was a hatchet. Alarm bells started ringing. "Where you been, buddy? I've been looking for you."

Dean didn't bother asking questions. He shot first, taking the Croat down with one between the eyes. The two across the street broke into a charge, feet pounding their way. Swearing, the hunter threw open the clinic door, holding it open as his brother hobbled inside with Andy.

"Let's go, Sarge!" he screamed, and Mark, staring in wide-eyed horror at the body of his neighbor, visibly gathered himself and darted inside. The main building that housed the medical clinic consisted of a long hallway, lined with offices on either side. Dr. Lee's was the first

door on the right. It was already open, and Mark could see Sam lowering the kid down in a chair just inside.

Dean bolted the glass doors behind them, Mark turning to help. Sam joined them seconds later, hauling two waiting room chairs with him. They lodged them under the handles of the locked doors just before the two Croats slammed into the glass. Mark jumped, staggering away from the doors, worried they would give. But their attackers, something not right in their eyes, just slinked away into the darkness, as if they had never been there to begin with.

They left the body of his neighbor lying on the sidewalk, feet away.

"That-" Mark ran a hand over his mouth, the other shaking with how tightly he gripped the barrel of his gun. "That was my neighbor, Mr. Rogers. With the hatchet…"

"You have a neighbor named Mr. Rogers?"

Mark turned at the unfamiliar and slurred voice. The injured kid hadn't stayed in down for long; he was leaning heavily in the doorway of the clinic, propping it open. He had one hand wrapped around his bleeding arm, the other gripping a gun – the one the taller man had been holding – in a trembling hand. Blood dripped down the barrel and hit the floor with a *plop, plop, plop*.

"Not anymore, he doesn't."

Dean pushed past the Master Sargent, his brother following and the two helped the kid further into the doctor's office. Mark glanced at the vulnerable glass doors, all that was between them and whatever the hell was wrong with the people of his town. He quickly followed after the only sane men left.

"Those aren't going to hold long," he announced as he shut and locked the main door of Dr. Lee's business. It, too, was comprised of far too much glass for his liking. The whole damn building was, something he'd never once worried about before this night. He hadn't thought he'd ever have to worry about those sorts of things at home.

"They won't come in here." The mysterious words, spoken with the confidence of a man who knew far more than he was letting on, didn't do much to put Mark at ease. He stared at Dean Winchester, this mystery man, as he got the kid settled. His brother started towards the patient rooms for supplies when one of the doors swung open.

Mark had his rifle up and ready to fire as Pamela Clayton, Dr. Lee's assistant, rushed into the waiting room, straight into the taller Winchester man. Sam reached out to steady the young woman before she could crash into him completely.

"Sam?" Dean hollered from the other side of the waiting room where he couldn't see what had drawn the taller Winchester up short.

"I'm fine- it's fine." Sam answered. The young nurse looked scared, and Sam immediately released her, though he kept his arms up and open, as non-threatening as possible given the way he towered over the much smaller woman.

"What's going on? Who are you?"

Sam went for a calm, encouraging smile, taking a step back to give her some space. "It's okay, we just need some help. Is the doctor here?"

The young woman blinked up at him, then glanced around his large frame to the others. Across the room, a tense Dean met her eyes and his own hardened. Pam straightened back up, hiding her frame behind Sam's unassumingly. "No, Dr. Lee…I think she went home for the night? I-I was on break, and when I got back…"

"She was just gone," Mark finished for her, nodding, because the story fit with everything else. Hell, he was just happy to see Pam was alright. He slung his rifle strap over his shoulder as the nurse glanced nervously between the gathered, armed men. His encouraging smile seemed to put Pam at better ease, and she relaxed somewhat, though she clasped and unclasped her hands in a nervous fidget.

"I can try calling her, if you'd like?"

Smiling as calmly as he could, Sam shook his head. He was about to bluff his way into getting this woman to give them the supplies they needed to patch Andy up himself when he heard his brother's hit-the-deck voice from behind.

"Sam, get out of the way!"

The younger Winchester didn't think twice about the order. Sam spun three steps to the left, in perfect synchronization with the double firing of his brother's gun. The nurse who'd stared up at him with wide, scared eyes, dropped to the ground with two to the chest. A perfect double-tap; she hadn't stood a chance.

"What the hell!" Mark yelled, rifle up and trained on the man who now seemed to be killing just about anyone in the town that didn't have a damn Marine Corps tattoo.

Sam pulled his backup from his boot, training it on the man even as Andy, God bless him, raised Sam's primary weapon. The thing shook in his hand, barrel jumping all over the place, but it was still largely trained on the man threatening Dean.

"Put it down, Sarge," Dean said for the second time that night.

"You just killed Pam, in cold blood! How many of these town folk are you gonna murder tonight?" he demanded, not lowering his weapon as he stared the killer and stranger down.

"She was infected."

"Infected?" Mark pulled his head back, a tight frown crossing his face. He didn't need line of sight to shoot this man if he had to.

"She was one of them," Dean rephrased, head gesturing towards the glass doors and the threat lurking just beyond, somewhere out there in the dark.

The Sarge wet his lips nervously, finger rubbing back and forth across the trigger. "How do you know? Her eyes weren't black."

"Neither were your neighbors." A determined green gaze – a confident gaze if the Master Sargent had ever seen one – stayed locked on him. "Trust me. I just know."

Mark wasn't quite sure why he believed him. Maybe it was because he didn't feel like he could believe anything, really, so what was the point? Either way, he slowly – very slowly – lowered his rifle. The room seemed to let out a collective breath; the poor kid still bleeding out in the chair dropped his gun so completely it clattered to the ground with a sharp metallic clatter that damn near caused everyone to jump..

"Andy," Sam muttered, crossing back over to him, weapon lowered as well. He was pale and shaking, and Sam was surprised he'd kept any sort of grip with that hand. Andy was practically limp wristed by the time Sam took his pulse. "Shit, Dean, he's losing too much blood."

The blond continued eyeing Mark for a moment more before he tucked his gun back into his jeans and took off for the back rooms. He

had to step over Pam's body, and Mark stared down at the poor girl.

"How could he possibly know?"

He hadn't asked it aloud for an answer. He hadn't even asked it aloud knowingly. But the taller of the two brothers – Sam – answered him as he stripped the hoodie off the injured kid, holding pressure to what was now very obviously a gunshot wound to his upper arm. A gunshot wound given to him by Kyle Mason. Sweet, naïve, cheerful Kyle Mason who was the shortstop on the town's leisure baseball team, who stayed after every game to hand out ice cream to the kids, who had wanted to be a cop since he was six and had followed that dream just four years earlier. Mark really couldn't believe it. But he was a practical man; he believed what he could see and touch. And he'd sure as hell seen Kyle attack the older Winchester, seen him take two sure-fired shots to the chest, and he'd sure as shit felt the butt of his rifle connect with the man's back.

"You should trust him on this."

"Yeah," the kid – Andy, was it? – mumbled from his slumped position, obviously flagging due to blood loss and what looked to be shock setting in. Sam was doing his best to rally his friend's wakefulness. Given the drooping of his eyelids, the shallow rise and fall of too-fast breaths, and the heavy slur to his words, it was a losing battle. Still, he managed a weak-ass giggle as he continued, "He's psychic."

He said it like a joke, and the Sarge couldn't help but think it was a terrible time for laughs. Shock did funny things to people, though. He'd seen that and so much more from men in the field who'd taken far worse hits they'd never recovered from. Sam's already concerned expression was growing worse.

Mark ignored the comment for the blood loss talking that it clearly was as Dean came back, arms full of medical supplies. While the two brothers got to work on the kid, the Sarge directed his attention to the older of the two, who seemed a man in charge and sure as shit more knowledgeable than Mark currently felt. He resisted the urge to glance back at Pamela Clayton's body for a third time. "I need to know what's going on, and I need to know it right now."

The unimpressed and annoyed look Dean sent his way was not necessarily a surprise, but it was always a little unsettling when Mark encountered a civilian immune to the command voice of Master Sargent Vago. His unit used to tell tall tales of what that tone could

get done with words alone.

"We think it's a virus," the occupied man answered tersely as he cleaned the bullet wound while Sam got to work stitching a cut up the back of his arm. The kid was busy chasing down painkillers with a bottle of water, both of which Dean had found in the back. It wasn't the good stuff, but it was what they had.

"A virus." No way a virus had turned the good townsfolk of Rivergrove – his friends and neighbors – into…into whatever he'd seen back there. No virus turned a man's eyes black.

"O negative?" the taller of the brothers asked, holding up a bag of blood and line that Dean had brought along with the other supplies. The other Winchester nodded and Sam started hooking Andy up to the fresh supply. The clinic's provisions were as small as the town, but that didn't make them nonexistent. In a few minutes, they had Andy's arm cleaned and bound, an IV inserted for a liquids, and the kid was drifting in and out of a drug-assisted, exhausted haze as he filled back up on blood.

Dean stood with a groan, rubbing at his right knee, which was stubbornly complaining about the time spent on the ground after a hard run and two separate roll-arounds on the ground. He turned to the Master Sargent. "Will you watch him for a minute? I need a word with my brother."

Mark nodded and Dean headed towards a quieter corner of the waiting room rather than one of the back rooms, Sam following. The Sarge appreciated the man's instincts not to leave his sight. Clearly, they still didn't trust one another, but Mark preferred it that way at this point. There were too many unanswered questions. Hesitantly, the marine moved towards the front windows, half an eye on the dozing kid, the other on the slit in the blinds to the outside world.

They were still out there, his neighbors, standing on street corners and just at the edges of the encroaching darkness. They weren't doing much but staring right back at him. With general unease at the situation as a whole, Mark released the blinds and moved back to the kid.

-o-o-o-

"This is where we ended up last time?" Sam asked immediately once they had stepped away from Andy and the Sarge. He crossed his arms over his chest, partially from the cold November night and an overly

air-conditioned doctor's office, partially because this was a messed up situation and he still wasn't quite prepared to see the blank rage in a civilians eyes as they charged at you with a hatchet. Or the fear in Andy's as he slowly bled out.

Dean had tried to warn him, but some things just had to be experienced to carry the full weight of horror.

"Of course it is," Dean answered bitterly, because why would Time allow for anything else? With a frustrated growl, the man from the future quickly recapped the events that had taken place in the medical clinic in his timeline. Sam cast a look over his shoulder at the downed nurse, lying in a puddle of red. He wondered if she would have attacked him then and there, had Dean not interfered. It didn't sound like it from his brother's retelling of events. It sounded like this had been a longer term play on Azazel's part, not a hasty setup.

"The whole thing ended a couple hours after Nurse Benedict Arnold over there infected you." Dean nodded his head Pam's way, a dark look in his eyes. He had no second thoughts about putting her down quick. "Everyone just up and vanished and we walked out of here like the whole damn thing never happened."

Across from him, Sam frowned. "So it was a test?"

Dean shrugged. They sure as hell hadn't known that back then, but now? Now he thought Hell wanted to know their golden boy was immune. No point in sending a virus out into the world if it killed Lucifer's precious vessel.

"But…they infected Andy," Sam continued, dropping his voice as both brothers glanced over to their resident third wheel. "He hasn't turned, shouldn't that be proof enough for them?"

The older Winchester bit the inside of his cheek, and Sam's eyes immediately narrowed at it and at the lack of eye contact.

"What?"

Dean let out more of a growl than a sigh, and rubbed a hand viciously over his scalp. "Some people didn't turn immediately. Doc said the incubation period was four hours."

There was something else Dean wasn't telling him, but Sam could tell he was working up to it. So Sam waited him out until his older brother made a frustrated noise that ultimately ended in another sigh.

"We never found out what made you immune."

It took a moment for the younger Winchester to follow the train of thought, but he stiffened when he found its inevitable end point. "What- it has to be the demon blood! Doesn't it?"

The fidgety older hunter shrugged defensively, but it was clear all his anger and frustration weren't directed at Sam. "We always assumed it was, but…"

"What else could it possibly be?" Sam asked, voice aggressive, born from fear and exhaustion and the unknown. Across from him, Dean got just as hostile.

"I don't know, Sam, how about your ability to host a friggin' archangel for starters?"

Sam faltered at that. The words were angry and bitter, but Sam knew it to be the same damn thing he was feeling and nothing personal. The younger Winchester deflated as his brother's point sunk in. His gaze dropped to the floor.

If that was true, if it hadn't been the demon blood but the *angelic* blood, however faint in his veins, that made him immune, that made him Lucifer's true vessel…

"Andy could turn," Sam finished the thought aloud, dawning horror reaching his eyes as he looked back at the bloodied kid. Dozing lightly, Andy would moan or twitch on occasion and Sam wondered, partly in fear, what exactly he was dreaming about.

They didn't have the coin, Sam realized abruptly. They'd left the coin safely in the trunk of the Impala. Sam's eyes widened as he stared at the other psychic – at Azazel's other kid – and realized the demon could be talking to him right now.

"We need to wake him up," Sam muttered, moving to do just that when Dean caught his arm. He turned back to his brother, but while Dean looked grim, he didn't look as panicked as Sam felt.

"It's gotta be the demon blood, Sam." There was anguish in those green eyes but also a determination formed by sheer force of will. Dean Winchester was going to will that to be the truth or so help him. Sam relaxed a fraction of an inch under his grip. "It's gotta be. He's immune, and Hell hasn't ended this freak show because they gotta see that you are too."

"Okay," the younger Winchester agreed quietly, casting another furtive glance Andy's way. Like his brother, he willed himself to believe their friend would be alright. "Then what now? Should I just…head out there and get it over with? Let one of them infect me?"

Dean shuddered at the words, skin blanching as he pulled away from his brother and struggled not to react as explosively as he wanted to. No, they were absolutely not doing that, in any way shape or form. That was not an idea he was on board with.

When he expressed as much, *calmly* (well, sort of), Sam only shrugged, otherwise without another idea. Not like he'd been all that serious about it to start. "Well…what else we got?"

Squat. They had jack squat, which was kind of the problem. Last time it had been Nurse Betty over there that did the deed, but Dean had seen to that problem. Which left them with a whole new set of issues, just like every other time they'd altered the timeline. You'd think they'd learn.

Before Dean could spitball any ideas, good or bad, the Sarge was calling them across the room. The brothers took off, worried for the worst, and got to Andy's side in about ten strides each (okay, eight strides in the case of the long-legged-freak that was the younger Winchester).

"What is it?" Sam asked, immediately crouching down beside their friend, who had regained consciousness. He swallowed back the next question, not wanting to alert the armed Master Sarge to Andy's possible condition, and instead wrapped his hand around the kid's wrist. His pulse was better, but still weak. "How're you feeling?"

"Definitely…been better," the kid answered, eyes half-drooped and chin slumped against his chest. There were dark circles under his eyes, his skin wasn't quite the right color, and he sounded exhausted. The blood loss, pain, and painkillers could explain all that. But then again, so could the early stages of turning into an angry zombie. The kid's eyes widened somewhat as he struggled to stay awake. "You guys g-gotta…lock me up."

"You're fine, kid." Dean, standing just behind his brother, leveled Andy with the kind of glare that dared him to say otherwise. Andy huffed.

"You don't know that," was his quiet reply, not that he was trying to be quiet.

"Yeah, I do."

Andy glanced up at him, a sad little furl forming between his brows. "Then why do you look so scared, man?"

Dean had to physically bite down on his tongue to keep from answering, and he looked away petulantly, crossing his arms over his chest without realizing it only added to the pouting child look.

To their left, Mark glanced between the three of them, and then he caught on. His rifle was in both hands in an instant, partially raised but not yet focused at the injured kid. For good reason, too. His instincts had told him taking aim at the kid would have been a threat that ended in a bullet him. And that was with Mark considering himself a damn quick shot.

Sure enough, the older Winchester had his own gun drawn on the Marine in less than a second, and Sam moved between his half-raised rifle and Andy.

"Put it down, Sargent," Dean demanded, the look in his eyes giving Mark absolutely no doubt that he would follow through with shooting him. Whereas, the Sargent hadn't made up his mind about killing the kid. "Back off, Sarge, or we're gonna have a real problem."

"He's infected!" he half-protested anyway, because if it was true, if this man was about to turn like his neighbor, like his friends, then they couldn't risk waiting. To the kid's credit, Andy just stared tiredly up at him, as if he hadn't decided whose side he was on yet. As if he could side with Mark.

"He's immune." The barked words were more like a command, and the military man found his eyes leaving the target to focus on the older Winchester.

"Immune." His scoff was incredulous at best, but the rifle remained only half raised.

"We knew this was coming." As Sam spoke up, voice even and calm amid the storm of anger, all parties involved turned uncertain and surprised eyes to him. He was he half-crouched, arms raised, between Andy and the gun. Hazel eyes locked with Marks, and damn if they weren't just as serious, just as sure, as his brother's.

Mark's grip tightened on his gun. "What?"

"We knew," Sam reiterated, keeping the Master Sargent's attention on him and not Andy. Beside him, Dean was tense. "This is what we do, alright? The people we work for-"

"And just who the hell is that?" Mark interrupted, eyes continuously darting between the two brothers, ready for whichever made the next move. But Dean's eyes were on his brother. "FBI? CDC?"

"The kind of agency that doesn't have a name," the younger Winchester offered simply, and Dean had to once again admire his brother's bullshitting capabilities. Really, kid would have made one hell of a lawyer. "We got a tip about a possible biological weapon test in this town."

"Bullshit."

"Really?" Dean countered, eyeing the Sarge now that he knew Sam's play. "You think there's a better place to test a virus than a small town in the middle of nowhere? One road in, one road out, and probably only one friggin' cell tower to knock over to kill communication of the entire place."

Mark swallowed heavily and Sam lowered his arms a little further.

"We came here to check it out. Yes, Andy's infected, but-" The younger Winchester gestured cautiously at the kid, who was still staring up at the Sarge like he fully expected the man to end it- "he's immune. We all are; we were inoculated before we came."

The Sarge caught the glance both men sent the younger Winchester's way at that, and narrowed his eyes. He knew an omitted truth when he heard one. "But?"

Sam let his arms finally settle by his sides as the tension in the room, while still tense, wasn't at *shoot-each-other-first-use-our-brains-and-communication-skills-second* levels. "The immunization has never been tested in the field. Not fully."

He could see his spun story wasn't do all that much to settle the Marine's nerves, but Sam was also pretty sure he wasn't going to kill Andy anymore. At least not in the next few seconds.

"So here's what we'll do," he continued once it was obvious the Sarge wasn't calling him on his lie. "We're going to isolate him-" Sam raised a hand to silence his brother before Dean could get out much more than a growl or protest- "and wait out the incubation period."

Slowly, inch by inch, Mark lowered his rifle until it was pointed at the ground. "How long is that?"

Sam glanced sidelong at his brother. "About four hours."

The Master Sargent finally released his secondary grip on the barrel, rifle falling to his side. He was in no way alright with the situation, but even in the middle of what felt like the end of the world, he wasn't going to kill a kid in cold blood. Not without a damn good reason.

The younger Winchester nodded at him gratefully, then turned to help Andy to his feet.

"Sam-" Dean started, but that head of floppy brown hair just shook him into obedient silence. He stepped forward, taking the two IV bags Sam handed him, temporarily disconnecting them from the kid's elbow and hand. With his other arm wrapped under Andy's arm and around his back, Dean helped him towards one of the two patient rooms.

"We're not sure either, Dean," Sam finally explained, keeping his voice quiet not just for the Sarge watching them like a hawk, but for the exhausted and terrified psychic between them. Andy was a champ, pushing through this with everything he had, but Sam knew he was scared.

"I don't wanna turn you into Reavers," Andy mumbled, head still hanging down as they carried him into the small room and got him up on the cushioned table. He listed to the side, and both brothers realized that wasn't going to work. "Don't let me go full Reaver, guys."

"I don't even know what that is," Dean grumbled right back, trying for good natured but missing by a hair. Given the severity of the situation, he figured his frustration could be forgiven. Sam helped Andy back off the table while Dean grabbed a chair from the corner and put it in the middle of the room. Andy settled into it, hunched into himself and looking half his size. Still, he had the energy to stare up at Dean in wide-eyed horror as the older Winchester's words registered.

"You haven't seen *Firefly*?" Appalled, Andy shuddered and mourned for the poor, deprived man in front of him. His friend. How had he let his own friend go on living such an incomplete and meaningless life? Beside him, hooking the blood bag back up, Sam rolled his eyes affectionately. "Dude. You say my television education sucks. You're not even allowed to talk to me anymore."

"Oh, was that all it took?" Dean rolled his eyes and moved over to the only window in the small room.

Andy scoffed, but the sound ended in a pitiful whine. He reached up towards his bound arm, but Sam caught his hand before he could risk opening his stitches. Familiar with that kind of suffering, Sam squeezed Andy's hand tightly, all but encouraging him to do the same, as the kid rode out the wave of pain. At the window, Dean released the blinds after seeing nothing but the empty lot behind the building and instead started rooting around the room for a stronger painkiller.

"You guys gotta tie me up." As the pain subsided, Andy's words came out breathless. It was clear he had used what energy he had left. The poor kid really wasn't looking good, but that could be the blood loss and shock. Or it could be the virus. It was probably blood loss and shock. Dean was ready to protest, probably to tell him it was definitely-absolutely-no-way-anything-else-but blood loss and shock (like the kid might not be aware he was missing a quarter of his supply), but the look Andy pinned him with ended the change of topic before he could even get it started. "Come on, it's not worth the risk, and you know it."

Dean was silent for a moment, once again pouting angrily at the corner of the room. But it didn't take much of the silence, of the kid's shallow, labored breathing, before he gave in. Mirroring words Andy had once granted him in an interrogation room in Baltimore, Dean conceded, "I do know it."

So Sam found several lengths of rubber medical tube, probably used to tourniquet a limb when drawing blood, and started securing Andy to the chair. While he did, Dean summoned as much huffy exasperation as an older brother possibly could, and asked the kid what the hell '*Firefly'* was all about. Nothing with that girly a name could be worth watching.

Well, *that* kept Andy plenty distracted from the current situation, so much so that Sam was done in no time at all.

The two brothers, Dean leaning out the door to check on the Sargent (who was keeping watch at the front windows), kept Andy talking for another ten minutes, mostly about this show that Sam actually had heard of before and Dean was begrudgingly starting to admit sounded pretty awesome, before their favorite Jedi fell morosely silent. Sam worried the full weight of the situation had finally settled in now that the kid was bound to a chair out of concern for turning into a rage-

crazed, mindless monster. That was a lot for anyone to handle, but even Sam hadn't realized just what the full potential of that weight really was. Andy did.

"Will my powers still work?" The question was dazed at first, but then Andy swallowed and tried to straighten in the chair, panic hitting the edge of his voice. "If I turn, will I still be able to control people?"

The matching way Sam and Dean's eyes doubled in size might have been funny – might have been the sort of thing a little brother would have a good long laugh over – had the situation not been as truly terrifying as it was. Dean looked at Sam, blinking in that way of his that said One: he had no idea the answer and B: son of a bitch.

"Shit," was what he said out loud, and Sam swallowed reflexively, struggling through what should be such a simple bodily function.

"I'll stay with him." He said it softly, but the conviction in his words was strong. Dean cast an anguished look between him and Andy, realizing Sam's words meant Dean needed to leave. Leave his younger brother and a kid that had sort of earned an honorary brother spot in his heart over the last few months.

But Andy looked as scared as he ever did, and Dean knew, even as a mindless Croat, Andy would never forgive himself if he 'Reavered' them.

'Dumb name for a zombie', he'd muttered while Sam as tying the kid up.

'I think you mean awesome, you piece of goushi.'

Dean had to admit, any show that got away with swearing on live television by doing it in another language was probably worth watching. If only to learn all the naughty words.

Watching the kid they'd tied up in the middle of a doc's office, that they'd dragged into this mess to get shot at and cut up and infected, Dean couldn't do it. He didn't want to leave Andy alone with this. That's not what older brothers did. But as he looked back at Sam, who gave him a subtle nod of support, Dean realized that the kid would have an older brother with him.

With more emotion than the older Winchester was ever comfortable feeling and thoughts clear across the border of hair braiding and sleepovers, Dean pushed down his hesitation and nodded. "Alright. I'll keep watch with the Sarge. We'll…uh, we'll figure a way out once

we're sure you're clear, alright?"

Andy nodded, obviously rallying every ounce of *don't-show-them-you're-afraid-you-asked-for-this* that he had in him. Still, Dean continued to stall, but he knew there was nothing for it. If Andy did turn, if it wasn't the demon blood that had made Sam immune but his bloodline as a vessel instead, if the kid did keep his powers as a Croat, Dean couldn't be there when it happened. He knew that. So he finally walked out of the small patient's room and, after a second's deliberation, swung the door mostly closed behind him. Worry still gnawed at his gut, for Andy, for Sam, so, at the last moment, he left it cracked. Just in case.

The kid would be fine. Because it was the demon blood that made Sam immune. It was, it was, it was. Dean released the door handle and made his way back to the lobby and their other tagalong.

-o-o-o-

The two men stood guard by the clinic's front windows, peaking through the blinds and aimlessly pacing the empty lobby in an excruciatingly tense and unpleasant hour. Between the threat outside and Sarge given him the distrusting, angry side-eye every six and a half minutes on the dot, the night wasn't exactly off to a great start.

Dean remembered liking the Sarge the last time. Respecting him, at the very least. He'd been glad the man had been among the few to survive, and had genuinely wished him well when he and the Tanner kid headed out of town the next morning. This time though…Dean wasn't sure if it was just the changes they'd enacted – the more limited Croat breakout that meant the Sarge hadn't seen his neighbors tearing each other apart, or maybe that the majority of what Mark *had* seen was Dean gunning down those neighbors in cold blood – but Dean was starting to worry about the possibility of more having changed than just what he and Sam had so far caused.

Okay, so maybe half of the Sarge's looks were purely in response to the distrustful side-eye Dean sent his way every six minutes on the dot.

But the man from the future was sickof being one step behind Hell and another two behind Time. Sick of it. He wasn't trusting anything anymore, and that included a man that hadn't been infected last time.

He turned on his heel at the end of the row of waiting chairs, the third up and down line he'd made in about half as many minutes, and faced

the Sarge. Dean opened his mouth, probably to start something he'd either regret because the man was nothing but an ordinary human terrified out of his mind at his quaint little home town ripping itself apart, or because he was a croat or a demon. The latter of which Dean was hardly prepared to fight.

He was damn sick of that too. As soon as they survived this nightmare and got out of Rivergrove, he was finding a damn demon knife or an angel blade. Fuck it. Other versions than Ruby's had to exist somewhere on the planet.

The sudden eruption of banging terrified cries for help coming from the front door stopped both men, who immediately rounded towards the noise, guns up.

"Hey! Let me in, let me in! Please!"

Dean frowned at the flash of déjà vu and the not-completely-unfamiliar voice. He realized who it was even as he followed the Sarge out into the main hallway of the building.

"It's Duane Tanner!" Mark exclaimed, but the pleasant surprise quickly turned into suspicion. He hesitated at the sight of the Tanner's oldest kid, pounding on the glass door, terror in his eyes and desperation on his face. Mark had seen enough tonight not to fall for it so quickly.

Winchester, on the other hand, pushed right past him, grabbing one of the chairs they'd formed a blockade with and tossing it aside. He opened the left door to the clinic, ushering the kid in without so much as a demanded explanation for where he'd been or how he'd found them. Duane Tanner limped gratefully into the quiet space, sliding his camping pack off his back as he did so.

"Thank god."

"You're bleeding," Mark said, suddenly twice as wary as he had been. Dean was putting the chair back under the handle of the door, wedging it into place.

Duane's eyes dropped down to his leg, where his pants leg was ripped clean through and he had a good two, three inch cut along his shin. A little frown pulled at his brow but the kid didn't look very worried about it. "I was running. I…I saw Roger McGill being dragged out of his house by people we know! They started cutting him with knives! So I ran. I…must have tripped."

Mark shook his head, rifle raising once more but not quite trained on the kid. He still wouldn't kill without a damn good reason, but he was starting to worry he had one.

"He's not infected," Dean announced, like he was some sort of damn oracle when it came to who in this town was a madman. The Winchester man left it at that, pushing past the two to head back into Dr. Lee's office.

"Infected?" Duane echoed with a new look of terror and confusion coming across his face. "Infected by what?"

"What do you mean, 'he's not infected'?" Mark parodied back, angrily following after the man he'd just about had enough with. Dean Winchester talked like he was a damn authority on whatever the hell was happening to Mark's town, but he refused to explain anything. Mark was done buying it.

"Exactly what I said," Dean answered tersely, that condescending tone back in his voice that grated on the Marine's last nerve. "He's not infected."

The Marine Sargent wet his lips, grip tightening and loosening against the trigger and butt of his rifle. Despite doing his best to keep his calm, it was through gritted teeth that he growled, "You can't possibly know that."

"Yeah, well, I do." Dean tucked his gun back into his waist, eyes darting, however momentarily, to the partially closed door where his brother and Andy were sequestered away. He hadn't checked on them in a while, and a little niggle of worry started up when Sam didn't come out to check on the noise. Dean rolled his shoulder, rubbing at his chest.

"You 'just know'."

Closing his eyes to keep from rolling them – or worse – Dean turned back to the front of the store and Mark, who was wringing that rifle in his hands with increased agitation. Dean narrowed his eyes and met every inch of distrust pouring off the man with a growing bucket load of his own. "Yeah. I just know."

"Yeah?" Mark countered, taking a challenging step forward. "Well I'm finding that damn suspicious. That you just *know*."

Between them but off to the side, Duane Tanner looked back and forth

at the warring men, worry quickly replacing his confusion. "Uh, guys? What's going on?"

"You know what I find suspicious?" Dean took that same step forward, bringing the two men within punching distance of each other. His fingers twitched for the gun he'd just put away, but if his growing hunch was right, if that ache spreading across his chest was dead on as it always had been, then that gun wouldn't do him any good. "That you of all people didn't listen to Andy's message. You didn't go home, Sarge. Nah, you just happened to be out on the town, in the exact right place at the right time to run into me. *Again*."

The Sarge's answering frown, angry as it was, also became confused. Dean didn't buy it, though. "What message? And what do you mean, 'again?' I've only run into you once on this blasted night, and once was plenty enough."

This time Dean did roll his eyes. Ignoring the second part of Mark's words, he explained curtly, "The message we broadcasted all over town, asshole, telling everyone to get inside and stay there. Funny that you didn't listen."

The Master Sarge's eyes grew dark at the accusation he didn't fully understand but heard regardless. He drew to his full height, which was a couple inches short of the Winchester man, but he didn't let that stop him from being an intimidating sight himself. "I didn't hear any damn message, and even if I had, I wouldn'ta listened to it!"

"Guys…" Duane glanced between them, clearly growing nervous of the fight just seconds from breaking out.

"Yeah, I'm starting to get that." Dean smirked, the corner of his mouth ticking up dangerously. Mark suddenly got a whole new impression of the man, and it wasn't a pretty one. Distantly, they both heard the door to the patient's room opening and Sam coming out, asking what was going on. But Dean was focused on other things, like the burning in his chest and the son of a bitch right in front of him. "In fact, I'm starting to get the feeling Azazel had a spy on the inside the entire time. We just didn't know it."

Mark's frown only doubled, bafflement almost winning over the anger. Beside them, the Tanner kid stiffened and across the room, Sam started towards them. Dean took that last step into the Sarge's personal space and opened his mouth.

"*Christo*."

-o-o-o-

Dean was expecting a hiss and black eyes. Which was exactly what he got, just not from the direction he was anticipating. The sharp, serpentine intake of air to his right was surprising enough to render the hunter utterly useless for a span of about six seconds. He blinked, turning to the kid standing beside them, pack still hanging off one shoulder, leg bleeding, and eyes pure black.

"Son of a-"

Dean's stunned curse was interrupted as Duane Tanner backhanded him, both physically and with a wave of supernatural power, sending him flying into a row of chairs. The hit was hardly the worst he'd taken, but the tangle of seats around him slowed the hunter from getting immediately back to his feet. As he fought metal limbs and hard plastic, tossing the chair atop him aside, he heard the Sarge's gun discharge three times. Even heard the sick, wet thud of bullets sinking into flesh, but Dean knew they'd do no good against the Tanner kid.

God damnit, had he been a demon the whole (other) time?

Dean sat upright in time to see Duane grab the barrel of Mark's rifle and bend it like a rubber hose. The Sarge's eyes were wide; he knew death when he looked it in the face. Duane snapped his neck just as easily.

The older Winchester didn't have time to mourn the man as Mark's body crumpled to the floor or acknowledge any of the guilt he'd sure be feeling later for getting him killed this time. All because he'd targeted the wrong damn change in the timeline.

"Dean, Dean, Dean." Tanner turned to him, aggressive grin spreading across his face, and Dean drew his gun. "There you go again, knowing things you're not supposed to."

They'd come into this cursed little town with holy water, of course (prepared for anything), but his canister had been in that god damn duffle bag back at the station. Knowing it was useless, Dean emptied the clip into the approaching demon anyway. Every bullet sinking into the bastard might do absolutely nothing to slow him down, but it sure as hell felt better than doing nothing.

Soon as they made it out. They were getting themselves a *god damn demon knife*.

Several feet away, Duane suddenly faltered in his approach. Dean's gun clicked empty, and he reached into his front pocket to reload. The Tanner kid's focus was elsewhere, however, as his limbs twitched of their own accord and a muscle in his neck spasmed. He hissed suddenly, and with it the first trickle of black smoke leaked free of his mouth.

Black eyes turned sharply to the right, to Sam, still standing across the room from them. His lips moved in a near silent exorcism, but the Latin whispers were just enough to reach the demon. Duane hissed and more smoke leaked out, more spasms followed.

Dean slammed his backup magazine into the chamber and emptied it a second time as the demon started across the room.

"Sam, run!"

But his brother did no such thing. The younger Winchester stood his ground, mouth moving furiously, no longer keeping the exorcism quiet. The Tanner kid twitched like a damn epileptic, but it didn't stop his progress across the room. Dean knew the demon was only playing with its food.

"Damnit," the older hunter hissed, shoving the weapon back into his waistline and scrambling to his feet. He charged the demon as soon as he was upright; it was a kamikaze move – a fool's move – but he had no other choice.

"Ah-ah-ah." Tanner took his tackle head on but spun and, with a little demon-love-tap, sent Dean flying into the ground and sliding several feet away.

"Dean!" Sam broke off the exorcism as his brother hit the linoleum floor *hard*. The young hunter had memorized the Latin words easily enough, but rattling it off unfazed, sentence after sentence, all while facing down a creature of Hell currently beating the crap out of his brother, was something that clearly required more practice.

"Now, don't you go anywhere, Sam," the demon said as he stalked the six or so feet over to the fallen Winchester. Dean rolled onto his back and kicked out with his legs. Duane Tanner's shin bone snapped in half, but the demon hardly cared. He didn't notice or care about the limp in his gait as he bent down, picking the older Winchester up by the front of his jacket and hauling him into the air. Dean grunted, one hand wrapped around the kid's insanely strong grip, the other trying fruitlessly to punch that smug smirk right off his face.

Still holding his older brother a good inch off the ground, Duane turned back to Sam and aimed his pointer finger, thumb up, at Sam and smiled. "We've got a little something we need you to try out for us. It won't hurt. Much."

Sam stiffened, the words ringing with distant familiarity. His brother had called all of this a *test.* The demon raised the same two fingers to his lips and whistled *loudly*. The immediate shattering of glass answered as the front windows caved in. An echo of the same happening in the hallway broke the tension-filled room.

"Damnit, Sam, *run!*" Dean growled, and this time Sam actually listened. Several Croats came flooding into the room, climbing through the broken windows, bringing down the blinds in a clatter as their bodies hit the floor, some slamming into the clinic door, breaking the glass and scrambling for the lock with torn up, bleeding arms. The demon and Dean were closest to both sources, but the infected flowed around them like a river around a rock and Sam, realizing they weren't after his brother, finally bolted.

He made it to the room Andy was still tied up in, barreling through the door and slamming it shut behind him.

"What's going on?" Andy, who'd been in a fitful sleep until gunfire woke him in a panic, was pulling at his bonds, tilting the chair dangerously back and forth in an attempt to break free. "Sam, what's happening!"

The younger Winchester didn't answer, darting across the room for the doctor's stool tucked beneath the counter. He shoved it up and under the door handle only seconds before the entire surface rattled with the impact of something big and heavy.

Andy went deathly quiet, staring at the door with wide, horrified eyes. "Sam…? Where's Dean?"

Another thud shook the door, then another and another, and the sound of Croats trying to break it down was hard to misinterpret. Andy was shaking, struggling to swallow through the giant lump in his throat that was the realization of only one Winchester being on the right side of the door. Sam turned to him, fingers trembling with adrenaline as he pulled out the IV line and started on the knots tying the medical tubing tight to the kid's arms.

"What are you doing?" Andy whispered, but even his voice shook. "It hasn't been four hours!"

The younger Winchester barely spared him the patronizing big brother look as he got the first tube off, freeing Andy's good arm. "I'll take my chances."

He immediately moved to the other arm. With the next thud to the door, the stool slid an inch forward with a terrible metallic screech. Andy stared at the trembling, warping door with horror. It wasn't going to hold forever.

Sam got the last of the knots out and ripped the tubing off of him. He hauled Andy to his feet.

"How do we get out?" the kid whispered, leaning a good portion of his weight against the taller hunter. Sam was a damn rock beside him. "Not that I'm complaining about dying standing up instead of tied to a chair, but it's still dying, and I'd rather not do that."

The Winchester nodded his head to the small window, the only other exit from the room. Andy stared at the thing for a second, realizing how much it was going to hurt climbing through that thing with his injuries, and just groaned.

-o-o-o-

Dean kicked out uselessly, feeling humiliatingly like a toddler in the much smaller kid's grip. Demon strength was a bitch. The hunter tried to break the black-eyed bastard's hold, but to no avail. All of the Croats but one had disappeared into the back of the clinic, leaving it eerily quiet and still. Dean could only hope the lack of noise meant Sam and Andy had made it out.

"Alone at last," the Tanner kid said, eyes practically twinkling as he kept the hunter aloft like every super-powered bad guy ever. Dean was not impressed. The demon completely ignored the solitary Croat he had ordered to stay. The poor soul had once been an older man, probably a stand up fellow in the community because, sure, why not. Now he stood by the clinic doors, swaying back and forth ever so slightly, but otherwise completely blank to the world.

Dean was way more wary of the Croat than the demon currently weight-lifting his body like he was going for the official title of World's Longest Upright Planking. Cuz that was totally a thing.

"Fuck you," he spat, kicking out again. Even when he managed to strike the demon, the Tanner kid barely even reacted to the glancing blows.

"Oh, you'll wish that's all we did to you, Winchester."

Dean stilled in the demon's grip, gritting his teeth as he stared down at the creature. Green eyes glanced over to the Croat, a flicker of fear running up his spine, but the zombie didn't move. Dean bared his teeth, trying to fight back the curiosity, tried not to give the bastard exactly what he wanted, but ultimately failed. "…We?"

Duane Tanner just grinned.

-o-o-o-

Sam lowered Andy into the claustrophobically narrow space slowly, careful not to tear open those wounds. They hadn't made it far, only a dozen feet from the medical clinic, but the small parking lot that lined the back of the building had several alcoves and doorways, including this one, which was primarily taken up by a very large dumpster. The smell was horrendous, of course, but it was a good hiding spot and the best they'd get in the handful of seconds between that door breaking down and the Croats climbing out the window after them.

The beanstalk of a Winchester crouched down to the ground the best he could between the filthy metal box and the dirt and skidmark-streaked wall at the back of the alcove. From where he was positioned, he could peer around the corner of the dumpster and see about a thirty foot stretch of parking lot. He ducked back with a silent hiss as a shadowy figure ran past only feet away. A second followed, pausing for a moment right in front of the dumpster and Sam latched onto Andy's hand as the kid positively shook. But he stayed quiet, and the Croat eventually turned on his heel and headed off across the lot at a dead run. The two hunters let out silent breaths.

Sam could see others dart into his constricted field of vision now and then, spreading out and away from the medical clinic. The five or so infected that had chased after them had, once again, split up in the hunt. Luckily, hide and seek didn't seem too high up on their resume of zombie skills.

"Was that all of them?" Andy finally whispered, voice so quiet Sam barely heard it from right next to him. He squeezed the kid's hand before letting go and daring to climb a little further out of the alcove.

Sam could still see a shadowy figure in the distance, searching the tree-line a hundred feet away. But given the lack of light in the lot behind this block of buildings, Sam doubted the Croat would spot them, even if they climbed out into the open right now.

"Yeah, I think that's all of them." The hunter straightened from his half-crouched position, cricket legs already cramping from the tight fit. Andy made an aborted motion to stop him, but ended up just clenching his teeth and breathing through the very obvious panic. Sam hesitated because of it, observing the poor kid for a long moment, before crouching back down. He laid a comforting hand on Andy's shoulder. "I've gotta go back for Dean."

Wide brown eyes snapped to his and Andy's jaw flapped open uselessly for a second. "He's alive?"

Sam winced, realizing that in his frantic rush to get them both out, he hadn't exactly been forthcoming with the details. "Yeah. A demon got him but…but he's alive. The…Reavers were just after me."

For some reason, Sam still couldn't bring himself to call the demon-virus infected humans by the term Dean slung around so damn causally. It was something about the bitter darkness in his brother's face anytime he used that word that continuously hung Sam up anytime he thought about using it.

"Aw, man," Andy shuddered. "You mean I coulda stayed tied up in my nice cozy medical-tube prison and been fine?"

Now he got the proper big brotherly glare.

"Sure, if getting capture by a demon is your idea of 'fine.'" The younger Winchester stood once more, this time fully rising to look out over the dumpster. The shadowy figure by the tree-line was gone and the rest of the small lot was encouragingly empty. "I've gotta go back."

"'Kay. What's the plan?" Andy hissed as he started struggling to his feet. Sam immediately turned, pushing him back to the ground as gently as he could.

"The plan is you're staying here."

"What?" The kid blinked up at him and, despite the fluids refill, Sam could tell he was still far from good. And surely in a lot of pain. "Nah, man, I'm coming with you."

"Andy, you can barely stand on your own."

And he was bleeding again, but considering they were zilch in the way of medical supplies right now, Sam really didn't see the benefit of pointing that out.

The resident Jedi let out a loud, 'pfft' before realizing it reverberated in the alcove and echoed out into the parking lot. Sam wasn't worried – there wasn't anyone near enough to hear – but the kid quickly dropped his voice back down. "Who needs to stand? You can totally pull off a rescue with a butt-scoot."

Sam dropped back down, a pitiable but affectionate (if not properly exasperated) expression on his face. He squeezed Andy's good shoulder again and the kid new he wasn't going right then and there. No one in the history of ever could win a fight against those stupidly sympathetic, understanding, puppy dog eyes.

"Youcan totally pull off a rescue. By sitting here, out of sight."

"And if you don't come back?" Andy was quieter now but staring up at him intently.

Sam was quiet too, knowing the possibility of that was very, very real. He gave the kid the most confident look he could muster and then tried to feel it himself. "I'm coming back."

With that, the younger Winchester climbed to his feet and edged his way around the dumpster and out of the alcove. He took several tentative steps into the open, staring at the darkness hedging in from all three sides. Confident he was alone, Sam turned back to the dumpster, double checking Andy was completely out of sight.

"Well, well, well."

Sam's head snapped up and he stumbled several feet back from the wall of the building, where three people stood on the edge of the roof at least twenty feet above him.

Not good.

"Sam Winchester."

The woman who had spoken dropped from the building, hitting the ground with a sharp impact, but standing from the twenty-something drop like she hadn't felt a thing. When she rose to her full height, her eyes slid black.

So. Not. Good.

"We've been looking for you."

Her two buddies joined her, landing on either side of the woman. The larger of the two looked over his shoulder at the dumpster, and Sam's stomach sunk somewhere down near his toes. They knew. He clenched his fists by his side as the hulking mass of a demon shoved the dumpster to the side and started pushing his way into the small space. There was no way Sam could get an exorcism out before one of the three demons took him down.

The woman pulled a walkie-talkie from her hip. It crackled with static as she turned it on, and Sam realized it had to be shortwave. Dean had said the radios would be out as well; another reason not to bring Baby with them. She raised it to her perfectly painted red lips.

"Kill the jammer and call the boss. Tell him we got 'em."

Andy cried out as the demon hauled him up and out of the alcove. Sam yelled at them to stop; there was no reason to hurt him further or risk tearing the stitches keeping an already limited supply of blood inside the boy where it belonged. But neither of the psychics' words, super-powered or not, had any effect on the demons. The kid stumbled into the open space behind the demon, dragged out by the hair. Both of Andy's arms were up, clawing at the meaty hands and Sam eyed his shoulder worryingly. It didn't look like it was bleeding much more than before, at least for now.

Andy met his gaze from feet away. Sam didn't have any answers to the questions or the fear there. He put up a fight as the third demon grabbed onto his arm, eventually having to get a much better grip after Sam took out a kneecap and busted the guy's nose. But there wasn't much more than a good fight to be had against three demons who could break their bones like toothpicks. They were well and truly screwed this time.

A minute later, the familiar crackle of Azazel's voice replying through the radio sealed that deal.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: *head thud* twenty one *head thud* god damn *head thud* pages.

…But it was worth it, no? Dear Chuck, tell me it was worth it. Lie to me if you have to.

Next Update: may be late, as I'm going camping next weekend. Great for writing time, reeeeally crappy for uploading-to-that-

thing-called-the-internet-which-doesn't-really-exist-in-the-middle-of-the-woods-(yet). But it'll be up by Monday at the latest.

Reviews: Firstly, you guys have been AWESOME to me the last couple chapters and there really aren't words to express just how much I appreciate it or how much it means to the success of this story. If you still have it in you, please keep it coming for this chapter. It's not that this little re-write took a lot out of me, but it definitely delayed that whole writing-new-material-instead-of-adding-a-super-long-chapter-to-an-already-finished-arc-that-just-didn't-have-the-Sarge-in-it-but-was-still-perfectly-fine-damnit. At least until the Muse reminded me that no, no it really wasn't.

Secondly, we gained a ton of new readers which is always awesome to see, so WELCOME NEW PEEPS!

Review Replies: To the Guest reviewer on ff who complimented my management of Andy not becoming a magical solve-all solution to every problem: [insert nervous laughter here that quickly turns into sobbing] You have no idea, can I please just kill him off, he makes it so I have to work SO MUCH HARDER AT THIS CREATIVE WRITING STORY TELLING THING.

Fun Fact #420: I will not kill Andy Gallagher off just because he makes me work so much harder at this creative writing story telling thing.

Fun Fact #421: I will (probably) kill him off because Time is a mother effer and I'm a no good dirty rotten author ^.^

Anyhoo! Hope you guys enjoyed this one, see you next time!

Chapter 76: Season 2: Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I came home early from my camping trip to finish editing this chapter just for you all XD

Ookay, so we didn't cut the trip short *only* for this story; my friend also started feeling ill and the weather was pretty chuck-awful. But no lie, I sat in the woods that I love all day yesterday and grumbled about how I just wanted to be home where I could edit without worrying about battery conservation and glare on my screen. XP This story is becoming my life and I'm really not sure that's a good thing.

Minutiae: The logical part of my brain that insists on accuracy and realism tells me a town the size of Rivergrove would not have its own school. They'd likely bus their kids to a bigger town. But, the imaginative part of my brain says a town close enough to ship their kids off in a bus every day is no place for a zombie apocalypse. So I'm making Rivergrove rural enough that those bitches, all three hundred and seventy one of them, have their own school.

Just imagine how proud they'd be, having chipped in their tax dollars and a little extra to build a brand new gymnasium complete with basketball court. They'd have had one of those large signs with a thermometer drawn on it, red marker filling up the tube to show how much money they'd raised and how much more they had to go. They'd have thrown a party in that gymnasium once it was newly built. It'd be the pride and joy of the community, guys.

(Am I romanticizing small town life in my head? You bet I am. But you go watch that episode. Aside from being creepy as fuck, that town was *cute*)

(Now let's go murder a bunch of people in it.)

Quality Warning: The beginning of this chapter was so much better written when it immediately followed Ch. 41. But now I've cannibalized it so the damn Muse could have her twenty one extra pages, and it's still a little rough in my opinion.

Chapter Warnings: Dean's taking a beating, Azazel is being his usual unnerving self, Sam's faced with some difficult choices, Andy's hurting, Cas is coming to the rescue, and if you thought the last chapter was a cliffhanger…well, it was nice knowing you, cuz you're not gonna like me for very much longer.

Actual Chapter Warnings: For real, there is a pretty rough beating and minor torture and gore in this chapter. Azazel is a super creep, Andy is, uh, really not doing well, and there's a terrible, no good, dirty rotten sort-of double cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 43

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean kicked and fought and punched for every yard he was dragged out of the doctor's office and down the main street. The Tanner kid hadn't gotten him very far in the six and a half minutes since Sam locked himself and Andy inside one of the patient rooms and never came back out. Their lack of progress was probably due to Dean putting all one hundred and eighty pounds of fit, trim muscle (and, okay, a *little* bit of cheeseburgers and pie, but only, like, a *little*), into throwing a level eleven temper tantrum that would have any two year old looking on in aspiration.

The old man Croat, weirdly enough, followed along behind the two of them like a chaperone to the world's most unorthodox and unwanted date.

"Enough!" Duane, or whatever the demon's actual name was (probably long forgotten after centuries down in the pit) shouted as he came to a halt outside a tiny little pharmacy only two doors down from the clinic. The demon spun, slamming Dean's back into the wall hard enough to shake dust free from the brick façade.

The hunter groaned, sure to have bruises all up and down his back tomorrow (if he lived that long). He picked his head off the wall to glare at the black-eyed bastard. "Or what? You'll kill me?"

How unoriginal that would turn out to be.

Tanner sneered, lip curling up and over his teeth. He gestured with his head to the old man standing just to their left, back to swaying mindlessly. "No, Winchester. I'll let that one take you apart piece by piece. Not enough to kill you, just enough to infect you and leave you to die a slow, miserable death. Until you get back up, mindless and obedient, and hunt down your own brother just to taste his blood."

For the life of him, Dean couldn't help the way he blanched, but damnit, did he try. The hunter swallowed past the lump in his throat and forced himself to maintain eye contact. But for one of the few times in his life, he opted to stay silent and it annoyed him how satisfied the demon looked. He didn't have a choice, though. There was no telling what Hell and Time would make of this mess, and he couldn't take any chances. They were far enough off from the events he knew that just about anything could happen now. Including one (or more) of them not making it out this time.

However, that didn't mean he had any intention of making it easy for the bastard holding him in an iron grip.

"Dean!"

The hunter's head snapped up and to the side, a mix of surprise, fear, hope, then ultimately devastation passing through him like so much whiplash. Sam stood at the next corner a hundred feet away, flanked by a man and woman. A third hulking beast of a dude joined them, practically hauling Andy in front of him. Dean's chest constricted at the sight. They hadn't gotten away after all.

The three captors were far too calm to be activated Croats, and Dean realized he was seeing the first wave of that 'we' Tanner mentioned. Demons. Just how many were in this God-forsaken town? Hell was only supposed to have a handful operating on Earth at the moment. Had they upped their numbers, or were they all just conveniently summoned for a little Winchester Welcoming Party? Dean grit his teeth as the Tanner kid grinned, peeling him off the wall and dragging him towards the others. He didn't fight nearly as hard since that was exactly where he wanted to go anyway.

"Sam," he breathed out as he got close enough to see his kid brother was alright. He didn't look hurt, though he was definitely a bit scuffed up and dirtier than he had been fifteen minutes ago. Andy wasn't doing nearly as well, half of his weight held up by the demon's hands, but he still looked better than he had right after they'd left the sheriff's station. The blood and fluids had clearly helped. Dean leaned away

from Duane's grip as much as he could to eye the kid's shoulder. There was some blood smattering the bandages and the poor kid was shivering in the November air in nothing more than his t-shirt, but he was alive and it looked like he might stay that way for now.

He looked in his right mind too, as much as a blood loss victim could be, which was a good sign. They were two hours into the incubation period. Dean would have expected a turn by now, if it was going to happen.

The female demon took immediate control of the situation, ordering the beast of a meatsuit holding Andy to also keep an eye on Dean, as well, given the new bruises Tanner was sporting on his face and arms. The older Winchester ended up sandwiched between the two of them as they resumed their journey to who-knows where.

The demons dragged the three humans down the deserted drag, the late hours of night upon them in the ghost town that Rivergrove was quickly becoming. They could still hear the occasional glass breaking in the distance, gunfire, and one time answering screams, but the noises were few and far between. And there was nothing the Winchester could do about any of it. Most of the town had surely been lost in that first hour after the Croats broke free. Their plan hadn't saved anyone. The whole town would be infected, dead, or missing by morning, if they weren't already.

As they got to the end of the main drag, the road split in a T-intersection, and across the street was what looked like a school, though it was hard to tell in the darkness. Well, that was a terrible idea. No horror movie ever took place in an empty, abandoned school in the dead of night in a town full of zombies. Not at all.

Dean landed a particularly good kick to Demon Hulk, to let his dislike of their current trajectory be clear. The hellspawn actually let out a grunt, grip on Andy faltering to the point where the kid stumbled and hit the ground with a weak cry. Dean felt a flash of guilt there, silently urging him to get up and run, but the kid was just too out of it. The woman who seemed to be in charge of Larry, Moe, and Hulk Curly here, spun on her heel, jaw squared tight and fire in her eyes.

"Hey!" she hissed, stalking up to him while Dean just pulled on his most charming Winchester smile. The one that never failed to piss off monsters. "You better get in line right now, Winchester, or-"

The demon stopped right in front of his face, her lips so close to his he

could feel her breath on his cheek, and Dean didn't hesitate. He reared back and slammed his head into hers.

He was pretty sure the snort he heard came from Andy, but given the way his vision whited out for a second, Dean didn't actually know. The Tanner kid delivered a punch right to his kidneys for that little move, and the hunter found himself bent involuntarily in half, harboring his side.

"Son of a- That's *it*!" the woman shrieked as she straightened back up, hands covering her bleeding, broken nose. The demon pointed viciously at the one croat the demons had kept with them: the old man.

"You! Get over here."

The guy obeyed without a sound, stepping towards her and Dean, who was playing nice while he put his internal organs back together. Tanner and the other normal sized meatsuit (Moe), seemed impatient to get moving, but as the woman was in charge, they stood by in disquieted agitation, hands tight on their prisoners.

"Gimme 'em," the demon demanded of the Croat. Dean tried not to let his trepidation show, but only ended up frowning almost comically when the infected man pulled three sets of cuffs from his pockets. He must have been one of the original Croats they'd locked up and raided the sheriff's station once the hunters fled. Dean eyed the cuffs, then turned that skeptical look on the demon.

"Wasn't my hands that broke your nose, sweetheart."

The woman took a deep breath, but let it out with a sickly sweet smile, made all the worse by the river of blood still dripping down her mouth and chin. "Oh, believe me. I'd take that head right off your shoulders if it was in the cards, bucko."

Dean forced a grin on his face to cover the way his stomach rolled. If the demons had orders to keep them alive – which was obvious given they'd been taken prisoner – then that could really only mean one thing.

Azazel was *here*, waiting for them at the end of this little nature walk of theirs.

Dean met Sam's eyes in realization, only to see his brother already knew. Well fuck.

They were all handcuffed, arms bound in front of them. As if to prove his brother's point, the bracelets didn't stopped Sam from giving his captor (Moe) a black eye, which earned him a particularly vicious hit across the face in return. Even bleeding from the temple, Sam didn't hesitate from striking out at the very next opportunity. As the demons turned to handcuffing Andy, the kid muffling a yell as his injured arm was manhandled in front of him, Sam broke free of Moe to bulldoze right into Demon Hulk (Curly, naturally).

"Enough!" The ringleader hollered, coming up behind Andy to grab the back of his neck with one hand and curl the other over his injured shoulder. She dug one of her perfectly manicured fake nail into the bullet wound as a warning, and Andy screamed.

Both hunters froze in their outright revolt, Dean releasing his captor (Larry, aka Duane Tanner) from a chokehold he absolutely had not been winning (though the cuffed hands had lent some assistance there) and Sam laid panting on the ground where Hulk Curly stumbled to his feet. The monstrosity of a meatsuit huffed in annoyance then pulled the hunter back up by the scruff of his shirt. Sam went willingly, eyes locked on the demon holding Andy.

She sneered at them, not withdrawing her finger from Andy's bleeding body but not going any further, either. The kid was struggling for air, eyes wide and glassy with pain, as a fresh flow of blood started down his arm.

"Leave him alone," Dean growled, uselessly raising bound wrists like the double-armed human club could ever be an actual threat to a demon (although, given he was a Winchester and they were known for pulling win's out of their asses, there was a chance, actually). Tanner grabbed onto his bicep with a low growl and Dean ripped away from him, his promise to turn that club on him next coming in loud and clear.

"Or what? Hunters; you always think you're the ones in charge," the demon scoffed, hand squeezing threateningly on Andy's shoulder. The kid whimpered, just barely keeping his feet under him as pain rolled from his arm like waves of liquid fire. No, worse than fire. Acid, burning him from the inside out. "Well, let me tell you, I've got no qualms having one less of you around. Hell, I'm more than happy to leave this kid right here and let him bleed to death if you two don't stow the hero complex and fall in line, *now*."

Her entire hand clenched, sending Andy back towards the ground as

his legs gave out and his entire upper body spasmed in retaliation. His scream tore at the Winchesters, and Sam raised his hands as well, less of the threat his brother promised and more in surrender.

"Stop, stop!" he yelled until the demon let up, leaving their friend a gasping, gaping, bleeding mess in her hands, the only thing holding him up. "Just stop. You don't need to hurt him, alright? It's me you all want." Sam slowly lowered his hands as the woman regarded him with cold, calculating eyes. Her hand finally loosened from its death grip on Andy. Beside him, Sam could feel Dean tense, teeth gritted against his little brother offering himself up on a silver platter. But it's what Dean would have done if it was Sam standing there hurt and bleeding. The younger Winchester gestured to himself with shrugged shoulders and bound wrists, "Well, you got me. I'm right here."

The thin-lipped smile – half a sneer, really – was all teeth, and it immediately set Sam's hunting instincts on edge. "That's nice of you to, Sam. Volunteering like that."

She tossed her head at something just over his shoulder, but the brunet didn't have time to turn before something was stabbed into his neck. Sam cried out, trying to pull away, but a tight grip wrapped around his arm held him kept him from escaping as fire erupted where his neck and shoulder met.

"Sammy!" Dean saw the attack coming at the last possible second, but there was nothing he could do to stop Moe from plunging a syringe full of the old man's blood – gathered while the two had been distracted by the threat to Andy's life – and emptying it into Sam's neck. Duane, still hovering beside him, was quick to restrain the older Winchester and Dean could do nothing but watch as Sam stumbled to one knee, hand clamped over the injection site.

The blood burned through his veins like liquid ice, and Sam shuddered at the slight buzz that accompanied it. Not unlike demon blood, he realized, and his eyes shot open at that. Sam jerked his head around, wincing as it pulled at the fresh bruising to his neck. He stared at Moe and the red-ringed syringe in his hand with wide eyes.

"What was that?" the younger hunter asked, a hollow fear in his voice that had Dean immediately on his toes.

It was the demon in charge, popping her lips in success, who answered coolly, "Just a little cocktail. Something we're trying out."

Sam met his brother's eyes, the fear there clearly painting a picture of

what else could have been in that syringe. Dean hadn't been paying attention – had Moe filled that syringe with some of his own good stuff before passing it onto the Croat? Damnit, they couldn't afford demon blood on top of everything else this night was turning out to be!

His part now played out, the female demon shoved Andy away from her. The kid stumbled a step and a half before his legs gave out. Luckily, Hulk Curly came to the antithetical rescue, grabbing Andy by his shirt before he could completely crumple to the ground. He set the kid back on his feet, holding up most of his weight when Andy couldn't quite manage it himself. Blood was once more falling to the black asphalt in a steady drip, drip, drip. The woman dusted her hands off on her skin-tight jeans and turned back towards the darkened school.

"Let's go," she tossed over her shoulder. The hunters' babysitters grabbed them one by one and started hauling them across the road.

-o-o-o-

The Rivergrove Robert Gray K-12 School was not a big building. It had one hallway lined with lockers that fed into four classrooms, a tiny teacher's lounge, and an administrative area that doubled as the principal's office. The building had an unattached gym, just big enough for a full-sized basketball court, which sat kitty-corner from the school. Hemmed in by the two buildings was a small rec field and playground. For a small town, it was the pride and joy of the community. They held local plays in that gym. The field doubled as a park on weekends, where the town held outdoor movie nights and the local Bluegrass band played every Friday. It was the central meeting location for just about anything town-related.

For the three hunters currently being dragged down its dark, deserted corridor, it was looking increasingly like a grave. Or, at the very least, an uncomfortably close call and the fuel for a series of nightmares they'd all rather not experience.

Andy was still shaking, eyes on the slow but steady stream of blood trailing down his arm, when the group came to a stop at the end of the school's only hallway. There were another four demons waiting for them there, eyes black and expressions grim.

Jesus Christ, how many damn demons were in this town? This was now beyond the number Dean had been comfortable thinking were

topside at this point in the timeline. This was *bad.*

A door to their left, marked with a glowing red exit sign, led out to the field and gymnasium beyond. Still holding Dean, the Tanner kid all but tossed him into the waiting arms of two of those demons, who grabbed him and started hauling him towards the exit. Duane followed along behind, a little limp still in his step (much to Dean's satisfaction), and the whole little party was joined by another demon and Hulk Curly.

"Dean!" Sam tried to follow, not liking the uneven split of manpower and what it hinted at. But the last of the new demons latched onto him, and he and Andy were hauled into the classroom at the end of the hall, no matter how much Sam fought against it. Dean disappeared through the exit surrounded by demons, and Sam had the gut-wrenching thought that this new timeline, created by decisions *he'd* insisted on, was about to get his brother killed.

The two were hurled through the door, Andy catching himself on one of ten school desks that filled the room. Sam toppled backwards into another, awkwardly catching himself half on the surface and half in the attached plastic chair that was absolutely not designed for a frame as large as his. The door slammed shut behind them, leaving the two boys alone in the dark, silent classroom.

At least until a light clicked on in the front corner over by the wall of windows. Andy, already facing that direction, looked up from his near death grip on the desk (sure they were about to be torn to shreds by a hoard of zombies just waiting for them in the dark, because what else could this nightmare possibly be missing?) and suddenly couldn't breathe for all new reasons. Sam rolled off the desk so he could face the threat head on, but even he couldn't fight the urge to back away.

Azazel sat at the teacher's desk in the far corner, chair balancing back on two legs, feet up on the surface. He was tossing a shiny, cliché-as-fuck, red apple up and down in one hand, a lazy grin stretched across his borrowed face. Yellow eyes glowed beneath the light of the desk lamp, the silver pull chain still swinging back and forth underneath the shade.

"Hello, kiddos. Welcome to the party."

Andy started shaking again and beside him, while he might have been able to hide it better, Sam wasn't doing much better.

-o-o-o-

The four demons brought Dean, kicking and hollering, into the gymnasium. He threw a two-armed punch (damn cuffs) and got punched back by the Demon Hulk, almost toppling to the side as they shoved him through the double doors. His boots made god awful squeaks on the shiny wood of the basketball court as he stumbled inside.

There were two more demons waiting for them, and Dean's stumble that time had nothing to do with his current captors shoving him towards them. This wasn't right. And not just the time bullshit, because, honestly, time not following the damn timeline was old news. But this – *this,* six demons plus the three more with Sammy was unheard of numbers pre-Hell Gate. This was…this wasn't good.

The hunter lurched forward as the hardest push yet sent him sprawling into the two waiting demons. They caught him and immediately tossed him back, keeping Dean off balance. Like some elementary school bullying, the six demons formed up a circle around him, shoving at him as he stumbled back and forth, until the hunter finally managed to catch his footing enough in the center that he wasn't within arm's reach of any of them.

Dean wiped at the blood gathered in the corner of his mouth and spat the remaining glob onto the court. The handcuffs jingled as he lowered his arms. "Let me guess. The first rule of Demon Fight Club is, we don't talk about Demon Fight Club?"

Hands grabbed from behind and spun him. The first punch was utterly unsurprising, but the force of it took the hunter to the floor. Dean groaned against the stupidly reflective surface. His breath left a cloud of condensation across the polish. He stared along the length of it, frowning when his double vision focused on another figure, not participating in ring-around-the-demonic-rosy. Another demon, no doubt; he was leaning against the far wall beside the bleachers, observing the proceedings with about as much interest as a fat kid would have in a Whole Foods. Dean didn't recognize the guy he was possessing – his short-cropped blond hair, too-tight black t-shirt, and leather jacket didn't particularly stand out – or know why he was so important he got to opt out of the Minions Anonymous meeting (beat-a-Winchester-to-a-bloody-pulp edition).

Dean allowed himself a moment, staring at the son of a bitch staring right back at him, before he got his chained hands under him and slowly hauled himself back up. He was surprised said minions hadn't bothered kicking him when he was down.

They even almost let him get to his feet before the next punch landed.

Dean knew how to take a beating; he'd had plenty in his life to learn by. In his experience, demons were some of the least creative when it came to a smack down. That always seemed to be the case with the monsters with super strength. So busy flouting their ability to throw you across the room like a hacky-sack they didn't even notice they weren't doing all that much damage. Now, the ones down in Hell – the ones that worked the racks and turned others – they were definitely creative, if you wanted to call it that. His time on the rack was, hands down, the worst beating Dean had ever taken, and not only because it lasted forty friggin' years. But your average demon, like the ones surrounding him now, they were overpaid nightclub bouncers at best.

Another punch landed right between his shoulder blades and Dean cried out as he found himself stomach down on the court once more. Of course, bouncers or not, it didn't mean it didn't hurt. He knew he could take it, though.

The only problem was, Dean didn't know how long it was going to go on, and if Azazel really was on scene, that meant Sam was alone with him. Sam and Andy. And as far as Hell was concerned, the kid was expendable. They needed Sam and they had the leverage to get what they wanted. Dean didn't have time to make like Tyler Durden with these guys.

He felt a tooth loosen with the next punch, then lost it completely when the Tanner kid's foot connected with his face while he was still on all fours on the ground. Dean spat it out with a little clatter across the bloodied court. His face was an array of pain, the newest addition a throbbing shock along his jaw, causing neck muscles to cramp and his head to throb in tandem with his now agitated pulse.

Unfortunately, Dean wasn't exactly seeing a way out. Six to one (seven, if you counted the Travolta-wannabe over by the bleachers) were ugly odds, even for a badass such as himself. And he was a badass. Dean launched himself off of the floor to tackle the Tanner kid to the ground, reigning punches on him for as long as he had, spouting an exorcism through a swollen jaw all the meanwhile.

Demon Hulk hauled him off, and this time the punch to his face dislocated the bone completely. No more exorcism for Dean, or talking of any kind.

"Wiping the floor with your face is fun, Winchester." Dean groaned

from the floor, and the demon – a new woman in a tall, athletic meatsuit with gorgeous dark skin (exactly Dean's type any other day) – picked him up by his jacket, hauling him to his feet. He managed to turn his head enough to deflect her blow from striking the same jaw, but it boxed his ear instead and his whole head rung like a bell. "But I bet it's not as much fun as little Sammy's having right now."

The demons around him laughed and Dean struck out blindly. His cuffed hands clipped the lady, but it might as well have been a mosquito buzzing in her ear for all the damage it did. She dropped him to the floor like a sack of potatoes, a kick from a high-heeled boot sent him rolling several feet back into the circle.

"Do you think Azazel's got him on the good stuff, yet?" The Tanner kid grinned toothily as Demon Hulk hauled the exhausted, bleeding hunter off the floor for the gazillionth time. He was set back on his feet with another punch to the head.

Much more and he wouldn't be conscious to save anyone, least of all himself. And though it all, that guy in black just stood there, leaning against the back wall, watching the beat down.

"I bet he's sucking down blood like a baby from its mama's teat right about now."

Fear struck through him like a bad cord at the thought. Dean blinked through the blood and the ringing that seemed to exist between his ears and his eyes. But he didn't need to see to pinpoint the one who'd said it. It was the same woman, the only female voice in a chorus of asshatery. Dean was getting real tired of her.

She locked eyes on him, a vicious smirk lighting one side of her face. "I bet it tastes *good* to him. Mother's milk, straight from the source-"

Dean tackled the bitch with a muffled roar. He even managed to take down the demon laughing beside her, the three tumbling to the floor in a heap. The hunter was hauled up and off of them in no time at all, but tucked his knees into his chest the second the demon whore climbed back to her feet. Making use of the strength of the guys wrestling him from behind, Dean struck out, encircling her throat with his legs and snapping her neck like a twig. The demon behind him toppled over backwards trying to shake the hunter free and they both went down together. Benny had taught him how to do that during some seriously weird Purgatory lessons.

But the demon just stumbled back to her feet, grabbing at her bent

head and untwisting the mangled vertebrae with a sickening series of cracks. Her eyes flicked black as she stalked towards Dean with murder in those soulless depths.

Without an exorcism or a miracle, he just wasn't getting out of this one.

But Dean had *promised*. He'd *promised* Sammy that this would never happen to him again. Dean wouldn't let it. He'd said it – and meant it – the day they started fixing up the Impala. Sam would never be forced to drink demon blood again. Big brother Dean *wouldn't* let it happen.

Well, big brother Dean was currently mopping the Rivergrove basketball court with his face and blood. Lot of good he or his promises were.

Of course, there was still option left. It was a little of column A, a lot of column B, fully capable of getting him out of this mess, and the only move Dean had left that didn't require the application of a dislocated jaw. But he didn't want to do it. *Hadn't* wanted to do it, before Hell's Fight Club started talking shop. In a shit ton of ways, Dean still didn't want to do it. Using their get-out-of-jail-free card, the ace up their sleeve, meant showing their hand way ahead of schedule. Way, *way* ahead of schedule. It could easily be the thing that broke the timeline for good, that jump started a biblical war two damn years early.

But if he couldn't get to Sam, then someone else had to. Timeline be damned.

The hunter turned his head away from the next round of hits, away from the tightness spreading across his chest and the twisting knots making Swiss cheese of his stomach. Dean shut it all out, closed his eyes, and prayed to Castiel.

-o-o-o-

"You boys won't be needing those," Azazel spoke through a mouth of full of apple, juice dripping down his chin. He waved the hand holding the half-eaten fruit, and suddenly two sets of handcuffs clicked open, falling off of Sam and Andy to clatter to the floor. The demon swallowed the apple down then grinned widely. He sat up quite suddenly, pulling his feet from the desk in a shift from cool and in control to manic and still very much in control. With sweeping movement, Azazel stood and rounded the desk, taking another loud

bite.

Andy and Sam both stumbled away from the approaching demon, but not in the same direction. The kid, clutching at his head with blood running down his arm like he'd forgotten he was injured, stumbled backwards down the aisle of desks until he had the length of the room between him and the yellow-eyed man. Sam only made it a handful of feet before his back met the wall beside the door. They had no weapons, nothing to defend themselves with. Not that much would work against a demon. Especially *this* demon.

Sam opened his mouth and got six words of an exorcism out before Azazel slammed into him, one hand slapping across his mouth, the other curling into his shirt. The apple bounced off the floor, splattering juice as it rolled away in a curve.

"Nuh-uh-uh, Sammy-boy." Those pale eyes were way too close for comfort, and Sam turned his head to the side just for the scant distance it put between them. "You play nice, now, or I'll give you the paddle, *boy*."

The purposeful drawl on his last word had Sam clenching his teeth against the connotation far more than the threat. Not that the threat of punishment – regardless of the obviously condescending choice – wasn't still very, very real. Sam remembered every bone Azazel had broken in his brother's body, every cut and laceration. Every scream Dean had made in that Michigan cabin. The younger Winchester was under no illusions of being safe simply because he was the demon's 'favorite.'

"What do you want?" he spat out as soon as Azazel's hand slid from his mouth. It shifted down his jaw to wrap around his neck and Sam gritted his teeth against the way his body trembled, from fear as much as anger and disgust. The touch was far too close to a caress, and Sam knew it was intentional. This demon had always been nothing if not taunting in his possessiveness over the younger Winchester. Dean would have called him creepy as fuck, Sam just wanted him *away*.

"You, tiger! Always you." The smile was almost cheerful, the tone full of excitement, and Sam tried to push himself further into the wall, to no avail.

"Leave him alone."

It was just a whisper in the mostly silent room, but it drew the attention of both demon and hunter. Andy was barely on his feet, the

far wall all that was keeping him upright. His hands were still buried in his short hair, trembling fingers clutching at his scalp, body curled in on itself. He looked on the brink of losing it entirely. But lucid eyes were focused on them, on Azazel.

The demon chuckled, though he did draw back enough for Sam to breathe again. "And so the mouse speaks! Let us know when you've worked up to a roar."

Azazel turned back to his main prize, but Sam's eyes stayed on his friend. Andy looked terrible, pale and sweating. The hunter dropped his gaze to the kid's blood-soaked shoulder, the bullet hole still bleeding sluggishly through its bandages. The infection wound wasn't visible, hidden away on the other side of his arm. Sam could only hope those stitches had held. The kid really couldn't afford to lose any more blood.

Sam's eyes darted back up to Andy's, now glassed over, and the Winchester hesitated as the old worry of infection popped back into his brain. But Dean had said it was the demon blood. Or, tried to, at least. It had been almost three hours and Andy hadn't turned yet, so Sam took it on faith that he wouldn't turn now. Even though he looked close to the brink of insanity, curled in on himself along the back wall, clutching at his head like he was losing it. Staring at him now, this kid who'd become like a little brother to the Winchesters, Sam prayed to a God he still believed in that the demon blood in his veins kept him safe from the infection, and somehow, Sam would keep him safe through the rest. Long enough to get them out of here.

"Now, kiddo." Sam tuned back in to the demon still holding him to the wall as Azazel patted down his jacket and pants with his free hand. Sam used the opportunity to wrap his cuffed hands around the wrist pinning him to the wall, but even putting his full weight into it, Azazel's arm didn't budge. Instead, Sam stayed trapped and the demon found the hex bag he'd been looking for, pulling it out and tossing it up and down in his palm. "This here's some naughty contraband. No witchcraft on school property, boys. You know the rules."

One pale yellow eye winked at him before the small pouch burst into flames, causing Sam to jerk away from the source of heat not a foot from his body. Azazel turned his hand over and the little fireball fell to the classroom floor where it continued sizzling away.

"Clever, though. Did you kill the witch that taught you that, Sammy?" Azazel wiped the front of his hand on Sam's shirt, then flipped it over

to wipe the back. "It would fit, after all. Hunters are such hypocrites."

Sam was pulled off the wall when Azazel's hand fisted in his shirt and hauled him forward. The six and a half foot man stumbled for footing as he was tossed across the room, catching himself between two desks and only sort of sliding to the ground rather than falling on his ass completely. Yellow Eyes, meanwhile, strolled to the desk across from the downed hunter and hopped up on it. Sam glared up at him as Azazel crossed one leg over the other, hands clasped around his knee.

The younger Winchester had always enjoyed school. Always liked every one of his teachers. He'd never had the kind of problems with authority figures that his brother did. But staring up at the demon, every inch of him a lesson in condescension, his stretched grin practically spelling out I-Will-Abuse-My-Authority-Over-You…well, Sam suddenly found new sympathy and understanding for Dean, who had wanted to punch every male teacher he'd ever had right in the smiling teeth.

"How you managed to block your mind, though…" Azazel tsk'ed through his teeth. It set Sam's nerves on edge like nails down a chalkboard. "That's the one I'm really curious about. I'm guessing… Spelled artifact? That's some pretty nasty magic, Sammy. Real dangerous, dabbling in stuff that can seal off your mind." The demon leaned forward, and though he was a good four, five feet away, Sam still found himself leaning further into the metal legs of the desk and chair. "You never know what might get trapped in there with it."

The trill of fear that ran down his spine was, Sam was quite certain, the whole point of Azazel's words. So he did his best to ignore them. Tried not to let this demon get under his skin or into his mind. Cas had warned them that consecutive use of the coin could turn dangerous, but Andy and Sam had both only been using it for a couple of months. They should be fine. Cas would have told them otherwise.

And besides, even if they weren't, what exactly was Sam going to do about it now? They had way bigger problems.

"How you doing over there, little mouse?" Azazel turned his gaze and half his upper body towards Andy. The kid, still propped up by the back wall, whimpered.

"Leave him alone," Sam demanded between clenched teeth. He tried to leverage himself off the floor using the desk and chair he was still clinging too, but Azazel shook a finger at him, warning look in his

eye. Begrudgingly, the Winchester stilled.

"Not so fast, Sammy. You stay right there."

The young hunter bared his teeth with true huffiness that Dean would be proud of (and endlessly annoyed by, most likely). "I told you. Only my brother gets to call me that."

Azazel just smirked and re-clasped his hands around his kneecap. "I'm afraid I can't leave Mr. Gallagher alone, tiger. I need him."

At Sam's pinched expression, turning towards the poor kid barely keeping it together in the back, Azazel clapped his hands. Sam's eyes snapped back on him.

"Let me tell you how I think tonight is going to go." The demon's arm disappeared behind his back as if he was reaching for something on the desk that had definitely been clear a minute ago. "I'll pull out something like this."

The jar of blood hit the table beside his thigh with a loud clang that caused both of his boys to jump. Still fresh, a dribble of red slid down the curvature of the glass, pooling along the bottom. It would leave a half-circled stain on the worn wooden surface that would never fully come out.

Its inevitable presence in the conversation was far from unexpected, but even just the sight of it, that dark liquid settling from being sloshed about, still stole Sam's breath from his lungs and turned his veins to ice.

"And you'll get a choice." Azazel's patient tone was just about the only sound in that classroom aside from Andy's labored breathing. Sam's fingers were shaking against the metal and wood, but he blamed it on the rage scouring through him like a festering wound.

If eyes could speak, Sam's glare would be screaming N-O, capital letters, at the top of his lungs. Azazel clucked his tongue, one finger snapping into a finger gun, which he aimed at the hunter on the floor. One of those pale eyes winked at him again.

"*You* will choose the ill-advised, futile path of a hero," the demon continued his account of the evening's upcoming events as if his audience was nothing more than that. Then he aimed his hand, pointer and thumb still out, towards the ceiling and the tremor in Sam's muscles became more pronounced. He locked his jaw and

prepared for pain. "And *I* will be forced to do something like this."

Sam slammed his eyes shut as Azazel waved his hand. But, of course, it wasn't Sam Winchester who suffered the demon's punishment. It never would be, until he agreed to play the game.

Hazel eyes ripped back open at Andy's scream and Sam tried to surge to his feet. But this time, Azazel did wave his way, and the hunter slammed back into the chairs. Pinned to the metal legs of the classroom furniture, Sam desperately turned his head, trying to see Andy through the sea of desks.

The kid sunk to the floor, limbs shaking and eyes wide. He was pressing a spasming hand to his chest, where three fresh tears in his shirt revealed shredded skin and fresh blood bubbling out of him. A *lot* of blood. Too much blood, when the kid had already lost so much.

"No!" Sam cried out, too little too late, and fought against the power keeping him down. He turned furious, desperate eyes to the demon sitting above him. "You can't!"

"I told you I needed him," Azazel shrugged one shoulder.

"Stop," the hunter pleaded, still pulling with all of his strength, legs scrabbling across the slick vinyl tiling, but the only thing he was managing to do was heave his torso off the floor. His arms stayed pinned to the desks. Sam had anger to spare on his best days, but all the fury in the world wasn't going to break him free of Azazel's powers.

Not…not without that jar of demon blood sitting next to him.

Sam slammed his eyes shut and tried to focus on the buzzing he'd felt the moment that demon injected him with the Croatoan virus. He'd felt it, he *had.* Something so similar to the demon blood that maybe… just maybe…

Nothing happened, and Sam was forced to open his eyes to face the smiling demon again. He looked desperately over at Andy, then snarled at Azazel. He had to do *something* but he had *nothing.* "He's one of your kids!"

"So was Max Miller."

The struggling man stilled at the name – at the reminder of what had

happened to the kid it belonged to – and stared in horror at the yellow eyed man. He was going to kill Andy. He was going to sit there and listen to the kid die without a care in the world, because Sam wouldn't do what he wanted. The reality of the situation hit the younger Winchester like an eighteen-wheeler, and he turned desperate eyes to the surrogate little brother bleeding out a dozen feet from him.

Azazel resumed his earlier pose, hands clasping around his knee once more, like this was a parent teacher conference and all they were discussing was a kid's ailing grades. "You missed my Aesop reference, champ. I'm looking for a lion. That-" he pointed to Andy, not even looking at his kid bleeding out on the classroom floor- "is a mouse."

Sam stared at his friend, still clutching at his chest. Their Jedi. A kid whose powers and abilities far outweighed Sam's own. But he didn't have the right blood in his veins, so he meant nothing to the demon. Just another pawn in the game.

Andy's breaths were ragged, terrible gasps, each a heaving, panicked inhale. Sam turned back to the demon, eyes sliding down to the jar of blood that would save Andy's life, whether it be by bargain or a Hail Mary play to get them out of this. Either way, he was running out of time to make a choice he knew he shouldn't make.

"I have tons of special kiddos, Sam-boy. But I only need one winner." Azazel smiled down at the hunter glaring up at him. When the the heavy, ugly silence stretched far longer than the demon expected it to, those yellow eyes narrowed curiously. He knew his favorite well, and Sammy wasn't sticking to the script, here. "Aren't you going to ask me why?"

The human's hands curled into fists and the demon clucked his tongue.

"Maybe, you already know. That little bird on Dean's shoulder, perhaps?"

The hunter stilled in his effort not to suck in a breath. Shit, he stayed quiet so he wouldn't accidentally give anything away. He hadn't meant to hint at even more with his silence.

"I'll tell you what, Sammy. Let's make a new deal." Azazel leaned forward, crossing his arms over his legs almost lazily, hand dangling off a thigh. "You tell me all about Dean's little friend, and you *don't* have to drink this."

His head tilted towards the jar of demon blood, and Sam couldn't help but follow that gesture. The hunter's stomach coiled into tight, sharp knots just looking at it.

"I'll even heal the mouse, free of charge!"

Sam closed his eyes briefly as a tidal wave of desperation threatened to choke him. He *couldn't*. It was an out, an out that meant he wouldn't break his promise to Dean, wouldn't break his promise to himself, wouldn't *end the world.* It was an out he desperately, *desperately* wanted to take. And he couldn't do it. He couldn't drink that blood, he couldn't let Andy die, he couldn't give Cas up. He couldn't do *anything*, and the world was going to move on, taking Andy with it, before Sam could come up with a solution that didn't end with him or his family losing in every way possible.

"Hmm," the demon above him hummed when he didn't answer. "You seemed so much more willing to talk to my daughter about him."

Sam's eyes snapped open at that. Azazel was tapping his hand idly against his leg, still hunched over and watching the hunter like this was nothing more than a schoolyard warning.

"Was it because you thought the little birdie was a demon at the time? 'Cass', wasn't it?" It took every ounce of effort in Sam's already straining body to keep his pulse down, to keep his breathing as normal as it could be, fighting as he still was. "That's the name you gave Meg, no? Not exactly the name of an angel, I'll give you that. But humans do love their pet names, I suppose. Did you know there's only a handful of those winged gnats out there with 'Cass' as part of their name?"

Azazel raised his hands pointer finger hitting pointer finger as he started counting them off. Sam slammed his eyes shut; he knew the second he heard the angel's name, pupil dilation alone would give it away if his racing heart didn't do it first. Sam started reciting the periodic table in his head, *loudly*, along with every other meditation trick he'd ever heard of to block the demon.

"Cassiel," was the first name the demon spoke, and Sam's heart skipped a beat, but he kept his eyes locked shut, his face scrunched up and his thoughts on anything but their angel.

"No, not that one? How about Casrathaol? Kashiel? Damn, none of those either, kiddo? Ah, well." Azazel made another clucking sound with the side of his cheek. He'd started with the bigger name angels,

but maybe he'd gone about it wrong. Maybe it was some minor league pair of wings making a mess of things. There were a lot more of those, unfortunately. Azazel sighed dramatically as Sam moved into the radiated elements. "I'm offering you an out here, kiddo! That's some fast loyalty you've got for something that's not even human. Whichever cloud jumper it is, he's not actually on your side, Sam, I can promise you that."

Hazel eyes opened to mere slits, glaring up at the demon, fisted hands straining against the bonds that held him down. Azazel sighed again and let his gaze wander over to the other end of the classroom.

"How about you, mouse?" he called to Andy, who was all but unresponsive in the back. The kid was slumped on the ground, blood starting to pool around him. He breathed shallow, raspy gulps, and glassy eyes struggled to focus on them. "Don't suppose you know anything? It'll save your life!"

Twitching, eyes half-lidded and yet still somehow wide with the growing realization that he wasn't getting out of this, Andy's gaze flickered to Sam. The rest of him barely moved. He was only half with them, but half was plenty to know he wasn't surviving this without a miracle. Or, in this case, the opposite. Hazel eyes met his and Andy saw the look there. The regret, the equal fear and horror. The guilt. Sam nodded and the resident Jedi recognized the permission there. Permission to betray them. To save himself. To give up Cas and live.

Sam couldn't do it, but Andy could.

But…*should* he? He knew the numbness slowly spreading through his body, bit by bit, working at the edges of the burning, screaming wound, wasn't actually a good sign. Neither was the cold, encasing him like a sprawling darkness. He'd lost too much blood and if someone didn't do something soon – if he didn't do something soon – he was going to die.

Then it would be over. He'd get to see Tracy again, if the stuff Castiel had said about Heaven was true. This weight on his shoulders that he'd been carrying for months now would be gone. Everything would just be…done. That didn't sound so bad. Maybe he was okay with that.

Andy didn't think he was suicidal. A pretty weird thought to have while bleeding out, knocking at Death's door while slumped on his front step. But it still rang true. Andy didn't really want to die. His

racing heart and the pure anxiety choking his lungs in some sick form of hope from the demon's twisted offer alone told him as much. But if dying meant not betraying Sam and Dean, not giving Hell a one up against the brothers who treated him like family for the last three months, who included Cas in that family...

The kid let out the easiest breath he'd taken since that first Croat sliced him up. He locked resilient eyes on those terrifying yellow irises.

"Go to hell."

Azazel rolled his eyes, the annoyance there about as much as a man swatting at a particularly whiney mosquito. He raised his hand to squish the nuisance once and for all, but Sam cried out, surging against his power hard enough to screech one of the desks an inch across the floor. Azazel raised an eyebrow at him, arm still outstretched.

"We had a deal." Sam's eyes dropped pointedly to the jar of blood and yellow eyes followed. "Heal him and I drink it."

Slowly, Azazel withdrew his hand, crossing his arms over his legs once again. A bemused smirk formed in the corner of his mouth and he watched his favorite kiddo with intense curiosity.

"Interesting," the demon commented almost offhandedly. He picked up the jar, setting it on his knee. The blood-ringed the bottom stained his jeans with a crimson crescent. "I offer you an out, and you don't take it. But one little mouse lies dying…. Hmm."

Sam's chest heaved with the steady flow of anger coursing through him. Andy was dying and Sam had picked his poison. They didn't have time for the demon to wax interesting poetics about angels and fables, God damn it. But the hunter bit his tongue hard to keep silent. All that mattered now was saving Andy. Getting out of this without that jar was already out the window as far as Sam was concerned. Not if they were all getting out of it alive.

"Is it that soft, squishy heart of yours, I wonder?" Azazel tapped the top of the jar before he wrapped long fingers around the edges and spun the lid. The grinding noise of metal twisting across glass, so quiet if not for the oppressive silence of the room, was deafening. Sam swore he could smell the metal in the air as the lid came off. "If it is, it'll be your downfall, tiger."

The Winchester just huffed. "It's getting you what you want, isn't it? Me hooked on that crap? Thought that's what you needed for me to win."

"Oh, it's a long game we're playing, kid. Let's just say you'll win some, lose some over the course of it," was the demon's unconcerned response. Sam gasped in surprise and relief as one of his arms was freed from the power, collapsing to the ground like a dead weight. "But you know what I think?"

No, he really, really didn't give a shit.

Azazel bent forward, holding the jar out. "I don't think it's your soft heart at all, Sam. I think you just want it."

Already reaching forward, the hunter froze as the words rung in the silence. His fingers trembled in midair, so close to that thing that really, truly scared him. That thing that was so very terrifying because Azazel wasn't completely wrong. Sam didn't want it. But he also really, really did.

The younger hunter shoved the demon out of his head, burying his words as hard and as fast as he could. He couldn't let Azazel get to him. He was doing this for *Andy*. Not for himself, not for that buzzing just beneath his skin, not for the power it promised.

"Haven't you noticed?" Those yellow eyes were locked on his, hovering just beyond that glass jar, and Sam didn't even know which of the two he couldn't seem to look away from. "You're even weaker now than you were before this all started. Hell, kiddo. You've barely got any powers at all. The mouse is stronger than you. We can't have that."

Azazel wasn't even trying to make him take it. He just sat there, arm outstretched, like he already knew Sam would. Not to save the life of a friend. Sam's gaze flickered to Andy. The kid's eyes were still open, but only barely. The hunter could still hear his lungs laboring for breath, but the sound was growing softer and softer. Andy's skin was grey, sickly so, and his shirt was completely soaked through. He was out of time.

"Heal him." The hunter turned back to the demon, a challenge in his eyes.

Azazel tipped the jar towards him, blood flowing to one side, but it was too far away for Sam to actually reach and the demon wasn't getting any closer. "After you drink."

"He's going to die!"

"Then you should stop wasting his time." Yellow eyes, hard and expectant, didn't blink. The demon didn't budge, calling the bluff that Sam himself hadn't fully known was one.

The hunter clenched his teeth, entire body shaking against the power that still held him back, but he knew he'd already lost. That half-raised hand curled into a fist. With a pained, angry noise, Sam finally sagged against the weight holding him down, chin dropping to a heaving chest. The side of his fist hit the ground in a punch that split skin. The least of his worries now.

"Alright."

Azazel slid off the desk like slime with a smile to match and crouched in front of the defeated hunter. He held the jar within easy reach now, and Sam stared at its sloshing red contents. Dean was going to be so damn pissed at him. So disappointed. Sam glanced at Andy again and his heart picked up when he realized he couldn't hear his breathing anymore. Panic gripped his throat like a vice and resolve formed, thick and cloying. Sam turned back to that jar.

The hunter's fingers wrapped it just as a shockwave hit the building, accompanied by a blinding, brilliant white light flooding the room. Sam released the jar with a jolt, his single free hand raising instinctually to block the flare coming through the windows, which rattled first from the explosion, then continued to vibrate from a sustained, high pitch noise hitting the classroom a second later.

Azazel straightened, still crouched in front of the boy, but upright enough to look out the shuddering glass. The gymnasium beyond was practically pulsing, every single window blown out by that brilliant, sustained light, shooting out into the night. The field and playground were lit up like a stadium. The white light was painfully bright on the demon's face, and Sam lowered his hand enough to see the grin stretch across his features like a plague.

Something ugly filled the hunter's stomach at that smile.

"Well, well, well." The demon stood, the whole upper half of his body now illuminated from the floodlight pouring through the windows. They were still rattling and Sam glanced up at them, worried they might shatter at any moment from the high frequency that was causing his ears to ring painfully.

"Looks like your little birdie just flew right into our trap." Those yellow eyes turned to stare at Sam, bright and sickening in the floodlight. The grin stretched wider. "Dean must have used his phone a friend option."

Sam's eyes widened in horror, realization sinking in.

Castiel.

"No," he whispered, eyes turning to the windows he was too low to see out of. He pulled and tugged at the power holding him down, but he couldn't gain enough leverage to see anything but that blinding light.

A light he'd seen before. A ringing he'd heard before, in the Baku's dream. In the explosion that had almost killed his brother in a cabin in Michigan. The same explosion that had left Dean terrified the angel was dead.

Sam bolted off the floor, but Azazel's power was still wrapped around his left side, keeping him pinned to the desk, which jerked and screeched with his desperation. "No!"

Yellow Eyes crouched back down, and Sam tried to surge forward again. To head-butt him, crack his nose, tell him to leave Castiel the fuck alone, *anything*. But the demon's power was plenty to keep the man trapped.

Azazel set the jar of blood down next to Sam's thigh.

"I'll just leave this here." He patted Sam's cheek, and the hunter threw a punch that was easily blocked. "Be right back, tiger."

The demon practically hopped to his feet, skipping out of the room. However, when he reached the aisle Andy was collapsed in, he paused thoughtfully. Yellow Eyes stared at the unmoving body for a minute, glancing back to Sam. The hunter glared at him, teeth clenched so hard his jaw hurt all the way up to his temple. Hazel eyes darted between the blinding light and his fallen friend.

Azazel smiled.

"You know what? Let's put the mouse someplace for safekeeping. Just in case you get any ideas, Sammy." He swept down the aisle toward the downed kid. Sam fought against the power holding him, but it was futile as it had always been. Azazel reached Andy, bending down to start digging through his pockets. Sam's view was obstructed, but he

saw the hex bag hit the ground and roll several feet from where Azazel tossed it. "Alrighty then, off you go!"

The demon's hand slapped down on the kid's back and Andy was gone.

"No!" Sam struggled, trying to use his free hand to pull himself off the desks, to shove them back or move them forward. Anything! But the binds wrapped around him were invisible and intangible. There was nothing Sam could do. He let out a scream filled with frustration and hatred.

Yellow Eyes cast one more look his way before he swept out of the room.

Sam collapsed, breathing so heavily his heart felt like it might burst from his chest. Damn it. Damn it! The hunter hit the ground with his fist, then did it again. He pulled at the desks, but could only ever get an inch, inch and a half out of them before his muscles cramped and his body warned it was nearing its limits.

"Damn it!" Sam kicked out at the desk again and again and again, but he couldn't break free. That steady white light still filled the room, casting eerie, long, flickering shadows across everything. The high pitch noise still shook the windows, and Sam was terrified it was Cas's true voice. That's what Dean had called it once.

Whatever was happening, Cas had come to Dean's aid and now she was screaming.

Sam's eyes fell to the jar of blood, so purposefully left within reach. The liquid inside was rippling under the stress of high frequency noise. The younger Winchester stared at it, knowing his freedom could lie within, but so did imprisonment of the far more eternal kind. His lungs quivered with every fast-paced, panicked breath. He glanced at the windows, light still pouring through, the building vibrations of Cas's screams threatening to shatter them.

Dean needed him. Cas needed him. *Andy* needed him. And he wasn't helping anyone tied to a damn desk.

Chest still heaving, Sam turned back and reached for the blood.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: [insert weak, slightly sadistic, mostly masochistic smile here] Sorry, not sorry? I love you all! And will now promptly run

for my life.

Chapter 77: Season 2: Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I couldn't wait until tonight/tomorrow to post. I'm just too excited about this! So. Excited.

More A/Ns: So you knooooow, how I might have mentioned at the end of the Baltimore arc that we were getting Cas soon, but in like, the dirtiest, rottenest, no good cliffhanger way purely possible?

:D

#SorryNotSorry #AtAll #NotEvenALittleBit
#CuzNoGoodDirtyRotten
#andTheEmotionalShitstormIsTotallyWorthIt

Chapter Warnings: Cas has his ears on, Dean should really learn to give a guy more heads up, Tom is a sneaky asshole, Azazel's got plans, (but unfortunately for him) Castiel is a badass Warrior of God with a Righteous Man on his side, and (despite all of that) everything is still going to shit because Dean never asked a question he really, really should have, Cas is suddenly in a sharing mood, and it's a really terrible time for *all of this*.

[deeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep breath after that run-on sentence]

And here we go!

Actual Chapter Warnings: More gore and minor torture below, also increased swearing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 44

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Cas?"

The angel was deep in the Archival Halls, performing the relatively

mundane and tedious duty of filing away old battle strategies that had been retrieved by a Seraphim earlier that morning. His duties had never before been tedious, not before he met Dean Winchester. Now much of what he was expected to do day-to-day in his homeland seemed to be nothing more than busy-work, where before it had seemed important. Contributing. Castiel did not like the implication, nor how drastic the realization and change within him was. Especially not when he knew one angel somewhere in Heaven was more than capable of brainwashing them into believing just that.

And one human on earth was, apparently, able to undo it all.

"Castiel?"

Castiel paused in his filing, tilting his head to the side as he listened to the whisper of Dean Winchester's prayer once more. He had not heard Dean's call in some time, not since he had begun making trips down to earth as often as he could spare in order to 'check in'. This time, though, the hunter sounded…hesitant. All the other times Dean had prayed to him, he'd been brash. Brazen. Insolent. Sarcastic, at the very least. The change immediately worried the angel and he stopped all work, waiting for the next prayer, as his name alone was hardly enough detail to go off of.

"So, uh…if you've got your ears on-' A truly baffling statement, considering Castiel neither had ears, nor would they be removable if he did- *'we're about to do something spectacularly stupid down here."*

The angel stiffened as something Angela would likely identify as terror gripped the center of his mass. He did not realize it, but his wings spread out behind him, prepared to take flight with just one word more. The parchment, nearly as old as Heaven itself and written in the hand of the Scribe, dented and crumpled beneath his iron grip. Castiel did not notice, too concerned with the way the heart he did not currently possess seemed to pound in those very ears he also did not have.

Perhaps this was why Heaven had forbade the taking of vessels for any length of time. Their flaws lingered in the mind well after their bodies were left behind on Earth.

"We're headed into Rivergrove, Oregon and I'm not gonna mince it, Cas…. It's a trap and we're going anyway."

The sound of tearing parchment broke Castiel's intense focus, and he turned down to the now ripped battle strategy. He released his fisted

hands, flexing fingers that took the startling shape of a five-fingered human hand, rather than the ethereal wavelengths of light more often reminiscent of wisps and tendrils. The angel quickly filed the page, ignoring the fresh tear along the bottom, and stepped away from the archives.

"You don't need to worry yet."

Castiel felt a flare of irrational exasperation at that, and he had the oddest sensation of Angela's voice in his head. He was quite certain that if she had been with him and not back at Bobby Singer's house, she would have been hollering at Dean to 'lead with that' next time.

"We got out of this alright last go around, and we know Azazel's plan this time. But if you can be on standby…well, things could go downhill fast and we might need a quick exit."

Castiel had never before found the communication of prayer to be so wholly inadequate. Another thing that had not been a concern before Dean Winchester. If a human had needed his assistance, Castiel either appeared unto him or he did not, dismissing the conversation as there was nothing more he could do for it. If a brother needed his assistance, Castiel simply replied back via their interconnected voices or flew to his location.

Never before had Castiel needed to answer a human indirectly. To ask what they were thinking, walking into a trap, particularly one devised by a Prince of Hell. To insist his presence was clearly necessary for their well-being in this situation. To assure Dean that he did 'have his ears on' and would be on standby until otherwise notified. To- and Castiel hesitated at the realization- to acquire reassurance of his own that his human charges were, in fact, as alright as Dean's tentative prayer asserted they were.

Which was ridiculous. Other than the hesitance in Dean's voice, the human sounded perfectly fine. Castiel could detect no other duress in his charge's prayer that might suggest otherwise. He should appreciate that Dean was giving him advanced notice of possible trouble. Instead, Castiel found himself frustrated and distracted, unable to refocus on his duties now that he knew his immediate assistance was not required, leaving him with nothing but to wait.

"*If things do go south and you have to get us out, Baby's parked about a mile out of town. Uh…guess that's it."*

Dean's voice fell silent and Castiel was left with a distinctly unsatisfied

feeling. The human should have included far more information. Where would they be in the town of Rivergrove, so that Castiel could fly to them immediately, should things, indeed, go 'south.' Why did they suspect this was a trap, and what kind of trap? And, again, *why* were they marching straight into it willingly and without him as anything more than a reserve?

All things that Castiel found frighteningly infuriating and could do nothing about.

-o-o-o-

Time moved in Heaven quite differently than it did on Earth. A true mirror reflection to the Hellscape below, the Heavenly plane passed faster than that of Earth. The difference was negligible in the outer levels, enough so that most angels did not notice the passing of the plane below as any slower, and the souls in Heaven's care did not seem aware one way or another that the sun rose and set a fair bit quicker in their memories. But the upper most levels, where the Gardens, the Greater Hall, and many of the Archival buildings lay (most days, at least. Heaven was particular to shifting itself about quite often, but the inner rings did seem less susceptible to the change), hours of Earth-time could pass in mere minutes.

The Archangel Gabriel had once explained the phenomenon as the only way angels could keep their sanity. *'Wouldn't you lose your mind if you had to watch over the earth for an* actual *millennia?'* Most of his brethren had nodded along because an Archangel was never wrong, but the answer never sat quite right in Castiel's mind. Not that he'd given it much thought.

Now he wondered if that was because he didn't find it important, or because Naomi didn't think he should.

The entire line of thinking – now taking a morose turn for the worse – all started because Castiel had not even made it to the main Archival Hall – a scant five minute walk from the lower levels up to the grand lobby – when Dean's voice broke through his thoughts in a panicked, desperate plea.

"Cas!"

The angel very nearly stumbled from the cry. It was *not* the calm, cautious voice he had heard only minutes before. Castiel's wings were spread before he made the doors leading outside. He was crossing Heaven's barrier using the last of Balthazar's secret exits before Dean's

next words came through.

-o-o-o-

"Cas, we- we need that rescue," Dean all but begged as a kick to the gut sent him curling into a fetal position. Fuck these demons. He'd had way worse and could take a hell of a lot more. Sort of. He just had to get his body on board with that thought. The hunter groaned as another kick sent him rolling onto his back, sprawled and vulnerable. "*They took Sam. They knew we were- this isn't like last time. They **knew**. We didn't- they have Sam and Andy. And Azazel- Azazel's here. Fuck-"*

It was the demon bitch that hauled him off the floor by his hair. He could barely even see anymore, but her manicured nails dug into his scalp and Dean hissed, scrabbling at her grip. How she even managed that with his short cut, he had no clue. But he was buzzing it next time, because *fuck this*.

"You gotta stop it, Cas. Please. Azazel's gonna make him- make him drink more blood." Dean knew from his years on the rack that there was no shame in fear. No shame in begging. And he could summon none now for the way his words broke with internal anguish. *"Please, Cas, you gotta save them. I promised-"*

A punch to his stomach doubled him over again, but the woman held fast and all Dean could do was hunch inward with a deep groan. Demon Hulk, who'd already played the bongos on his kidneys, now took over. He gripped his dislocated jaw, and Dean grunted to keep from crying out as the demon raised his head.

"You gonna cry, Winchester?" The man punched him right in the temple and Dean saw stars. Whatever concentration he'd been maintaining broke and the prayer ended. The bastard just righted his head again with meaty fingers, the joint in his jaw grinding against his skull as it was manhandled. "It'd be a lot more fun if you cried."

Dean didn't know if one could spit with a broken jaw, but if he learned anything that night, it was that hell yes, one could if they wanted to bad enough. The gob of blood and saliva hit the demon square between the eyes with a satisfying and disgusting plop that the hunter was quite proud of.

The next hit cracked something in his head – he friggin' *heard* it – and took him to the floor. Dean knew he wasn't getting back up without help.

"Well, if you ain't gonna cry, I wanna hear you scream." Through blurry, water- and blood-streaked double vision, Dean was pretty sure the meatsuit was about to stomp the shit out of his back. That was going to suck. Really suck.

But the hit never came. A crash like thunder inside the room made the floor shake, and Mr. Muscles suddenly wasn't standing over him anymore. In fact, not that Dean could see it all that well, but he was pretty sure Demon Hulk and half the bleachers had just taken out the north wall of the gym. That, or he'd cracked his head wide open and was now hallucinating from blood loss and mashed potato brains.

The remaining demons ended up as unconscious or moaning piles of limbs scattered around him in the time it took Dean to realize Cas had heard his prayer.

"Dean."

The angel kneeled beside him, as if she hadn't just bulldozed her way through six demons like they were toothpicks.

Wait.

Six?

A hand settled on his shoulder blade, another reaching for his forehead, and Dean couldn't talk. He couldn't get his jaw to work, to even move. There was one more. He needed to tell Cas there was another demon. Mr. Too-Tight-Shirt. The Travolta-Wannabe. Last Dean had seen him, he had still been over by the wall, watching the Winchester beat-down with all the interest of someone who had better places to be.

The words came out as nothing more than a garbled moan on a swollen tongue.

"Hold on, Dean."

The hunter tried to lift himself off the ground, tried to push at Cas's fingers as they pressed to his forehead, but his body wouldn't cooperate. He was done and his brain just hadn't caught up yet.

Healing warmth flooded him at the same time as a brilliant, blinding, white light filled just about everything else. And then Cas was screaming.

-o-o-o-

Tom pulled his hand off of the now smoldering sigil he'd been leaning against, hidden from Dean Winchester by his meatsuit's broad frame. Embers sparked across the dried, blackened blood painted onto the gymnasium wall. Its sister symbol, drawn on the basketball court hours before in unholy water that had long-since dried, was now alive with crimson light. The angel that answered Dean Winchester's prayer was now trapped within its binding power. A sphere of energy, at least a dozen feet in diameter, encased the Halo like a glowing orb. Within, forks of red lightning lashed out at random intervals, striking the bent figure.

It was like a giant plasma ball, only so much more entertaining and complete with the sound effects of an angel's true voice pitched in agony. Tom could almost make out the shape of flared wings through the brightness, a strike of red flaring down the length of one, singing feathers and the flesh of grace beneath.

The activation of the sigil and consequential explosion of light had blown anything caught within its radius clear out. Tom stepped over one of his kin, heedless of the crumpled and broken body – eyes burned right out of its skull – that lay empty on the ground. No demon could survive the blast of grace pouring out of the angel in a desperate fight against the power of the sigil trying to contain her. Dean Winchester was blown clear as well, but Tom was unconcerned. The human had been near death before he'd activated the trap. He was most certainly dead now.

Azazel could bring him back once they'd secured the angel.

Whichever of the Halos she was, her true voice vibrated the walls around them, unable to remain contained within the fragile human body under the onslaught of their trap. Every single window in the building had shattered with its activation, along with, Tom imagined, the rest of the block. Glass now sprinkled the court and bleachers. What was left of them, anyway. Even the demon found the racket painful enough that he avoided getting any closer than he already. Tom's father would be along shortly and he would surely shut the thing up.

At least until they made her sing for their own purposes, of course.

Movement caught the peripheral of Tom's vision and he frowned, turning away from the encaged angel. Shock lit his features when he

found Dean Winchester, wrists still bound, body mostly healed, crawling up from the ground just beneath the sigil. The demon stared, unable to comprehend his biggest mistake: thinking that the hunter was out for the count.

The damn angel had healed him *before* the trap went off.

"No!" Tom yelled, starting forward, but he already knew he was too late. Blood was running down the hunters wrists, presumably from where the handcuffs had cut into him on his roll across the basketball court. Whether from the angel shoving him out of the way or her explosion of grace, it didn't really matter, now did it? That blood would break the trap were it to come in contact with the sigil.

Dean Winchester met his eyes, leaning heavily against the wall beside the smoldering drawing. He raised his cuffed hands, blood smeared across both palms. The demon was still more than a dozen steps away. Tom threw out his hand to power slam the hunter away from the sigil, but Dean was faster.

"Go to hell."

The human slammed his hand against the wall, dragging a bloodied palm through the sigil, interrupting the glowing line. Made entirely of dark blood magic, the spell trapping the angel was not intended to integrate new blood, especially that of a Righteous Man, and the end result was not pretty. Not only did the trap shatter – the angel's grace ripping through the gymnasium as it was finally freed in a tidal wave of energy – but the sigil on the wall exploded as well. Tom screamed as he was hit by one shockwave and then the other, human body twisted damn near in two by the opposing forces.

Dean, meanwhile, got lucky. The force of Tom's power throw had him sailing a good dozen feet away from the explosion, which probably would have done a hell of a lot more damage than another barrel roll across the basketball court did. Not like he honestly needed another one of those, after the trap going off had flung him into the bleachers hard enough to bruise freshly-healed skin.

But if he was feeling pain then he wasn't dead. That's what he had told himself as he army crawled, handcuffed, across the floor and back wall to get to that damn sigil, listening to Cas scream all the while.

Speaking of.

Dean groaned as muscles twitched and spasmed all up and down his

back, but the hunter forced himself upright all the same. Cas was still kneeling in the center of the room, friggin' smoke coming off her bent figure in floating wisps. Dean limped towards her, hands stuck together in front of him. He really needed his friggin' lock picks right about now.

On the floor, a dozen feet away, the only remaining demon lifted his head, which was at the completely wrong angle and oh, god, gross. Mr. Too Tight T-shirt glanced between the freed angel and the hunter (and Dean could hear the bones grinding in his twisted neck) before he opened his mouth and smoked out of there like the coward that he was.

"Good riddance," the hunter muttered, though he knew it wouldn't be the last they'd see of him. Even with a healed jaw, Dean never would have gotten an exorcism out in time. Damnit, they needed a faster way to kill demons, and they needed it *yesterday*. He turned his attention instead to Castiel, who hadn't yet moved. There were holes in the clothing they'd bought her, straight through her tan coat, slacks, and blouse, probably from those forks of lightning. Dean grimaced at the sight of blackened flesh beneath each patch of torn fabric.

"Cas?"

The hunter took another step forward, ignoring the way his knee threatened to give out on him with every step. He made it to her side as blue eyes finally opened – glowing fiercely enough to give Dean pause, unsure if the angel would recognize where she was after what had just happened – but it wasn't what made the hunter stop from reaching out to her completely.

No, that would be the double doors of the gymnasium thrown open by none other than Azazel, himself. The yellow eyed bastard strolled in like he owned the place, three more demons flanking either side of him.

All four stopped rather suddenly as they realized their trapped prize was kind of less than trapped.

"No," Azazel whispered, eyes locked on Castiel. The angel, still on one knee and looking like her hand braced against the floor beneath a locked elbow was all that was keeping her up, returned the fierce gaze through strands of singed, static-charged hair. Dean curled one hand protectively over her shoulder, the other following uselessly along due to the cuffs. He knew just how far up Shit Creek they were. He was

more than prepared to pull her behind him if necessary, however futile it might prove.

He never got the chance. Without so much as looking at him, Castiel threw her hand out, slapping a palm flush to Dean's chest. The hunter gasped, first from the surprise from it, thinking he was about to be shoved out of the way, but then the sound morphed into the hollow sucking noise of someone trying to reach air and finding themselves completely unable to. Cas's eyes lit like a battery draining the last of its juice. Dean was pretty sure he was the juice, given the painful, squeezing, sieving sensation drawing at his chest, just beneath Cas's fingers.

Then her whole body started to match that glow and Dean got a really bad feeling.

"No!" Yellow Eyes shot forward, hand flying up to stop them, when Cas all but exploded.

Dean tried to throw himself to the ground – damn sick of being tossed about like a ragdoll in a tornado between these mother-effing powerhouses – but found he couldn't move. Like the last time Cas had tried to remove the grace from his chest, Dean was stuck to her hand like glue. Aside from being attached to the angel like she was world's biggest damn magnet, it turned out he didn't need to worry. Cas's temper tantrum was aimed entirely in one direction; the four demons took the full brunt of it. Their screams were drowned out by Castiel's own, full of righteous fury and absolutely terrifying to the sole witness beside her.

The hunter had seen his friend well and truly pissed on several occasions, but none quite so visceral or…Warrior of God-like. He'd never seen pre-Apocalypse Cas lose his shit. And now, staring at the devastation as the light of her grace finally faded, he was really, really glad about that.

Pre-Apocalypse Dean would have crapped his pants.

Half the gym was…well, it wasn't gone, but Dean's tornado analogy hadn't been that far off. All that was missing was the part where that tornado had been made of friggin' fire, apparently. The entire south and west walls of the gym were…blackened. What was left of them, at least. They looked like they'd taken the full force of a small bomb. Bleachers were blown over and into walls, splintered into pieces. Where windows had been were now just ragged holes. And everything

had the air of being torched by a pyro loaded up with a flame thrower and about six days' worth of fuel.

In the middle of it all there were four bodies, burnt to a crisp, practically crumbling to ash where they lay.

"Cas?" Dean finally drew in a shocked breath of air, the name leaving his mouth with a wheeze. The angel's hand slid from his chest, and with it what felt like all of the energy in his body. Dean practically slumped under the lack of anything resembling strength or adrenaline. He felt like he'd been up nine days straight, and eight of them spent running a marathon. The hunter glanced to his left – brain willing his body to pull itself together so he could yell at the friggin' angel (because *what the hell was that?!)* – just in time to see her crumple. "Cas!"

The hunter tried to catch her before she hit the floor, but he more so just keeled over sideways and sort of managed to get underneath her head before it hit the court. (Dean told himself, of course, that he caught her with all the grace of a herculean hero.) Cas's eyes were still glowing a faint blue, the light flickering like a dying bulb, but the rest of her was ashen. Ignoring his own aches and pains, the hunter managed to get his beleaguered body on the same page as his terror-fueled brain and hauled her off the floor enough to cradle the angel against him. It was awkward as hell with his bound hands, but he managed.

"Jesus, Cas…" Dean took stock of her body. The burn marks from the lightning trap didn't look good, but they didn't look fatal either. Didn't explain the pallor of her skin or the way she sunk into him, boneless. "What did they do to you?"

"D-Damaged…my grace…" The glowing blue of her eyes finally faded, leaving Cas distressingly dim. Her voice was rough, even deeper than usual and clearly strained. Dean could imagine why. He'd heard her screams. Screams that probably should have blown out his ear drums, but his intact hearing and eyesight was a puzzle for another time. Any other damn time.

"No shit," he muttered instead. "I'm sure re-enacting Hiroshima over there didn't help."

The reminder of her attack on the demons caused Castiel to struggle in his arms. The damn idiot was trying to sit up. Dean pushed her back down with his shoulder, given that's all he had available, and leveled

an admonishing look her way. As damn scolding as he could get while staring down at her wrecked expression. Cas settled for just lifting her head, which, given the way her entire core shook with the effort, was probably about as much as the weakened angel ever would have managed anyway.

"Azazel?" Castiel couldn't see much from the floor, but she searched for a returning threat nonetheless. Dean would be in danger if she had not successfully taken care of all four demons, but, most importantly, the Prince. Facing Azazel would have been a challenge for an angel of Castiel's class on a good day, and with whatever that sigil had been, it was *not* turning out to be a good day.

Dean looked over at the charred remains of one of his worst nightmares (one of many) with an overwhelming sense of relief and vindictiveness. "Trust me, he's not getting back up from that." He turned back to the angel in his arms. "Did you kill him?"

Cas shook her head, finally reclining against his arms. "Exorcism."

Shit. That hadn't been like any exorcism Dean had ever seen. And he'd seen this angel exorcise a demon before. Sure, the glowing white light had always been a part of it, but this right here was the difference between chucking a Mentos into a bottle of coke and throwing a grenade at someone.

The hunter raised an eyebrow. "Overkill much?"

Not that he was complaining, really.

Cas shook her head again. "Not…for a P-Prince of Hell…it wasn't."

Dean's head whipped around to stare at what was left of Azazel once more. A Prince of Hell? Jesus, that didn't sound good. He'd always known Yellow Eyes was powerful – definitely something to be feared – but with a title like that… The hunter shook his head. One problem at a time and, right now, Azazel was not their main problem.

For fucking once.

"You gonna be okay?" He gathered Cas under his arms the best he could, intent on getting her to her feet.

She was shaking, but managed a decently strong grip around his arm and looked up at him with wide, pure blue eyes. "Sam?"

Dean shook his head, hauling her up into a sitting position as he got his own knees back under him. His left nearly gave out, but he gritted his teeth and soldiered on. "We gotta find him. Can you stand?"

Cas's answer of, "I can try," wasn't exactly the ringing bell of encouragement he'd hoped for, but it was all they had. Working together, they did get her to her feet, mostly. The cuffs did absolutely no one any good and caused Dean to almost drop her once before the angel reached out and snapped the chain in two with just one hand. It was a terrifying reminder of how strong even a seriously injured Castiel was. It also left twin bracelets with little dangling chains securely wrapped around Dean's wrists, but he couldn't care less. Now with two free arms, Dean got one of Cas's wrapped around his waist (this version of her was too short to go over his shoulder as easily) and the other underneath her arms, supporting more than half her weight. Ignoring his own tired, lagging body, Dean had just started dragging her towards the gym doors (what was left of them) when they burst open again.

The angel's little explosion had taken one door half off its hinges and the other was partially blocked by a destroyed set of bleachers. So when the one burst inward, it more so fell off its last hinge entirely, crashing to the floor so that whoever was trying to get in from the other side had to scramble over the damn thing. Unarmed and weighed down with the angel, Dean tried to push Cas behind him. Cas, who never had known how to back down, tried to do the same thing to the hunter. The two canceling moves against already weakened forms just ended up with Cas almost falling to the ground in a heap and Dean scrambling to keep them both on their feet.

So they were completely unprepared to defend themselves at all against the non-threat that was Sam Winchester, all but tripping over the door he'd taken clean off the wall in his haste to get into the damaged gymnasium.

"Dean!" Sam cried, blinking in surprise and then overwhelming joy.

The first immediate thing Dean felt was relief. So much so that he nearly dropped Cas, catching her with an arm across her chest, but gravity was already against them. The two slid to the ground in a less-than elegant tangle of bodies. Sam, eyes still wide at the two of them slumped on the floor in the center of absolute carnage, let out a staggering breath of relief (and shock, plenty of shock) before he took off towards them. The younger hunter hit his knees as Dean managed to lower Cas the rest of the way to the ground.

It was a good thing Sam had found them, because there was no way he'd have been able to carry her around to look for the younger Winchester in his state. Or her state. Either of their states. Walking definitely wasn't in the cards for the angel at the moment, either.

"Dean! Cas!" Sam laid a hand on his brother's shoulder, another on Cas's, the reassurance of finding them alive clear on his face. Unsurprising, Dean thought, given that it looked like they'd survived ground zero of a friggin' air strike.

That relief Dean was feeling in equal measure turned to a sickening dead weight in his stomach when he realized his brother was covered in blood. And not the oh-I-got-an-injury sort of blood, which would have been worrying enough on its own. Oh, no, this was a distinct, triangular shaped soakage down the front of his shirt, originating at his neck, which was also drenched in red without any wound to supply it.

Sort of like he'd spilled something as he'd been drinking it.

Dean had seen his brother like that once before. Cas in danger, just like now, demons laying a trap for him and the brothers. And Sam, standing up from a kill, blood running down his mouth and throat.

His brother who, in that moment, Dean hadn't recognized.

"Sam?"

The younger Winchester looked up, worried at his big brother's shaken, wispy tone, but faltered when he realized Dean's gaze was locked on his chest. Sam dropped his eyes to the red-soaked t-shirt and tried to ignore the way his hand trembled on his brother's shoulder.

"It's not what it looks like." Sam's voice was quiet. Below them, Cas seemed to pick up on the tone, out of it and shaking as she was, and followed between their two gazes. Sam felt her stiffen beneath his grip when she followed where Dean's lay. He didn't know what the angel was thinking and didn't want to. "I didn't drink it."

Dean raised his eyes, staring right into his soul, and Sam saw doubt there.

"I *didn't*."

What he didn't say – couldn't say – was how close he'd come to doing

just that. The jar had been in his hand, the rim against his lips (he was ready to do it, he just had to make his hand stop shaking, had to stop wasting precious time, steel his nerves, and *drink*) when every piece of glass in the classroom shattered, jar included. Shards rained down around him and cold, viscous liquid splattered his throat and chest, pooling in his lap like ooze. That brilliant light filling the entire room died out in an instant, and Sam had feared the worst.

But he was free. Azazel's power was gone. Sam was left clutching the remains of the broken jar, completely stunned, but *free*.

He'd sat in a state of shock, unsure what the hell had just happened, what he'd almost done, before realizing he was covered in demon blood. Very accessible demon blood. It was on his face. On his *lips*. Sam ripped off his long-sleeved shirt, using it to claw at his skin, to scrub the blood off of him as much as possible.

Then he'd ran. Out of the classroom, into an empty hall and an empty field, towards a terrifyingly dark and silent gymnasium, still fearing the worst.

"Okay," Dean said, but in that quiet sort of way that Sam knew was still full of doubt. His brother didn't truly believe him, but it was a problem for later. The hunter gathered Cas in his arms again and Sam helped haul her to her feet. "We gotta get out of here. Where's Andy?"

The younger Winchester met his eyes and the desperate guilt there was answer enough. Sam shook his head, looking away from the equal devastation running across Dean's face. "Azazel took him. I don't know where. Cas, he doesn't have his hex bag; can you sense him?"

Sam could only pray Andy was still alive to be sensed.

The question looked like it pained the angel, who was clearly running on fumes. Still, she closed her eyes, brow furrowing. After a moment, Cas shook her head. "He- He is not nearby. I do not have the reserves to search f-further."

"It's okay, Cas." Dean adjusted his grip on the angel, his intention to get moving clear in the tense lines of his body. "We'll find him."

"And Azazel?" Sam's eyes darted around in a frantic manner, looking for the yellow-eyed demon he'd chased afte. But there were only bodies.

Dean's eyes fell to one corpse in particular. "He's gone, Sam. At least

for now."

The younger Winchester stared at the remains, heart skipping a hopeful, painful beat. Dean's words certainly weren't optimistic enough for Sam to think the demon was dead. But, at least for now, he wasn't a concern anymore.

Which made Sam wonder, instead, what it was they were running from then. Of course, he had a whole list to pick from. More demons, soon to arrive as backup to their boss? A whole town full of demonic-virus induced zombies? And all three of them injured, the strongest of whom was also the worst off.

"H-Heaven," Cas's hoarse voice rasped out from between them as they moved across the destroyed gymnasium. Dean's face, already grim like he knew what was coming, turned truly dark. Sam glanced apprehensively between his brother and the woman strung between them. "Angels will co-come to inv-vestigate. I have to leave."

"Take a damn minute, Cas. You can't even stand on your own." Dean didn't look at the angel, but given that she was barely supporting any of her own weight between the two Winchesters, it wasn't like he needed to.

"Dean, I h-have to get back."

"Cas," Sam spoke softer than his brother as he climbed over the downed door of the gym and partial bleachers. Dean handed the angel off to him before scrambling over the debris himself. "You're hurt pretty bad. I don't think you'll be able to hide that."

The angel nearly collapsed between them again as they carried her outside, trying to get her feet back under her and utterly failing. "My brother will help me conceal my i-injuries. I have to go b-before they find me missing."

Sam's sigh was almost silent. "I think that ship may have already sailed, Cas."

"More like sunk," Dean grumbled unhelpfully. The younger Winchester spared him a look that he was too busy helping Cas to see.

They barely cleared the gym into the field when Cas would go no further. She dropped to the ground, mysteriously more weight now than the hundred and thirty pound woman she possessed should be. Sam let out an 'oof' and Dean swore viciously as the two were partially

pulled to the ground with her. Castiel raised two fingers to Sam's forehead, the hunter stiffening under the trembling touch. With her other hand, she splayed her fingers out, palm hovering centimeters off Dean's chest. The hunter realized what Cas was about to do, what it was going to take to get them *all* safely out of there.

"I am sorry, but I must." Blue eyes locked on green. Still, that hand didn't close the gap between them and Dean hesitated to give the consent the angel was waiting for.

The hunter cursed himself, but the words wouldn't form. His chest *hurt*, his whole body ached, dragging further and further behind with every step he took. He was so tired. Dean didn't know how much more he could give. But it was more than that. Because it wasn't just pain or exhaustion. It was a growing hollowness, an emptiness behind his ribcage that felt all too familiar. What would it become if Cas took back more of that grace? That's what she had done, right? Was asking to do again? For Dean's chest to feel so cold, for that little black hole, infinitesimal as it was right now, to be back?

It didn't matter. It didn't matter that he was terrified of what would happen if Cas took more, that that hole might get bigger. It didn't matter if it was uncomfortable, if it hurt, if it made him think of those forty years in hell and the worst scars his soul had ever borne. Of the hollow, empty pit that followed him around long after he'd escaped the Pit it had formed in. It didn't matter if he'd grown to need that warmth, that wholeness. That angel in his chest.

This was life or death. His life, Sammy's life. Cas, and Andy, wherever he was. And that's all that actually mattered.

"It's fine, Cas," he tried to say, but his voice cracked, coming out as only a whisper. Dean cleared his throat. "Just do it."

Cas's hand pressed to his sternum and then the three of them were riding Angel Air away from Rivergrove, and Dean's chest ached in a way that made him want to cry.

-o-o-o-

Bobby came racing down his stairs two at a time in response to a mighty thud on the first level of his house. He had a loaded shotgun in hand, ready to use it, only to find his fears abated and (reluctant) hopes affirmed at the sight of his boys and their angel sprawled on his living room floor. They all looked like hell, not that Bobby was much surprised. He'd woken in the middle of night to a flash of white light,

a heavy crash down the hall, a missing angelic vessel, and a medical room looking like a tornado had come through. After something like that in the dead of night, the old hunter had more than expected follow-up company, though he had hoped they'd be in better shape.

"I have to go," Cas mumbled, barely able to form the words. Her skin was grey – the scary kind of grey that humans were never supposed to be – and she was on all fours between the two Winchesters.

"Just wait a damn minute-" Dean was saying as he, too, tried to scramble to his feet but barely made it to his knees. There were horrible spots in his vision, and if he'd thought he was tired before, he must be damn near close to blacking out now. His chest ached fiercely with the kind of hollow emptiness that left him shaking, stuck in memories of another time, another place. Dean single-mindedly rubbed circles into his sternum, trying anything to reignite some of the warmth that he'd so blissfully had for the last year.

"Dean." The deep, commanding voice, regretful as it was, brought the older Winchester's attention back into sharp focus. Dean blinked through his blotchy vision to meet Cas's stare, a desperate kind of look in her gorgeous blue eyes. "Uriel will heal me; I will be fine. But I must go *now*."

The floor that the hunter had just managed to get under his feet promptly dropped back out from under him, stealing the air from his lungs right along with it. He could practically see Cas spreading her wings. Panic flared within him, digging vicious claws into that gaping hole behind his sternum.

"Uriel?" The name came out stunned. Quiet. Numb. Not the ferocious fury it should have been. Not the warning it needed to be.

"The brother I confided in," Castiel confirmed, breathless. She looked like she was seconds from passing out too. "I have to go."

"No, Cas, wait, you can't-" Dean still couldn't breathe right. All he could see was that muscled up meatsuit threatening to destroy an entire town. That dickwad that had forced him to torture Alistair. The bastard who'd set that demon free and stood by while he beat the living shit out of the older Winchester. The traitor who'd sided with Lucifer. The first brother Castiel had ever had to kill.

"I may not hear your prayers while I heal," Cas talked over him, looking to Sam if only because the younger Winchester was actually hearing him. "But I will return as soon as I am able."

"Damnit, Cas, listen to me!" Dean made to grab the angel, but all he got was a handful of a suddenly unconscious and limp woman. With a brief glow of light beneath her skin, Angela Garrett fell into his arms: ashen, human, and not breathing.

"Cas!"

Dean's furious scream and the accompanying punch right into the floor – hard enough to bust open knuckles – caused Sam to jump, staring at his brother with wide-eyed confusion. Dean turned his head up to the ceiling, the unconscious vessel still lying half atop him. "Damnit, get your ass back here, you hear me? You can't trust Uriel! You idiot, he's gonna kill you!"

The younger Winchester didn't have a clue what was going on – worry, dread, and panic all fighting for control of his gut at the shit-storm this night had so rapidly turned into – but as he stared at the woman in Dean's arms, chest deadly still and face quickly gaining a blue hue to that ashen grey, he realized they had a more urgent problem.

"We've got to get her upstairs!" Sam dug his arms under Angela's torso, pulling her from Dean's lap while getting his feet under him. But Bobby's grip, hard on his bicep, stopped him. Sam stared at the older hunter, whose eyes were equally wide with yet another terrifying realization.

"They're not setup," he said, sort of stunned with a little headshake. His eyes darted down to the unconscious vessel. "Your girl must have landed hard and taken off harder. Knocked half the room over."

Sam, instantly comprehending that they weren't going to simply hook the dying woman up to the machines she desperately needed, inhaled two sharp breaths. Then, with the kind of calm Sam Winchester excelled at, immediately lowered Angela back to the floor, laying her out as flat as possible. The hunter started compressions on her chest as Bobby bolted for the stairs. They'd have to keep her heart beating and blood oxygenated long enough to get her up the stairs once the room was ready. Long enough to stave off the reaper surely coming for her soul.

How they were going to get her upstairs while maintaining CPR, Sam didn't know. They might have no choice but to stop and make the climb with Angela's heart and lungs utterly still. His mind, composed on the outside and panicking internally, battled between how long

they'd have without her breathing before a Reaper came calling, and whether or not Cas would be able to heal brain damage when she returned.

If Angela's soul would even be there to grant permission.

Sam jerked his head back up to his older brother. Dean was still screaming at the ceiling for an angel who clearly couldn't hear him. They didn't have time for this, whatever *this* was (no matter how bad it sounded, and, given the freaked out fury in his brother's voice, it was *bad*).

"Dean!" Sam cast the older Winchester a harsh look, mostly formed by desperation and fear, as he kept up the unforgiving compressions on Angela's chest. "I need your help or she is going to die!"

Green eyes snapped to his and Sam was momentarily taken back by the distress in them. Not for Angela, though of course Dean wouldn't want the woman to die. No, the level of terror in his eyes seemed the type specifically reserved for Winchesters, Singers, and one particular angel.

But they didn't have time to deal with it. Like Andy, who was God-knows-where, maybe already dead from injuries or infection. Like the town of Rivergrove, all of its people murdered or missing or worse. They could only do one thing at a time, and right now, Angela's life was literally in their hands.

"Rescue breaths," Sam ordered, keeping his tone level but firm. "Two of them. Now, Dean."

Dean's hands were clenched in fists and he turned his head upwards again, glowering at the ceiling. For a moment, Sam thought he might keep on ignoring him and the dying woman. Then Dean shut his eyes tightly, forced his hands to loosen, and bent over Angela to pinch her nose and tilt her head back. Sam had no doubt that he was praying furiously to Castiel as he delivered the rescue breaths, then backed off for Sam to resume compressions. Hell, Sam was sending up several of his own, though he had no idea the kind of danger Cas was in, only that she was in a lot of it.

They could both only hope the angel heard them and that she would still have a vessel to come back to when she did.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Deeeep breath in, let it out, and as you do, just whisper it under your breath: No good, dirty rotten author.

Chapter 78: Season 2: Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I am SO SORRY I fell off the face of the Earth. Oh boy, did I have a rough month though, guys. It started with a awesome reviewer (who will get a mention in a couple chapters) offering up a new idea for How-Not-To-Kill-Andy(yet) that I sorta-kind-absolutely-okay-I-want-to-see-that latched onto. But, it meant halting ALL writing because I had to have an emergency re-think and planning/strategy/outlining meeting with the muse since I was in the middle of writing the chapter that would need to change if we went that route. So I didn't write for two weeks while I tackled the change in script. Then, a Surprise!Depression bout popped up out of the blue (my depression comes and goes in a fairly regular/trackable cycle) and it was a *doozy.* The worst I've had in a year at least. It also lasted three times the normal length of one of my normal bouts. And then, right when I thought, 'hey, I think I'm coming out of it!' I fell down my entire flight of stairs trying to leave for work one morning. I banged myself up pretty good and hyperextended two fingers on my dominant hand. I don't know if many of you recall, but my work is entirely computer based. And the program I use requires *two* hands to operate. -_- So work *suuucked* for a week, not to mention, typing generally requires two hands. So…uh…needless to say, I haven't written in over a month and a half.

And my parents are in town this weekend, so now that the depression has cleared up and I have two hands again, I have absolutely no time. I'm definitely speed-editing this chapter when I should have been in bed about two hours ago. I have to pick my parents up from their hotel in, like, six hours D:

And *that* is why this chapter is so horrendously late. I also didn't want to post a note telling you all what was going on, because as a reader I always hated the disappointment that came from getting a chapter update and only having a note. However, if I'm alone in this and you guys would prefer I leave a note update, let me know and I'll leave one in the future if something like this ever happens again.

Quality Warning: This chapter has had just one read-through. Barely even an edit. Half an edit. So I guarantee there are some

typos and errors in it, for which I apologize but I really didn't want to hold it up for another week!

Angel Heirarchy and Titles: Alrighty, in an attempt to stay canonically correct, I went about looking for what Sphere of angel Zachariah is. Show-wise, Zachariah described himself as having six wings. According to the internet, that would make him a Seraphim. But he also has four faces, which would make him a Cherub (canonically a naked, diaper-wearing match-maker in the Supernatural World). However, if we go based on duties instead of descriptions, then Zach would most likely be in a Dominion – they rule over lower angels.

So, long story short (too late), my conclusion is as follows: gaaaaaaaaaah!

We're clearly making this up as we go, then. So here's what I'm gonna say is canon for this story: we're going with duties. Zachariah is a Dominion, beneath the archangels but with room for a promotion to Principalities. (side note: outside the world of Supernatural, I would guess Angels were born/created into their specific power level and don't move up or down, but the show does seem to move angels around or emphasize promotions and the like. So we'll go with canon, then, and say angels can climb the ladder.) Castiel and his unit will be Powers, since they're described as angels that fight against the forces of evil. Sounds like our Bad-ass Warrior of God, no? :D Power it is!

Enough Author's Notes! Now that we've got that sorted out, let's get to an actual story. Sheesh!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 45

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam stepped back from the stolen hospital bed, wiping his hands on one of the pillow cases he'd had to strip from the bed once he realized he'd gotten it covered in blood just setting Angela down on it. Azazel's blood was still all over him. It reeked, in ways that required every ounce of Sam's strength to ignore. The metallic scent was practically

palpable, a fact the young Winchester was ignoring with every fiber of his being. But he knew his limit was quickly approaching, and he would need to be out of those clothes and as far from that blood as possible before that point hit.

Angela was stable. Or, well, she was breathing and her heart was beating. The steady blip of the monitors and hum of the ventilator assured as much. She'd been braindead when Cas found her and she was braindead now. The only problem was, Sam didn't actually know if they'd done damage in the two minutes and fourteen seconds it had taken them to get her up the stairs and plugged in. Had a Reaper already come for her soul?

Staring at her unmoving, ashen body, Sam was having a tough time rallying any optimism at all. Or, maybe that was just everything else that had happened tonight. Andy was gone, dead or missing, with no clue where he might be and no yellow-eyed demon to summon him back. They'd lost the entire town of Rivergrove despite knowing everything that was supposed to happen. They hadn't stood a chance, it turned out. And Dean…

Sam glanced at his brother, sitting in a chair beside Angela's lifeless form, just staring at her. His lips were moving still – had been ever since Cas left them – so the younger Winchester knew he was uttering those desperate, pleading, increasingly-angry prayers for the angel to return. The broken handcuffs, a parting gift from the Rivergrove Sheriff's department, were still locked securely around his damaged, raw wrists. The wounds had stopped bleeding, but they would need to get those bracelets off to clean and wrap the skin.

The younger Winchester thought about saying something. Reassure Dean that Angela Garrett would be fine. Only, he didn't know that. He didn't know if the body lying on that bed was anything more than the empty husk of what had once been a beautiful young woman, kind and earnest enough to offer her body to an angel in need. And they wouldn't know until Cas returned, which was the person Dean really needed to hear would be fine. Would be coming back. But Sam didn't know that either.

The smell of demon blood was getting stronger, and his resolution was getting weaker.

"She'll be alright," he said aloud, because he felt like he needed to say something. They would need to clean and patch the burn wounds scattered across her body from what Sam could only assume was the

trap Azazel mentioned. Those would be very susceptible to infection – burns always were – so they'd have to make sure they kept them clean until Cas returned and could heal her. The angel hadn't done so before she'd left, which seemed out of character for the organized, consistent, and conscientious Castiel. Of course, given the state she'd been in after battling Azazel, she probably didn't have it in her. Sam tried not to think about it, or about the fear that was still in Dean's eyes, buried deeper and deeper beneath mounting anger.

Glancing at his brother again, Sam decided silence was doing Dean no favors. "We'll have to clean her wounds. At least until Cas can come back and heal them."

"If he comes back," Dean muttered darkly, eyes still locked on the still form of Angela Garrett.

Sam closed his eyes and held back a sigh. Held back his own urge to be angry, to be hopeless and pessimistic. He really needed to change clothes. To shower off the blood, the failure, the entire *night.* To be free of the *smell* in all its pervasive, taunting memories and *need.* He wanted a coffee so he could see straight long enough to patch Angela up. Then they needed to be out there, finding Andy, who was alone and probably scared out of his mind, *if* he was even alive to begin with. And, though all of that, what Sam really needed was his brother, present, on board, *with him*.

But it was pretty clear that Dean needed him more right now. Sam could see it; his brother was afraid. The younger Winchester could count on one hand the things that made Dean scared, and so far, half that list had to do with his angel being beyond reach.

"Tell me about Uriel." Sam stowed his own tiredness, his aching body, and growing desperation to get clean. He wouldn't last much longer, but he could last long enough for his brother. He would just breathe through his mouth and ignore the sticky wetness clinging to his chest like it wasn't there.

Dean didn't answer immediately, still brooding. Maybe still praying. But eventually he shifted, not out of physical discomfort, and re-settled in the chair. His eyes never left Angela's face. "He was an angel. *Is* an angel. Real dick. Worked with Cas on some shit assignments…. He was no good, Sammy."

Green eyes finally glanced over and Sam found himself reevaluating just how much trouble Castiel might be in. His brother wasn't just

scared, he was *wrecked*. It was hardly the time to think about it, but the younger Winchester found himself thinking about the relationship between his brother and the angel once more. Even after Dad's death, he'd never seen Dean quite like this. There was so much he didn't know about this brother from 2016. Mainly personal things, given the man never talked about himself so much as he did events to come. But the level of raw fear the older Winchester was exhibiting behind tired, ringed eyes, was reserved for family only. And, maybe, something more. Sam didn't know, he'd never seen *that* in his brother before, so he wouldn't know what it looked like, but he did wonder. He was pretty sure Bobby wondered too.

"He sided with Lucifer. Helped the seals fall, tried to convert other angels to his side. When he couldn't, he killed 'em." The older hunter reached up, rubbing that now familiar circular pattern across a sternum that felt so damn cold in comparison to the supernova it had been for the past year. "He framed demons for the murders. Almost got me killed."

Dean could still feel the pain of the beating he'd taken at that bastard's indirect hands. The soul-wrenching terror of facing Alistair again and *losing*. It was vivid enough, still after all this time, that Dean wasn't sure where the pain of Cas draining his chest ended and the approaching panic attack of Alistair began.

Sam was watching him closely – he could feel those puppy dog eyes locked on his face – but Dean was back to staring at the empty vessel. A vessel Cas should be in, damnit. Not upstairs, with friggin' *Uriel*. *Trusting* Uriel. Up where they could do nothing to help him when it all went to hell. And it was going to. Because Time wanted to stay the same, and the same meant Uriel trying to kill his best friend and almost friggin' succeeding. God damn it, Dean never should have let him go back up in the first place. He should be down here, where he belonged. Cas was a Winchester, he should be with them.

"When Cas confronted him…" Dean tried to keep talking, to keep his mind off what was happening to his best friend right now. What could be happening. And they couldn't even find out if it *was* happening. So, surprise, surprise, talking about last time, about what could be going down *right now*, was not helping. At all. Dean shifted awkwardly in the chair. "He was the first brother Cas had to kill."

He should have said something sooner. He should have sent Cas back up there months ago with a god damn list of who he could and couldn't trust. Why hadn't Dean said anything?

Because Uriel hadn't even been on that list, let alone his mind.

Dean honestly hadn't remembered the angel as an upcoming threat. They'd faced so many opponents, had so many enemies, that Uriel didn't even make the top twenty. It didn't help that Dean had been out of commission for the actual confrontation; he hadn't learned until later that Uriel was the one responsible for the worst beating of his life. And not because of the physical damage but the emotional wounds Alistair had ripped back open with glee. He'd always been so good at that.

Dean should have asked the last time Cas was here. Why hadn't he asked? *Hey, which brother did you tell, exactly*? Because there were *so many* bad answers. Too many to count. But he hadn't. He hadn't wanted to know, because he hadn't wanted Cas up there in the first place. Hadn't even wanted to think about Cas up there, alone and largely unprepared for a real fight. Because Cas was too busy thinking of it as his home. But it *wasn't.* It shouldn't be. His home was with his family, *right. Friggin. Here.* Dean was never gonna understand why every version of Cas fought so hard for those bastards that didn't want him and definitely didn't deserve him.

He'd also stupidly assumed the brother Castiel mentioned was Hannah, because it had always been Hannah for the last four years. Or Rachel, loathe as Dean was to involve her either, at least she'd always had Cas's best interests at heart. And Cas was always reminding Dean that angels didn't have genders, so it wasn't like Dean had eliminated those options just 'cuz he'd known them in female vessels (he'd even been proud of himself for that totally not-sexist or human-species-based call at the time).

And hell, even if he had knocked Hannah and Rachel off the list, thinking of them strictly as Cas's sisters, then Balthazar was the obvious next choice.

Why, *why*, would Cas trust *Uriel* of all people?

Because they had been best buds before the dickwad tried to kill him.

Dean's hand was shaking against his chest. He dropped it, fingers curling into a fist over his thigh. Cas was walking right into a trap. He had no warning and they had no way to reach him. Dean bit down on his tongue hard enough to bruise and glanced sidelong to his brother, still standing at the foot of Angela's bed.

"He'll kill him, Sam." Dean had to force the words out. They got stuck

in his throat and didn't want to form. Didn't want to be true. "He'll kill Cas."

Sam was slower to answer, not wanting to immediately discount the knowledge his brother from the future had. Dean would know the events to come better than him, of course, but he was also blinded by his emotion. The older Winchester couldn't see past the possibility of what might happen because it had happened in his world.

"Maybe not," he began slowly, weighing his word choice very carefully. "Cas might be safe. She said the brother she confided in was a friend, someone she trusted." Sam raised a hand to stop his own brother from telling him that was exactly what was about to get her killed. "Uriel most likely wants her alive, Dean. As a friend and brother, but also as a potential ally."

Dean snorted. "Until she doesn't agree to help him raise the damn devil."

But Sam was already shaking his head. "That's years away, isn't it? And we already know Time wants to try and stay the same. Well… Heaven's gates aren't even opened yet, right? You said he framed demons for his kills, but he can't right now. And I'm willing to bet killing an angel in Heaven is a lot riskier than doing it down here."

The man from the future paused, his rebound protest already half formed, mouth hanging open. Slowly, he closed it. That… okay, maybe there was something there. Beneath his sternum, Dean's heart began to beat in earnest for the first time in what felt like hours.

"Cas is safe for now," Sam reasoned, putting as much confidence as he could into the statement. Probably more than he actually felt, but his brother didn't need to know that. Right now, Dean needed someone to tell him it was going to be alright, and Sam could do that for him with logic and well-acted confidence. He just hoped it didn't turn out to all be a lie. "Uriel will heal her, too. He needs her alive if he's going to recruit her. She'll be alright until she can get back down here, Dean. Then we'll warn her about him."

And lock her in the panic room if she even so much as considered going back up to Heaven, Dean decided internally. But his heart felt far steadier and though the ache in his chest was still icy and terrifying, it didn't feel so damn hollow. He was still tense – and likely would be for some time – but Dean realized Sam's logic was, as usual, right. Cas was probably okay. Well, as okay as a wounded, weakened

angel stuck in heaven without his ears on and in a traitor's hands possibly could be. But Uriel had seemed like he respected Cas way back when. Dean had seen how hard the betrayal hit his friend afterward.

Which was one of only about six thousand reasons Dean still wasn't okay with this. But, he supposed, looking down at Angela's still form again, there really wasn't much they could do about it, was there? Dean bit down on his tongue again and his hand went back to rubbing at his chest.

"I'm going to get changed," Sam mentioned quietly, tossing the bloodied pillow case onto the pile of equally ruined sheets. They'd had to change them all once they'd gotten Angela hooked up. Sam was covered in blood, no-where near dry, and he'd made a mess of just about everything in their mad dash up the stairs to deposit her on the bed and resume CPR. Sam and Bobby had tackled the red-stained sheets while Dean made sure Angela stayed hooked as they changed the bed around her.

After that harrowing and exhausting experience, Sam had all new levels of respect for nurses and hospital staff.

Those soft words paired with Sam's utterly worn countenance sent warning bells ringing like crazy in Dean's head. Enough, even, to make it through the anger and brooding. He looked over at his brother, noticing the blood still soaking the poor kid's entire front. Demon blood. There were traces of it on his skin, lines of it down his neck, and a Pollack painting splattered across his hands and forearms.

Dean's throat dried up for the second time that night as the next round of realization and reality slammed home. Sam fidgeted under the attention, picking at the sticky wet cotton self-consciously. Dean knew better than to ask, but he couldn't help it. He had to know.

"You really didn't drink it?"

The defensive hurt that flashed across his brother's face, haunted and angry, was a reminder of why Dean shouldn't have asked in the first place. "No. I didn't drink it."

The older Winchester nodded, trying to accept the answer for the truth it was and not worry – not doubt – his kid brother. If Sam said he didn't drink it, then he didn't drink it. Dean would just have to trust that this wasn't the brother who'd spent a year and a half lying to him about exactly that.

"We'll patch her up after," Sam mentioned offhandedly, either trying to shift the topic or the tension. He gestured to Angela's still form and the electric burns dotting her body from that horrific lightning trap. "Then we'll…we'll look for Andy."

Dean's expression turned stricken at the reminder of another missing family member, but Sam didn't regret bringing it up. Cas wasn't their only friend in danger right now, after all. The older Winchester nodded, that curled hand tightening on his thigh.

"I'll- I'll try his cell." Dean fumbled for his pants pocket to pull out his phone.

"Bobby already tried," Sam said, words still discomfortingly quiet. The old hunter had tried Andy's number three times while Sam finished up with Angela, Dean sitting by her side, catatonic except for his silent praying. The line had gone to voicemail every time and the chip wasn't returning a GPS signal. Andy's cell was either dead or out of range. Sam really hoped it was the latter.

Dean slumped back into the chair, the helplessness of the situation – his own uselessness in particular – hitting hard. Sam took pity on him. He never could help it when it came to his brother.

"They'll both be alright." This time the confidence in his words was definitely more than he felt and it showed. But he doubled down, because they were going to be alright. Somehow, they would get through this. All four of them. Because despite the demon's words, Sam had to believe that Azazel needed Andy alive. He must have healed him before he transported him; there was no point in a demon hiding a corpse. "We'll find them and bring them home."

Turning to his brother with watery green eyes he'd never admit to, Dean nodded, before dropping his head to stare at his hands. Then he staggered up from the chair and grabbed the first aid kit Bobby had left on the nightstand. Not for Cas, but Angela this time. She was a part of their little fucked up family too, and it was time he took care of all of them, not just their one wayward angel.

The younger Winchester watched for a heartbroken moment before he turned and left the room.

-o-o-o-

Zachariah charged for the Upper Archival Halls like an angel on a mission. He *was* an angel on a mission. A mission to root out the

traitor among his men. The ugly wrench thrown into an otherwise perfectly planned machine. An explosion of grace had been detected on earth and early reports were coming in about a large spike in demonic activity at the exact same time and place.

An unauthorized angel on earth and more demonic activity than should ever exist all in one spot? Oh, Zachariah knew who the wrench was, yes he did.

Today was the day he would finally pin something on that little upstart Castiel and get their Apocalypse Plan back on track. He could *feel* it.

There was no way the angel would make it back to his post in time, not if he had been the one in the middle of that grace bomb in Oregon as Zachariah suspected. No, not suspected: *knew*. And now, he finally *had* him. He'd be getting that promotion in no time at all.

One of Heaven's top head Honchos, the *best* of the Dominions and most deserving of an upcoming promotion in status (in his always-correct opinion), headed directly towards Archives with four other angels hot on his heels. In case Castiel resisted his arrest, of course. Oh, Zachariah hoped Castiel resisted.

The contingent passed several angels coming and going – it was a fairly busy district in Heaven's inner ring – but Zachariah drew his men up short at the sight of Uriel not far from them, heading away from the general direction of the Archival Halls. The larger angel was a close contact of Castiel's. One might even call them friends (if one was inclined to use such a human sentiment).

"Uriel!" Zachariah barked, causing the other angel to come to a formal stop in recognition of his superior. "Where is Castiel?"

Uriel arched an eyebrow – one of several – at his commanding officer and his facial colors shifted into something close to confusion, but not quite there. "Castiel? He has Archival duty right now, doesn't he?"

Indeed he did, and had for the last six centuries. Heaven wasn't really big into change, after all. The problem was, Zachariah already *knew* that. Why else would he be headed there? The first thing he'd done upon hearing the report of a massive explosion of grace on Earth, followed by secondary reports of demonic activity by Ishim's team on site, was ask his assistant where Castiel was right at that moment. The little puissant could only offer the Power's current duty roster, which would be no help if Castiel wasn't on duty, being planet-side instead.

But Zachariah could at least prove the little angel disobedient if nothing else.

"He should be wrapping up shortly," Uriel continued, glancing skyward at the slowly moving sun inching its way across the sky.

The burning ball of gas was a simulated representation that only ever took two forms: the most beautiful sunrise the planet below had ever seen, or a never ending sunset that would take your breath away each time you looked upon it, had you any air to breathe to start. Heaven, as it always had been and always would be, really didn't change much. Sunrise, Sunset, Repeat. Except for the buildings. Those liked to move around quite a lot. No one really knew why, but, then again, no one had yet to ask.

Three of Zachariah's four faces flushed an ugly color at Uriel's helpful and conveniently counter-productive reply. The far too readily offered alibi for his friend rubbed the Dominion the wrong way. He pushed past the larger angel, waving his men onward. "Well, we'll just see about that, won't we?"

Uriel stepped out of their way, turning to watch them head into the towering building he'd just come from. He kept the waves of his grace carefully neutral as they disappeared into the Archival Halls.

-o-o-o-

"Castiel!"

The angel in question's head shot up from his work, pouring over ancient battlefield reports. His eyes widened at the approach of his direct superior and a contingent of men who frankly had no business coming here. It was a somewhat uncommon sight, particularly in a place that's usual weekly allotment of action was a book falling from the higher shelves to make quite the racket in the near-silent halls.

Castiel drew himself to attention and nodded sharply to his superior. "Zachariah. What has happened?"

The Dominion drew up short, all four of his faces caught in a comical coloring of disbelief. His two human mouths hung open in a little 'o' shape, one stuttering closed as eight metaphysical eyes blinked at the smaller angel like he might be an illusion.

"Castiel…" the Dominion spoke slowly, as if he hadn't expected an answer from the angel he'd been hollering for among the endless halls

of the Archival building. His third head, resembling that of an Earth lion, glanced around, but didn't seem to find what he was looking for in the handful of other angels milling about in their duties, several of them casting the group curious or speculator looks. All four faces focused back on the Power, grace shifting into a higher saturation of suspicion. "How long have you been here?"

Castiel's colors shifted as well, growing dim with mild confusion and concern. "I arrived during the morning shift. I have another twelves minutes of duty. But if you require my assistance elsewhere-"

"Can anyone verify that?" Zachariah snapped, crossing his arms over his broad chest. Castiel blinked at the demanding tone.

"I updated the roster upon arrival…" The angel gestured somewhat uncertainly back the way the unit of men had come. All angels noted their arrival and departure anytime they were on duty anywhere in Heaven. A positively absurd amount of information that was kept in a ridiculous number of large tomes in nowhere else than the Archival Halls. The room for storing those books alone was larger than both the Lesser and Greater Halls combined. It had to be; over a millennium of duty scheduling for thousands of angels took up quite a lot of space. "You can check the records, but…have I done something wrong?"

"And I don't suppose you left anytime between then and now?" Zachariah ignored the angel's question, his tone and color growing more accusatory by the second.

Castiel hesitated. Behind Zachariah's men, the closest other angel in the Archives Hall slid a thick book he'd been inspecting back into the shelf with a single finger. Dark, glittering eyes focused on the escalating situation.

"Is there a problem here?"

All six angels turned at the new voice, and Zachariah dropped his arms in surprise, not only at the newcomer for interfering, but for being seen in the Archival Halls at all.

"Malachi?" He blinked at the angel best known for his anarchist views and utter distaste of authority. Zachariah glanced between him and Castiel, brain completely short circuiting at the notion of this angel coming to the defense of any member of the host, but particularly *Castiel*.

For all that Zachariah called him an upstart, Castiel was far too *goody-*

two-shoes for an angel like Malachi to ever associate with. But Castiel just stood there, a single blink and a slight tilt of his head suggesting he didn't know the angel or expect his assistance any more than Zachariah did.

"What are you doing here?" the Dominion asked instead, not bothering to curb his incredulity (or condescension).

"I don't see how that's any of your business as I don't report to you, Zachariah," Malachi answered coolly, crossing from the shelves to join the small gathering. Unlike most angels, the anarchist's colors rarely shifted, staying in an unappealing range of neutrals. It made him awfully hard to trust. Zachariah could feel the angels behind him fidget. "Now, did you require something of Castiel, or have you simply come to interrupt everyone working in the Archives today?"

Zachariah's hands fisted by his side at the blatant disregard of his authority, and in front of his men, no less. He drew up to his full height, puffing out his chest in indignation. "I suppose you'd like to vouch for him, then?"

The comment was made offhand. A scoff at most. A preposterous idea. Malachi didn't stand up for anyone. The anarchist didn't care enough.

But the angel just tilted his head in regard of Castiel. Then, looking Zachariah once more, he shrugged with such indifference that the nonchalance leaked off him in waves of translucent gray. "I can only speak for the hour that I have been here."

The Dominion's feather's ruffled, both incredulous and insulted by the blatant runaround. "And Castiel has been here with you for that hour?"

Malachi stared. "Did he not say that he was?"

Zachariah's teeth ground together so hard all four of his heads hurt from it. Grace growing an ugly, humiliated red, he turned, furious, to Castiel, but the smaller angel just blinked his many eyes in that innocent way of his that fooled all the others. But not Zachariah. Although…Castiel certainly didn't *look* like an angel that had just come from Earth after expelling so much grace that most of his reserves would *have* to be depleted. He looked perfectly, distastefully, *frustratingly*, normal.

"Finish your duty and then return to the barracks. The *both* of you!" Zachariah snapped out, snatching control of the situation back by the

lungful regardless of whether Malachi would listen to it or not. He spun to his men, all of who backed away from his very obvious ire. "What are you staring at? Get back to work. All of you!"

The angels scrambled to clear out of the library, Zachariah following behind in a huff.

Not three seconds after the last of the apoplectic Dominion and his men finally vanished from sight, Castiel's legs buckled beneath him and he caught himself heavily on the table. Malachi was by his side in four concise strides, easing Castiel off of the cluttered surface, scrolls and parchment now a bit haphazard, and into a nearby chair. The Power was shaking, the last of the strength Uriel had lent him long gone, along with all the saturation to his grace.

"That was a halfway decent performance," Malachi praised as he got Castiel off his feet. The angel sagged into the chair, his celestial wavelength more closely resembling liquid than air. The anarchist stood back, but not so far as to withdraw from Castiel completely. "You're not as entirely terrible at this as I thought you'd be."

Castiel stared up at him, all of his eyes blinking but not completely in synch. Uriel had only been able to provide him with a surface healing; a mask to cover his injuries more than a bandage to treat them. It was a very, very thin mask now. Maintaining it in front of Zachariah had taken the last of Castiel's already depleted reserves.

"You are Malachi," the Power spoke, still staring up at the angel that had helped him. The angel Uriel had left him with to better disguise their partnership and throw Zachariah off the trail. Castiel had never before spoken to the angel most identified as an Anarchist. He had never had need nor care to.

"And you are Castiel." Malachi hardly looked impressed, but then Castiel supposed the angel not known for making friends or even being pleasant to start with had just complimented him.

Well, sort of.

Castiel was fairly sure Dean would call it a backhanded compliment. The phrase was quite evocative and the angel found that he rather liked it as a descriptor. But that was neither here nor there at the moment, and Castiel worried to find his thoughts drifting so flagrantly.

The Anarchist held out his manifested hand, an extension of his grace,

palm down over Castiel's straining chest. Malachi's head tilted ever so slightly to the side. "You'll permit me?"

Castiel swallowed reflexively at the offer. He needed the healing, but he was hesitant to trust an angel he did not know. Worse than did not know: had heard unkind words about. However, Uriel told him he would assist their cause, and Malachi had yet to prove himself otherwise.

"Thank you, brother," he granted with a nod, and Malachi crouched beside him, fingers of grace wrapping around his center of mass. Castiel's many eyes half-shuttered at the healing touch of another so close to his damaged core. His brother's soothing grace was a therapeutic balm to the turbulent flow of his own.

"This is quite the beating you took," the Anarchist mentioned offhand, eyes scanning the length of Castiel's grace.

The damage was primarily to his cracked and singed core. That trap had been powerful and, while flawed, intended for him almost specifically. Castiel suspected the demons had attempted to carve his name into the sigils of the trap. He was very, very lucky that whatever they guessed, they had not gotten it entirely correct. If they had, he likely would not have been capable of flying himself, let alone Dean, Sam, and Baby, out of that town. And certainly not back to Heaven in time.

"It will take multiple sessions to mend completely. Even the most untrained Healer would recommend a trance at this point."

The injured angel nodded tiredly, already well aware of that fact. The second he'd taken off from Bobby Singer's living room, he had figuratively powered down all non-essential systems feeding off his limited energy supply. Uriel had been the one to inform him Zachariah was on the move, Castiel having silenced his brothers' voices (what Dean coined as 'angel radio') as well as the far more muted prayers of the thousands of devout humans on Earth. Castiel was running on base functions only and would be until a healing trance could be initiated by another angel.

"I have not seen this type of damage before," Malachi commented again, still rather detachedly as he observed the wounds with nothing more than clinical interest. Castiel did not know why, but it made him feel cold.

"A demonic trap," he supplied, not interested in expanding upon it any

further.

"Yes, Uriel mentioned you've been making trips to Earth." Another offhanded comment, as though Malachi could hardly be bothered with the information Castiel regarded as highly sensitive and quite dangerous to simply toss around.

Castiel found his discomfort with his brother's apathy, as well as what information Uriel had chosen to disclose, growing rapidly. Malachi was not the type Castiel would have been comfortable discussing his impermissible planet-side visits with. Nor was he one of the angels Castiel would have trusted with such information. But Cas did trust Uriel. And, he supposed, an Anarchist was the sort one might garner support from when looking for angels willing to oppose Heaven. Just…not the sort Castiel would have gone to first, perhaps.

"I should return to the barracks." If Malachi noticed the less than subtle dismissal, he did not speak of it. But as Castiel attempted to stand, the angel did step in, pushing the injured Castiel back down.

"You need to enter a healing trance," Malachi corrected, reproach coloring his grace a darker brown for needing to say it twice.

What Cas needed was someplace private – someplace *safe* – where Zachariah could not return unexpectedly. That was not the Archival Halls with an angel he barely knew. "Uriel will assist me-"

"Uriel is busy covering for you," the Anarchist interrupted, and Castiel's grace, what little color it had left, flushed with guilt. "I will assist."

Once more, Castiel found himself hesitant to accept the largely-unknown angel's aid. There was little reason for it; Castiel did not know most of Heaven's Healers by anything more than name alone, and he had and would again trust them with such a task. Perhaps it was that Malachi was not a Healer, or known for any talents in that field.

Then again, neither was Uriel.

Either way, talking himself in circles was getting Castiel nowhere other than more exhausted. Uriel had entrusted him to Malachi's care, and his friend and brother was currently risking Zachariah's wrath by lying for Castiel and his cause. A cause Uriel had believed largely on Castiel's word alone. It would be shameful not to extend his brother the same faith in trusting Malachi now to do what Uriel could not be

present for.

"Very well," Castiel conceded, relaxing back into the chair. Malachi was not wrong; he would be risking permanent damage to his being if he did not enter a trance soon, and there was no telling when Uriel would return, or if Castiel could even make it to the barracks unnoticed.

The Anarchist looked utterly unimpressed by his blessing and instead wrapped his hand across Castiel's forehead, forcing his eyes to close.

"Rest," he ordered, though not unkindly. "Uriel will finish the healing when he returns."

It was the last thing Castiel heard before his brother's calming presence guided him into the soothing silence of oblivion.

-o-o-o-

Uriel returned some twenty minutes later, once he was certain that Zachariah and his people had left the Archives and surrounding district with no intention to return. The overpowering angel had stood guard by the entrance to the Halls, though not within direct line of sight should the puffed-up Dominion choose to double back. When Uriel made it down to the lower levels where he had left Castiel, barely able to stand some hour and change ago, Malachi was crouched over the smaller angel, grace pouring into his battered form in waves of pastel healing.

The Anarchist withdrew as Uriel came near, the larger angel taking his place by Castiel's side to immediately wrap his hand across the injured angel's forehead.

"He is in a healing trance now," Malachi stated, though that much was more than obvious, given the dulled, glacial waves of Castiel's slowed grace.

Uriel's own flickered in annoyance that he had not been the one to assist his friend in such a manner. He could feel Malachi's echoed annoyance without even looking at him. Withdrawing his hand from Castiel, Uriel faced the anarchist head on.

Malachi regarded him with a cool disdain. "We should eliminate him. He put the entire operation at risk returning with those injuries."

Uriel's meaty hands curled into fists, furious that the angel in front of

him should even suggest as much. Malachi did not even know Castiel. No, his brother's fate was Uriel's call to make and Malachi would have to go through him if he wanted to lay hands on the injured angel. Of course, he could have done as much at any moment over the last hour that Uriel was away guarding against Zachariah. Or simply inform the blustering Dominion of Castiel's absence from duty and let Zachariah lead Castiel away in chains. The fact that he had not soothed some of Uriel's blistering possessiveness.

Besides, his breed of angel did not respond to brawn. So Uriel dug a little deeper for the logic he knew his brother was a slave to, rusty as he was using it. "Castiel is our only connection to the Michael sword. If we are to succeed in our plans, we must have access to the Righteous Man."

Malachi did not immediately agree, and Uriel could tell he was still wary of Castiel's involvement. Or, more so, Uriel's insistence of his involvement. Malachi had not been subtle in calling out the larger angel's attachment to his friend and partner, but Uriel had been able to make the necessity of Castiel's involvement perfectly clear to the others they had recruited. They would need the information he could provide on the Righteous Man but, more than that, they would need the human's obedience, something the smaller angel was slowly garnering with every visit to Earth.

So Castiel was off limits, no matter what Malachi had to say about it.

"We will bring Castiel to our side yet, brother," Uriel tried once more to reassure Malachi's doubts with something he had no such qualms about himself. Castiel would come to see the light; Uriel was certain of it.

The Anarchist remained cold and detached in his assessment of both Powers. "If you're wrong, you'll be the one to deal with it."

With that, Malachi withdrew from the Archival Halls, leaving behind a seething Uriel. He did not like to be ordered around, but he particularly did not like to be ordered around by an equal, if Malachi even qualified as such. Still, Uriel told himself as he turned back to the unconscious Castiel, there was no sense in fighting amongst themselves. If they were to succeed in overthrowing Heaven's rule and raising their brother from the pit, they would have to work together, dislikes aside.

Uriel hoisted Castiel into his arms to find the smaller angel someplace

safe and out of the way to recover from his ghastly injuries.

"Don't worry, Castiel," he said as he took him deeper into the Archives to utilize a little-used back entrance. He let his grace flow off of him in soothing pastels, washing over and ultimately absorbed by his smaller friend. "I will show you the light, little brother. That of the Morning Star, which burns brighter than any of us."

Predictably, Castiel did not answer him, but that was alright. He would soon enough.

-o-o-o-

Sam hated blood. He'd always hated blood. He'd thrown up after his first kill, in part because he had just ripped the life from something he had no right to judge worthy of living or dying, but mostly because of the blood. Over the years, his distaste had not improved, only numbed until Sam was able to do his job – the family job – without throwing up. And he'd learned quickly as a child how hard it was to wash dried blood off.

It wasn't that it didn't come off with water, because it did. Blood was pretty damn dissolvable. It was that it got *everywhere*. Like sand. Little crusty red particles wedged beneath his nails, along the curve of every cuticle, in the lining of every dry patch of skin, every imperfection of flesh and soul. That's what blood did. It showed all your flaws like open wounds. Sam used to pretend, as he washed his hands in motels, gas station restrooms, rivers and lakes. He used to pretend he was an astronaut – the first man on Mars – scrubbing the red dirt from his hands as the water flowed over his skin. A crew member of the U.S.S. Enterprise (not a red shirt, no, Sam would definitely be in the Science Department. It was blue for him all the way) exploring a new planet, red and dry like Vulcan. Red and dry like Mars. Red and dry like Doctor McCoy, washing the blood from his hands after saving a life, not taking it. Never taking it.

Sam hated blood like he hated his bloody childhood.

Washing the crusty red specks from his hands now, Sam stared at them, at the pink water swirling around the drain. It was no different this time; it still wasn't coming off, even as it bled into the sink like every other water-soluble substance on the planet. But it was still on his hands. Crusted in his cuticles, lodged under his finger nails, clogging his nose. He could taste it on the air. He could feel it on his skin.

And, worse, beneath it.

Sam turned his hands over, water pooling across both palms, the right shaking ever so slightly as the churning liquid pulled and pushed at the multiple lacerations cut both shallow and deep across his skin. Skin still stained red with the blood of a demon.

The younger Winchester closed his eyes and felt it. The buzzing snaking through torn flesh and muscle, where the jar had sliced him open and spilled blood so dark red it was nearly black all over the open wounds. The softer, subtler vibrations buried in the junction of his neck and shoulder, where he'd been injected with the virus and what he could now confirm had been more than just human blood. A little contingency plan, no doubt, for if he turned down Azazel's deal.

Back in Rivergrove, he'd hoped that buzzing in the back of his skull was just fear. Terror. Adrenaline. But Sam was utterly drained now and still that buzz remained.

He slowly curled his bleeding, tainted hand into a fist beneath the water, the other wrapping around the edge of the sink as he soaked in the buzzing. He was drained, but he felt strong. The utterly wrong kind of strong that was like a drug he couldn't quit. Didn't want to, even if he knew, he *knew*, he had to. Sam opened his eyes, staring at the man in the mirror. A man he still recognized, for now.

His hands shook.

The younger Winchester looked down at the sink, the water finally running clear. No more blood, no little red particles left, no Mars dirt to wash off, but he knew it was still there. It was just beneath the surface now, like it always had been.

Sam looked back up at his reflection, at the face he'd almost been afraid to see. But it was just a tired, pale wreck of a man staring back at him. A man who was starting to look a lot older than his actual age. The young hunter sighed. He hadn't known what he'd been expecting to see, but he couldn't wrestle with the dropped weight in his gut. It should have been relief, to still look like him, still *be* him, but…

Sam shook his head, shoved that buzzing back by pure force of will, and went to open the mirror cabinet. As he grabbed a suture kit (Bobby was a wise man, keeping a fully stocked kit in just about every room in the house), Sam didn't notice the hairline fractures running across the edge of the sink where his hand had curled around the porcelain in a white-knuckled grip. He threaded the needle and

opened his lacerated palm. His hands were steady as stone as he started the first stitch, and he didn't feel a thing.

-o-o-o-

"Still nothing," Bobby offered as both boys came downstairs an hour later: Sam in fresh clothing, hair wet and hand wrapped, and Dean looking just as wretched as he had before, but now with an air of hardened determination. "Ain't heard a peep 'bout your town; news channels are all quiet."

Sam nodded tiredly, not having expected much else. The sun was just rising; it had only been a couple of hours since it had all gone down. If the town had gone the way of the Roanoke Colony, it would be hours yet until someone noticed all the residents were missing.

With reluctance born from even more bad news, Bobby offered over the younger Winchester's phone. He'd been at the mobile device ever since Sam told him Andy was missing, eyes all sorts of devastated as he delivered the news. "Sorry, boys, but the kid's phone is either out of range or outa battery."

Neither brother commented on Bobby's avoidance of the third option, but they were grateful he hadn't mentioned it. Hadn't even used the word 'dead' when referring to the cell phone.

"Then we head to Cold Oak." Dean turned to his brother, the words falling from his mouth with the kind of confidence that came when you've only got one option. At least it made choices easy.

Sam nodded again, rubbing at the back of his neck and the sore injection site there. He wished they had more to go on, but Dean's future knowledge probably was their best lead. Azazel shouldn't know they were aware of his little Battle Royale Arena off in the South Dakota woods, which meant it was still the most likely path the demon would take, as long as they hadn't altered the timeline that badly.

They could only hope their most recent misadventure wasn't a sign that they had.

"Yeah, alright," the younger Winchester conceded, and that was that.

The two packed quickly, Bobby telling them he'd take care of their upstairs guest. Dean's face was so damn relieved, but grateful, but guilty, that Bobby just offered a hand on his shoulder and the

cherished silence that emotionally challenged hunters like them did best. Dean had mostly patched Angela up on the surface, Sam helping once he'd finished cleaning himself up, but they had no idea what real shape she was in. And leaving her was hard, knowing it was the spot Cas was most likely to return to, when she did return (not if). But there wasn't any place more secure than Bobby Singer's Salvage Yard, and no hands better to be left in than Bobby's.

It took another half hour to restock their supplies, having lost a huge chunk of their weapons and amo supply to the failed job in Rivergrove. Another thing they owed Bobby when this was all over. Then they were heading out to the Impala, which had shown up on the edge of Bobby's property, about a hundred yards away from the house. Bobby had discovered her about an hour ago when he'd gone to check and re-check all the wards once Cas had gone skyward and Angela was hooked back up.

As they climbed into the car, Dean cast his brother one more sidelong glance, sliding the key into the ignition. "You sure you okay?"

Sam, settling into the front seat, paused with his hand – his wrapped hand – still on the passenger door. He stared at the gauze tightly encasing an ugly truth. Slowly, he closed the door.

"Yeah, I'm good to go."

Dean hesitated for only a second worth of silence more before he threw the car in reverse and they were heading for Cold Oak as fast as Baby would carry them.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For anyone on FF.net as well as this site, you may have noticed this story posted almost 24 hours ago over there. That would be because AO3 just stopped working on my laptop at 2am and I still very much needed to go to bed. So I went to bed thinking I'd be able to post it in the morning. Nope! Still down on the laptop. But on my way to my parents, I realized it was working on my phone. Cue the desperate scramble to edit and post on this stupid two-thumbed device. But I got it done! I was so proud of myself. And then I hit "post" just as we pulled into a parking garage and lost all service. The story never posted and that was my last chance until mother friggin' *now* to get it up today.

[You can insert that gif of Anger from Inside Out blowing his top here, because that's been my entire day]

So Apologies again for the lengthy, uninformed delay. I think, in this case, it's safe to say: Shit happens. Hopefully the chapter was worth the wait!

Secrets: Balancing what is canon in the show (eleven years of the same damn secrets and lies over and over and over again) and actually getting our boys to grow as characters while still keeping them in-character is a challenge, and one I wish I could skip. I'd rather Sam just started coming clean and Dean didn't have anger issues :P But those aren't our boys. So if you're rolling your eyes in annoyance at this, no worries, I'm aware of it and working on it! Just keeping our boys in character while I also grow them up in a quarter of the time the show did ;P

Next Up: Okay, I will not lie, I have *no* idea when the next chapter will be up. I haven't written in a month and a half, and while I have high hopes that will change this week, I can't make promises. We're definitely moving to a two-week posting schedule at a minimum, but I'll keep you updated from there the best I can.

In the meantime, thanks for sticking with me guys. I am sorry to make you wait longer.

Chapter 79: Season 2: Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Thank you for the continued support you guys are giving this story. Real Life is taking a chunk out of my soul right now, and writing this story and hearing how you all receive it is helping me get through it.

Future Update Status: Alright, I think I've found a way to let you all know when there's a delay without posting a note chapter. I've updated my profile on both sites with a 'current works' and 'current update stats' section. So if you haven't heard from me in two weeks, go check there. Unless I'm utterly incapacitated, I will update that section with an explanation and ETA of the next chapter.

Chapter Warnings: It has been far too long since we had a proper bout of brotherly angst! And nothing balances out Winchester Angst like a little bit of Andy Gallagher, back on his feet and not bleeding out as a crumpled pile on the ground. Good for him!

Actual Chapter Warnings: I'm kind of a meanie-head, if you hadn't already picked up on that, so there is a small cliffhanger at the end. Itty bitty one. But it's a nice long chapter to make up for it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 46

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Andy sat bolt upright in a cold sweat. He had no idea where he was or what was going on, but his heart was pounding like he'd just been running a marathon in the middle of a zombie apocalypse.

Zombies.

The psychic gasped, clutching at his chest as he doubled over his

outstretched legs, the memory of torn flesh and agony taking his breath away. Oh god. He grappled desperately with his own t-shirt, patting down his chest and ribs, searching for the pain that should be there, but wasn't.

He was…he was….fine. Remarkably fine. Andy grabbed at his shoulder, at the back of his arm, but he loosened bloody bandages to find clean, unmarred skin. Add to that a lack of wanting to eat brains or Reaver-fy the people around him (not that there were any…), the shirt he was wearing wasn't even sporting a bullet hole or jagged tear marks across his chest, and he was ridiculously, completely, absolutely *fine*.

Also, apparently, he was in a…saloon?

Okay, was he drunk and really high and had just…imagined the thing with the zombies, or something?

Andy blinked at the room around him. Round wooden tables, tipped over, broken chairs, an old-timey bar, a curved staircase disappearing up to a second floor and missing half its steps. It looked like the set of every western ever, except all dusty and completely, utterly abandoned. This…this was *not* where Andy had been a minute ago.

He climbed to his feet in more of a scramble than anything resembling calm observation, spinning in a circle. What… what the *hell*?!

He had been in- in- in the Zombie town with Sam and Dean. He'd been infected, and shot, and sliced, and frigging *carved up*, and pretty certain he was dying. No, *very* certain he was dying. What the hell happened to all that? Not that he was complaining or asking for any of it back. Nope, no, he was good in, uh… Frontier Land… he just would like some answers as to *why* the change.

This didn't exactly feel like a Winchester last-minute-save that he'd heard so much tell of and even witnessed a time or two himself. This…was *weird.* Really weird. And he'd spent the last three months hanging out with a man from the future, an angel, and a guy who saw dead people (or, okay, fine, they *all* saw dead people, Sam just saw 'em die *first*), so that was really saying something.

Andy stumbled out of the saloon through a pair of swinging shutter doors that squeaked awfully and oh-my-god he really was in Frontier Land. The philosopher-junkie didn't quite know what he'd been expecting – maybe to accidentally step off a movie set or find out that he'd been '*Punk'd*' or something – but stepping into bright sunlight

pouring down on an honest-to-god ghost town straight out of the Frontier was…well, it was… it was, uh…

Weird.

"Hello?" Andy called out as he spun in another circle, stumbling off the old, creaky wooden walkway and onto dry, cracked dirt littered with pine needles and dead leaves. The town didn't look that big, but it definitely looked empty. Andy was standing in what he'd guess was the center of it, an intersection of two roads that stretched about two blocks in each direction. Then there was just…nothing. Woods, from what he could see.

What the hell? Where *was* he? He was no botanist or geologist, but this didn't look like Oregon. At least, not that part he'd just been in. And hadn't it been night? Andy was pretty sure he'd passed out there, back in that classroom with a homicidal maniac with yellow eyes and Sam-

Andy's brain faltered, realizing for a second time but in a whole new way that he was very much alone.

"Sam?" Andy cupped his hands around his mouth and tried again, louder this time. As loud as he could go. "Sam!"

If Sam wasn't here…was he still with Azazel? Andy's hands started shaking and he shoved them in his jean pockets. It was cold here; way colder than Oregon had been. Andy pulled his hands back out almost immediately to rub at his arms as he noticed the frosty air for the first time. He was definitely further north. No clue *where* along that latitude they were talking, but definitely north. He wished he still had his jacket, blood-soaked as it had been. But they'd left it behind at the doc's office when he and Sam had run.

Andy shuddered, memories of those Croats pounding on the door, scrambling to get in, memories of their hands on him, holding him against those bars- The psychic pushed those thoughts back before they could turn into a full-blooded flashback, extra emphasis on the blood. He needed to focus. Survival first, panic and PTSD later. That sounded like a good plan.

Okay, so… He was alone in Frontier Land and…

"Stupid!" Andy suddenly cursed, frantically digging at his pants for his cell phone the second the realization hit him. He pulled out the small device, flipping it open and praying to absolutely no one but karma

and cosmic fate. The universe pretty much owed him one by now, he figured.

The screen lit up; it had a charge. Great first step, go Universe! Andy held the thing up, squinting in the sunlight, and his expression fell. No service. Yeah, well, screw you too, Cosmos.

With a devastated sigh (although, really, he hadn't been expecting much to start with), Andy flipped the phone shut and stuck it back in his pocket. Okay, well, at least that helped him formulate a plan. He needed to find someplace with service, which was definitely not going to be Frontier Land. The psychic spun in a calculative circle this time, eyeing his four directional options, then the sun still climbing towards noon.

"Well, I'm already freezing my butt off, so North is out." Andy turned on his heel, spinning one-eighty to face the opposite direction. "South it is! Mexico, here I come. Get your beaches and margaritas ready."

"You're going to *walk* to Mexico?"

Andy damn near tripped over his own feet and let out a staggered yelp as he scrambled to stay upright and then back the hell away from the new, petulant, female voice. It was a girl (duh, as if the part where it had been a female voice didn't tip him off), maybe Latina heritage, roughly his age, about the same height too, with light brown skin and dark hair standing on the wooden boardwalk of the intersection's southwest corner.

His first, immediately relieved thought was that she wasn't a ghost. Well, probably not, anyway. She had on a pair of black yoga pants and a loose, knitted tank top with two little tassle-y things dangling from the v-cut neckline. There was a light sweater tied around her waist, but Andy was busy staring at those dangling strings, bouncing with every small movement the girl made. He wondered if she had a cat. She looked like the type who'd have a cat. Why else would someone actually hand over money for a shirt that had bonafied cat toys hanging off of it unless they had a cat?

But he digressed.

The girl stood with hands on her hips, nothing but attitude in the downturn of her pouty lips, and an utter lack of interest in Andy as a human being who had a soul, feelings, and, oh yeah, was *freaking the hell out right now, thank you very much.*

"You're nowhere *near* Mexico. And I hate cats," she said in that same tone, her lips thinning in an obviously unimpressed manner. Andy just couldn't catch a break with women lately, could he? Either they were too busy being defensive about their first time hunting and almost dying, they were trying to kill him with his own clothing and magic powers, or they were slicing him up for zombie chow.

Or giving him crap for liking cats and wanting a warm beach and a Piña Colada with a little umbrella on top.

The train of thought ended where all his thoughts inevitably did: he missed *his* girl. He missed Tracy. A woman who actually liked him and enjoyed his company and quirky humor. Until she'd been murdered by his evil twin brother, that is.

Like all the thoughts before it, Andy shoved that one and the empty, hollow pain that came with it, far, far away. Unless there was a crossroads around here with a demon willing to deal *and* Andy was feeling morose and suicidal enough to make that deal (eh, it came and went), those thoughts did nothing but tank his soul so deep down in an ocean of depression that he might as well be down in Hell already.

"Uh…" Andy realized he was just staring at Ms. Nowhere-Near-Mexico and had been for several long, embarrassing moments. That sass was turning into suspicion and something a lot worse. Andy cleared his throat and opened his arms wide. "Look, a tour guide! That's great. You wouldn't happen to know where we are, would you?"

She eyed him up and down like a particularly unappealing bug in a specimen jar. "Not Mexico."

Andy sagged, dropping his arms and using the last of his energy to resist telling the only living thing he'd seen so far to piss off. Instead he looked around again, detrimentally hopeful that maybe a third living thing might exist that wasn't an obnoxious college sorority girl. Maybe he could hire them as a tour guide.

He'd take a raccoon at this point, seriously.

"Yeah, thanks, I'd figured that much out for myself," he answered instead, keeping the sarcasm to not-completely rude levels (just mostly-rude). "It's not Berkley either, though that's just an educated guess. I've never actually been."

The girl dropped her arms from her hips in alarm, all that attitude disappearing in a wave of mild fear. "How do you know where I'm

from?"

Andy nodded his head at the jacket tied around her waist, one arm reading *Cal Softball* along its length. "Your jacket. University of California Berkely, right? I looked into that place a little, back when I actually thought about going to college. I hear it's a nice campus."

In the end school hadn't been for him, but sometimes he did wonder where his life would have ended up instead.

She looked down at her waist and the jacket nodded just below her stomach. "Oh. Uh…it is."

And apparently that was all it took to kick Ms. Mexico off her throne of Bitch Supreme. She crossed her arms, body reading a lot more insecure than the strong stance she'd taken a minute ago. Andy was no expert of female body language (as Tracy had told him on several occasions aaaand oh, look, there went that thought, too, as far away from him as physically possible, bye, bye, now), but he was pretty sure she was embarrassed.

"Where are you from?" She hopped off the walkway and trudged a couple cautious feet forward in the dirt.

"Guthrie, Oklahoma," Andy answered casually. "But last night I was in Oregon."

"Oh, another West Coaster," the girl said, perking up a bit with a smile. Andy stared at her, not remotely understanding why that made her feel better.

"Not really," he shrugged, unsure what her deal was. He really didn't understand girls. Or most people, in general, really. He missed his van, man. "More of a nomad these days. Don't think it matters though; I doubt we're anywhere near the West Coast anymore."

Not if Andy had any sort of read on the trees around them. Again, he was no geographer, but this forest, the mostly flat land and lack of any mountainous features in the distance reminded him way more of home than it did of the West, at least what he'd seen of it so far. Not that that gave him any real clue as to where he was. There was a lot of the United States covered under 'not California, Oregon, or Washington.' Like…the entire rest of it. Well, okay, given how cold it was, he could probably knock out all the southern states too. Whoopie, only, like, thirty other possibilities left!

"Well, I've got a cell phone but no service," Andy continued when his companion fell silent. He wondered if their situation was settling in. She didn't ask how it could be possible, the both of them transported overnight to a ghost town in the middle of…uh…somewhere. "Maybe we can hike out of here, try to find a signal."

The girl shrugged, but didn't seem against the idea. She nodded her head down the road that went East, untying her Cal jacket and tugging it on. "There's more buildings that way. I woke up over there. Maybe we can find a road leading out?"

Andy spun on the heel of his shoe to stare down the innocuous street lined with more of the same old-timey buildings, all slowly succumbing to time and gravity. A road would be a lot nicer walking than struggling through the woods that seemed to surround their other three sides. Plus, if they made their way through town first, maybe Andy could find some supplies. Salt, at the very least, something with some iron in it if they were really lucky.

"Sure, worth a shot. I'm Andy by the way."

"Amanda."

Andy nodded. Not a bad start for waking up in the middle of nowhere with some girl who came on way too strong. Beside him, Amanda jogged a couple steps to catch up as he started down the wide dirt road in the direction she had indicated.

"Sorry," she muttered after a moment, and he blinked, turning clueless eyes her way. She offered a weak smile. "I come on kinda strong. Or, uh…so I've heard."

Andy just shrugged, appreciating that. "Everyone deals differently with waking up thousands of miles away completely alone in a ghost town probably filled with actual ghosts. So…yeah, you did okay in my book."

Her smile turned a little more genuine and the two walked in companionable silence on their search for a road away from that place.

"Wait…" Andy said in sudden realization, turning to her. Amanda withdrew, hunching in on herself like she was expecting something ugly from him. "Did you say you hate cats? No one *hates* cats; I mean, plenty of people don't *like* cats, but no one *hates* them. Are you allergic or something?"

-o-o-o-

Cold Oak was a deserted town deep in Black Hills National Forest on the western edge of South Dakota. It was about as far from Sioux Falls as it physically could be while still being in the same state. Despite the fact they wouldn't be crossing any state lines, it would still take them almost seven hours to get there. Something that weighed heavily on both Winchesters.

"It's not even on Google Maps," Sam muttered, staring at the small screen of his blackberry as he used two fingers to inch his way through the National Forest pixel by pixel, looking for any sort of roads or markings that could indicate the haunted town.

He'd heard of it, long before his brother came ten years back in time talking about a battle royale. It was one of the most haunted mining towns in all of North America. Rumor had it that the town was so infested by the things that went bump in the night it had been unlivable; the inhabitants all fled. Given it was in the middle of nowhere with no current population and a very low known death toll, no hunter had ever bothered to take it on. So it sat untouched, a literal ghost town in the South Dakota woods.

Until now. Yay for the Winchesters, yet again.

"Here," Dean said out of nowhere, letting go of the wheel with one hand to dig around in the back seat. Sam looked up from his map-scrolling in time for his brother to dump a small box in his lap. The contents inside rattled. Sam blinked down at the case of .45 caliber bullets as Dean put his hand back on the wheel. "Carve devil traps into those. I'm done being the underdog. We're not going into this shit unprepared again."

Sam stared at the box for a scant second before setting down his phone and digging through the bag at his feet for a switchblade sturdy enough to do the job. There were way better tools that would take less time and provide better results, but Sam didn't have any on hand, or a plug for the electric dremel he'd prefer to be using. And pulling over and finding one to get the job done was not an option.

Sam got to work carving the bullets, Dean warning him anytime the road was about to get uneven. They weren't perfect, but as Sam blew away the miniscule metal shavings to observe the first of many to come, he was fairly confident the trap would function. They'd carved seven of them originally, when confronting Crowley and Azazel the

first time. That was the magazine load of their standard ivory-gripped 1911A1 Colts that John Winchester had given each of the boys on their eighteenth birthday. Once they'd concluded their business with Crowley that night, no firing needed, they'd kept those bullets in a special clip in the Impala's trunk ever since.

Dean honestly hadn't thought to bring them to Rivergrove. There wasn't *supposed* to be demonic activity there, and especially not the whole of Hell's population on Earth. It had been a trap, pure and simple, and not at all the one Azazel had lined up the first time around. No, Hell had made a play to see where the Winchesters stood on the board. To see if they had an angel in their back pocket or just in Dean's chest. To gauge just how deep Dean's insider knowledge went. To get Sam back onto the demon blood he'd flushed from his system and since been able to avoid.

And they'd succeeded, on all fronts but one.

Dean glanced at his brother again from his peripheral vision. Sam had been morosely quiet, and it was beginning to gnaw at the older Winchester. With every bullet the kid completed he'd stop, knife in hand, and rub at his injured palm in a way Dean was uncomfortably familiar with. It was just like what he used to do when Death's wall had come down. When the kid had lost all grip of reality, Hell scars literally driving him insane. He'd rub and press and worry at a not-so-different injury anytime he saw Lucifer, using the pain to remind himself it wasn't real.

The man from the future knew Sam was worried about Andy. The kid had apparently been in really bad shape when Azazel disappeared him, bleeding out and on Death's door, and Sam couldn't say one way or another if he'd even be alive when they found him. But this quiet was something more than just that worry. Something…unnatural, with an air of something dark. Something sinister, just beneath the surface. Dean was uncomfortably familiar with that, too.

"I need to ask you something," the older Winchester announced suddenly, but from the way the silence immediately turned into tension thick enough to poke with a stick, Sam had been expecting it. Dean wrung his hands on Baby's wheel, listening to the comforting creak of well-loved leather and steeling himself for an ugly conversation. "And I need the truth. No judgement, no anger, like we talked about, alright?"

Green eyes glanced at his younger brother. Sam watched him in tense

silence for far too long, before the kid finally lowered his gaze and nodded.

"Did you drink it?"

It stung, being asked that yet again, though Sam knew there was good reason. Knew it had been coming. But a bitter part of him that still railed against being treated always like the *kid* brother, was angry that Dean wouldn't just believe him. Even if it was an omitted truth, what he'd said was still the truth. He hadn't drunk it.

"No," Sam answered, voice clipped, but his shoulders sagged with a weight of a burden he had no interest in carrying alone. He just hadn't wanted the burden of sharing it, either. "But in the end it didn't matter."

Dean's eyes shuttered closed for a brief moment, as long as he dared while actively driving. "The syringe?"

"I think so," Sam answered, though there was little doubt at this point. The needle mark was still sore and tender, red around the edges, but the surrounding muscles were taught with a strength Sam hadn't had before. Azazel had been right; he'd been weak, weaker than ever before. And now he wasn't.

Sam held his palm out, fingers stretched flat, switchblade balanced atop the bandage wrapped around damaged flesh. "My hand, too. When the jar broke."

"Damnit, Sammy." Dean hit Baby's wheel with a closed fist hard enough to make the entire steering column shake. "You can't- You can't *keep* this stuff from me!"

Despite his promise of no anger or judgement, he *was* angry. Furious. But not at Sam. Not really. Dean hit the steering wheel again, silently apologizing to Baby but needing the outlet. They couldn't afford to pull over so he could take his anger out on something more substantial and less loved. Andy needed them; they didn't have the time. Dean let out a frustrated noise and Sammy just kept quite beside him. That unnatural, tense silence.

"God damnit!" Dean yelled again, wringing his hands around Baby's leather hard enough to make the skin on the undersides of his fingers hurt. "I'm- Sorry, I know I said- *Fuck!* I'm not- I'm not angry with you, damnit, I'm just…"

"Angry," Sam supplied, like it was the easiest answer in the world. Two plus two. Dean realized that it was an easy answer for Sam, because he was angry too. He'd just always been so much better at turning it into something useful. "I get it, Dean."

"I promised you." The older Winchester's words dropped in timber, to the point where Sam almost didn't hear them. His eyes were locked straight ahead, like he couldn't even look at Sam, and the younger Winchester sighed as Guilty Dean reared his ugly head in the worst of ways. "I *promised* this wouldn't happen again."

"It was never a promise you could keep." Though it sounded harsh, it was forgiveness in the only way Sam could really offer. "Azazel was never going to let you."

Still wouldn't. Sam had only gotten a partial dose, and he knew the demon wouldn't stop until he took the rest. It scared him, knowing there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop it, in such a way that he was left numb to that fear, that inevitable truth.

"I need you to tell me next time. Sooner." It wasn't as demanding as his older brother usually got, nor as self-righteous and hypocritical. Sam appreciated the effort, despite the white-knuckled grip Dean had on the steering wheel that belied just how much anger he was holding back.

"What's the point?"

Sam knew he shouldn't say it, at least not like that, but he was tired. Tired, and just as angry.

"What? *What?!*" Dean's head whipped around hard enough to crack his neck, but he had other things taking priority at the moment. "The point is I need to know these things, Sammy!"

"What difference does it make, Dean?" Sam dropped the bullet he was working on – hadn't really been working on since Dean started this – and turned to his brother. "You can't change it."

Dean eyed him like he'd grown a second, then third head. "I need to know so I know if you're gonna-"

But the man from the future abruptly cut himself off, biting down on his own cheek to keep from saying too much.

"Say it," Sam said, at first soft, then firmer. "Say it, Dean. You need to

know if I'm gonna go dark side, so you can stop me!"

Dean's hands tightened on the leather far beyond what Baby was ever built to take. "Not what I was gonna say, Sammy."

"Yeah?" Sam let out a huff of laughter, but it was bitter and angry and dark. "Well, it might as well have been, because that's what you're going to have to do."

His brother was as tense as he'd ever seen him, but Sam knew it was because he was *right*.

"You're not gonna go dark side."

"Not now." The surly, petulant tone was hardly reassuring. Then again, Sam didn't mean it to be. "It's not enough. Not yet. But eventually it will be."

Because eventually, Azazel would corner him with another jar of blood and more, and the Winchesters would be all out of miracles and last minute saves.

"No, it won't, because you're not gonna drink anymore," Dean argued, the tension in his voice causing the words to practically vibrate. It was usually a warning that it was time to change topics, lest the older Winchester finally boil over. It was the last sign before impending ugliness.

Sam didn't care.

"Don't you get it, Dean? Yes, I will! Even if I don't drink it, I'm still going to end up with it inside me!" Sam held up his hand like weaponized truth, palm flat and cuts bandaged. Dean flinched, remembering a time when Sam's hand alone *was* a weapon. "We can't stop this. They're never going to stop, they're gonna get me hooked and there is *nothing* you or I can do to stop it! Whether it's Layla or Andy, or someone we haven't even met yet, Azazel can threaten anyone and I won't have a choice."

Sam's voice dropped as heavily as his hand, and he stared at it, laying atop the box of bullets in his lap. "I'll never have a choice. I need you to get your head around that."

Dean was silent and the quiet this time was an angry one, as only Dean Winchester could ever truly make it. His eyes stayed locked on the road, but his shoulders were slumped in a defeated way that Sam

always hated to see in his stalwart big brother. "What do you want from me, Sam? You want me to give up, throw in the towel?" He glanced over for a split second before refocusing on the windshield. "Cuz I can't do that."

Sam knew that. He knew it, and he didn't want that anyway.

"I want you to start thinking about containment instead of prevention, Dean." He sighed, raising his uninjured hand to pinch at his forehead and try to rub the developing headache away before it could get any worse. "We're always going to be two steps behind if we don't start thinking three steps ahead."

Beside him, Dean swallowed, having absolutely no idea how to do that. Damnit, he was from the friggin' *future*. He should be three steps ahead by the very nature of this nightmare. But he wasn't, and he didn't know why, or how to be again. And the only *containment* they'd ever tried had been locking Sam in the panic room. Lot'a good that did them. They'd almost killed him before Cas set him free to destroy the world.

Dean couldn't think about that right now. Any of it. He just…he couldn't. Not right now.

"Let's just…focus on finding Andy, alright?" They could worry about the rest of it after. One thing at a time.

In the passenger seat, Sam let out a world-weary sigh, eyes tracking out the side window at the passing landscape. With those words, Dean had once more set his mind to the step they were currently on, only illustrating just how much he'd missed or chosen to ignore Sam's point. The younger Winchester really didn't know how else to get his warning across before it was way too late. Part of him, a part that had grown bitter in the stubborn shadow of the Winchester name, didn't even know why he bothered.

-o-o-o-

"So what's Oklahoma like?"

Amanda trudged along behind Andy, swinging the iron skillet they'd found back and forth as she walked alongside him. It had been in the third building they'd ducked inside on their supply search. She'd picked it up, hefting it up and down to test its weight, and asked if that would work as one of those weapons he'd mentioned. You know, in case that 'wild animal' attacked them.

Honestly, she'd just stared at him when he'd said it. Long and hard and kind of like he was crazy. But there she was, finding a potential weapon, and beggars can't be choosers.

Andy took it, feeling the weight and balance of it. It was old, covered in a layer of dusty rust, and not particularly large, but it was heavy and probably solid iron, even if it wasn't pure. Yeah, this would definitely do, at least against any ghosts they might run into. He lifted it up, a batter's two handed grip wrapped around the short handle, and mimicked a swing.

Amanda backed off a step, the kind of uncertain concern in her eye that Andy had seen on many a girl on the bus, or walking home from school, or just standing outside the 7-Eleven having to deal with some asshole catcalling her. He knew that look, though he couldn't say he'd ever been the cause of it before.

The Jedi lowered the weapon with an apologetic grin and held it out to her instead, much to Amanda's surprise.

"You'll probably be better with it, being on an actual softball team and all," he said, feigning obliviousness at her relief. He didn't blame her; it was a lot easier being the one with something to swing rather than worrying about the other person you barely knew swinging at you.

She'd taken the skillet gingerly, but soon enough hefted it on her shoulder with a more enthusiastic expression, and they'd gotten back on their way, searching through the abandoned down.

Now, almost reaching the end of the current road they were on, Andy shrugged at her question. "Guthrie's a pretty small town, but not the smallest. I don't know, it was nice?"

He didn't like to think about it, about the life he'd had that he'd been forced to leave behind. About Tracy, which inevitably led him to think of *what* had forced him to flee, to join the Winchesters in wandering the country fighting *monsters* of all things.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Andy concluded, not noticing that Amanda had staggered to a stop several feet behind him and not resumed walking. Andy made it another half dozen feet before he glanced over his shoulder at her silence. He frowned at the girl, standing stalk still in the middle of the dirt road, eyeing him with that same '*oh god, please don't be crazy*' look back on her face. "You coming?"

"Um…I…" Yup, that worried look was definitely back, a hundred times over. That was the best word he could put to the wide eyes and stiff posture. Andy frowned even more, realizing she looked scared. A quick flash of panic hit him, thinking perhaps she'd seen something behind him. A ghost or maybe a-

"Hello! Is *anybody* here?"

A panicked voice shattered the otherwise calm around just the two of them and both kids jumped at the sudden disruption. Andy spun around in time to see a kid, lanky and tall, dressed in an old brown bomber jacket, and looking a step from the grave with unwashed, messy brown hair and circles under his eyes so dark in contrast to his pasty white skin it was a wonder if he'd slept in the last century. He was kind of stumbling on the wooden boardwalk that wrapped the corner building, and he had a wild look in his eye like a man who'd just woken up in the middle of a Frontier time ghost town, completely alone, thousands of miles from where he'd fallen asleep.

Andy could relate.

"Hey!" he called out, waving an arm over his head. Tall-dark-and-exhausted spotted them right away, going completely still as he realized he finally wasn't alone. Andy hoped the energetic wave would be enough to convey 'non-threat' status as he started towards the guy who definitely looked like he might be a threat. At least in that cliché, obviously-evil-villain-in-a-spy-movie sort of way. As he jogged towards the fellow who he most definitely hoped was not evil, Andy called over his shoulder to Amanda, "Hey, looks like we're not completely alone after all."

Mr. Disney-Channel-Movie-Villain faltered on the first few steps, clearly relieved to not be alone in this town but also realizing he was now alone with two other people he knew nothing about. But eventually he climbed off the wooden boardwalk and met Andy halfway. Amanda followed with a little more caution, whatever had scared her before not entirely forgotten but also not the focus of her attention any longer.

"Hey, man," Andy greeted with as friendly a smile as he could muster. "I'm Andy. You just wake up here?"

"Y-Yeah," the guy answered, obviously still shaken by the entire event and not too trusting of its most recent changes. "Uh, Scott. Scott Carey."

"Nice to meet you, Scott. This is Amanda," Andy introduced, gesturing behind him as the Berkley student hesitantly caught up to them. "We just ran into each other, like, ten minutes ago? We've been looking for any sorta supplies or tools we can use. We're gonna hike outa here."

"You…uh…how did you…we…get here?" Scott looked shakily between the two them, face a picture of near panic, even when Amanda gave him a little wave with her free hand. Personally, Scott was finding Andy's calm demeanor about the entire thing both comforting and the absolute opposite of comforting. Dr. Waxler would probably tell him that was a dissociative defense mechanism in response to his recurring distrust of people coming into his life.

He still wasn't sure about the new therapist.

"Not sure," Andy answered easily enough, his cheerful demeanor taking no hits in the light of…well, whatever this was. "But I think we should get outa here as soon as possible. Don't you?"

Further movement over Scott's shoulder caught Andy's attention, and the Jedi blinked at a fourth kid, mostly hidden behind the corner of the building Scott had just come from. The guy was watching them.

"Hey!" he called out again, making Scott jump, and he went for the same arm-over-his-head friendly wave, since it seemed to work so well the first time.

The fourth guy, a bulky kid with a broad-shouldered frame, dirty blonde hair, and suspicious, narrowed eyes, slowly stepped out from behind the building. He crossed his arms, staring at the three of them for a moment before finally coming to whatever decision he was contemplating and stalking towards them. Andy didn't hold it against the kid; he'd be pretty cautious of all this too if he hadn't spent the last three months traipsing the country with the Winchesters.

"Hey," Andy repeated yet again once the guy was close enough not to require shouting. "I'm Andy. This is Scott and Amanda. I take it you're new here too?"

"Hilarious," the other kid spoke with a scowl. Andy let it flow right off of him. Again, he'd be pretty grumpy if all of this was happening to him unprepared. Hell, he was just happy not to be bleeding to death anymore. "You know where we are, or are you just the Walmart greeter?"

Andy shrugged. "Nope. Just trying to get out of wherever this is. I've

got a cell, but no service. Figure we could try a little further down the road."

"There is no road," kid number four spat, arms still crossed, and a little more of Andy's forced calm and cheer chipped. "I've checked."

Andy didn't know why, but he didn't believe him. Still, calling out Mr. Grumpy Pants on the first day of class when they were *all* the new kid seemed in poor taste. Andy was pretty sure they'd do better making friends in this place than enemies.

"Alright, then…we'll hike through the woods." Andy turned to the other two, Scott who was slowly shying in on himself with every disparaging word Sir Grump-a-lots had to say, and Amanda who looked about ready to strike it out on her own and leave the behind the useless, bickering boys. Andy's frown slowly returned. If this town really was haunted (and, come on, look around. It was most definitely haunted), they'd have better luck sticking together. He spared the scowly guy another look. "What's your name?"

"Jonathon."

"Alright, well, Jonny," Andy said, giving him a light slap on the back in a second attempt at comradery, "we were thinking-"

"I said it's Jonathon," the guy snapped, immediately stepping away from Andy with something between defensiveness and aggression filling every line of his closed-off posture. "Are you deaf?"

Andy frowned but tried to shrug it off yet again. Some people didn't like being touched; water over the bridge and under the bridge and all that, right? "Sorry, Jonathon. We were looking for-"

"Supplies. Yeah, I heard you."

Andy let the awkward silence stretch, blinking at *Jonathon* who seemed utterly determined to be an ass.

"Alright then," Andy muttered again, finally letting some of his own annoyance bleed through. He turned away from the obnoxious guy, much preferring the company of Amanda and Scott, despite the fact that Scott was about half a second from a full freak out.

To be honest, inner Andy wasn't doing all that well himself, he just had more practice at burying the *oh-my-god-this-can't-be-happening-this-isn't-real-this-sort-of-thing-doesn't-actually-happen* gut reaction and panic.

About three months more experience.

And, he knew more about what was happening than any of his current compatriots. Andy might not know where they were or the name of this god-forsaken town, but it was certainly ringing all the wrong alarm bells. The young hunter was slowly but surely getting the feeling that waking up here of all places, magically *not* bleeding to death, when Azazel's ugly mug had been the last he thought he'd ever see, was a lot less of the miracle than it first felt like.

-o-o-o-

- Two Months Ago -

They'd been sitting in the Impala, Dean in the driver's seat, Andy in the front seat (for once!) while Sam ran into the diner to grab a late night snack (and pie. Dean always insisted on pie. He had a minor obsession, Andy was starting to realize after just a few weeks around the man). Andy hadn't been with the brothers for much more than a month now, but the red-eye drives through the night to the next hunt were becoming unsettlingly familiar. Sometimes, Andy wondered why he hadn't moved on yet. Find a nice corner of nowhere, stock up on weed and Hot Pockets, and smoke and feast till the end of the world. But then they'd face their next werewolf or ghost or *wendigo*, for Pete's sake, and Andy remembered that he absolutely did not want to be alone in this monster-infested worldat allorever again, please and thank you.

"Here."

Andy, lost in thoughts about the terrors of a world he'd never even known existed, glanced over at Dean's sharp voice. That was his trying-to-be-the-adult-in-the-car tone, something that never failed to amuse the likes of Andy Gallagher. Usually because Dean only summoned it in the middle of some of the most childish arguments Andy had ever heard. He'd never had brothers, but listening to Sam and Dean bicker about music choices, movies that weren't even from this century, and which of the bachelorettes was the hottest was, by and far, making up for twenty-three years of single child syndrome.

Dean was holding a gun out in the flat of his palm. Andy blinked at it.

"Uh…?"

The older Winchester leveled him with a look that clearly said *don't-make-me-rethink-this* and Andy took the weapon quickly. It was heavy

in his hand, heavier than he'd expected. Which seemed both profound and profoundly ridiculous. It was hardly the first gun he'd held this week alone.

"What's this for?" Andy asked, a little nervous. In no way ever did a good situation require one of the Winchester's to hand him a gun. The kid managed not to glance around the mostly empty diner parking lot in search of the newest threat, lurking in the dark.

"You wanted a gun," Dean answered like it was obvious. Andy's head whipped back around to stare at him.

He…had asked for a gun, on that first hunt in the graveyard, with the crazy witch controlling an even crazier civil war dude's ghost. Andy lost his robe that day and learned an important and vital lesson about capes. But he hadn't gotten a gun. And it took a good couple of hunts after that before Dean finally trusted him not to friendly-fire their asses into an early grave.

"Yeah…" Andy glanced down at the weapon. It was a standard fair handgun, nothing particularly special or unique about it. But still. He looked back up at the hunter. "Thought you and Sam said I didn't need one."

Dean shrugged. "That was when we didn't know you'd be sticking with us. But if you're gonna be a hunter, you need a gun."

Andy slid the magazine out, checking the bullets. They weren't silver, but he knew they had that amo, and he got the feeling Dean was offering him a lot more than just one gun and one magazine, here. He slid the magazine back into place with a click.

"Uh…thanks." It didn't sound like enough, but Andy wasn't sure what else to say.

"Look, there's something else too…" Dean's voice trailed off in full-on hesitation now, and he sighed. Andy sat up a little straighter as something small and tight and definitely one hundred percent worry knotted in his gut. Dean Winchester didn't *sigh.* Not un-ironically, at least. "Sam told you about the yellow-eyed demon, right?"

"Azazel? Yeah, he's, uh…he's mentioned him." Andy swallowed a little roughly, throat tightening up like hypovolemic shock was setting in. The kid looked down at the gun heavy in his hand, hand resting in his lap. The offer of a weapon was starting to take a distinctly unpleasant turn. It left him with a bad taste in his mouth.

"Did he tell you about the Battle Royale?"

Andy's head turned back to Dean, a slow blink giving the answer before his mouth ever formed it. Dean sighed again, staring blankly out the front window like he wished he'd never asked. Then he launched into it. Told Andy all about what Azazel had planned for his 'special kids'. And that sinking weight in Andy's gut got so, so much worse.

"So you keep that on you at all times," Dean said, nodding his head towards the gun in Andy's hands. "And if…if you wake up somewhere you don't know surrounded by other kids like you, you do *whatever* it takes to get out of there, you hear me? You defend yourself, no matter what that means, and then you run. Sam and I'll come for you."

Andy swallowing the Sahara desert that was now his mouth was damn audible in the car. He stared down at the weapon with dread, wishing that tossing it out the car window meant taking its promise of a bloody future with it.

"You…want me to kill those kids?"

"I want you to survive. Hell, shoot 'em in the kneecaps." Dean's cavalier words almost, *almost,* had Andy choking on his own saliva. If he'd had any saliva left, he probably would have. "Just know, not all of those kids have powers like you. Some of them have a lot worse."

"My powers don't even work on other 'special kids'," Andy grumbled, still staring down at that gun like it might bite him as surely as it would also save his life.

"Doesn't mean theirs won't work on you." Dean's voice was tight, a warning not to underestimate the situation if he found himself in it. Andy curled his fingers around the edge of the metal to disguise the way they trembled ever so slightly. "Sam ran into plenty of those kids that could take him out. And none of his powers ever worked on them."

Andy stared at his lap and the quiet that filled the car was dark and weighted. "It doesn't seem fair."

"No, it sure as hell doesn't, kid." Dean glanced over at him, then back to the diner where they could see Sam's beanstalk frame sitting at the counter, fidgeting awkwardly while he waited for their order. The younger Winchester glanced over his shoulder at them and Dean nodded, though he doubted the kid could really see him through the

reflections off the diner window. "Which is why you do whatever it takes. You hear me?"

Andy stared at the reflective curve of the gun's grip. He wrapped his hand around it, feeling the metal start to warm. "Yeah. I hear you."

The resident Jedi leaned forward to tuck the weapon into his waistband, as he'd seen the Winchesters – and every TV character ever – do a million times before. They'd later get him a hip holster, considering the gun slipped free the first time he climbed out of the car, fell down the length of his pants and out of his ankle while he did a 'shit, that's cold!' wiggle dance to get it free.

Thank Christ he'd given it to the kid with the safety on, the older Winchester had later muttered under his breath as he watched the jiggle dance and resisted burying his face in his palm.

-o-o-o-

- Now -

Memory fresh in his mind, Andy stared at the three other kids he had so far found in this creepy ghost town. He regarded each in turn, wondering what powers they might possess. Amanda's was fairly obvious in retrospect, but Scott and Johnathon were still mysteries. Not that the Extra-From-Dawn-Of-The-Dead or Mr. Excuse-Me-It's-Jon*athon* hadn't already had Andy at least on edge, but now he was eyeing them each a little more nervously.

He wished he'd asked Dean to go into a little more detail about those kids that Sam had run into. He also wish he still had that gun.

But he didn't and there was no use dwelling on it.

So, time for plan B. Okay. Yes. Sure. Yes. This was- this was fine. They were fine. All fine. Making friends, even. There was no need for them to start killing each other.

"What?" Amanda practically screeched, breaking the otherwise low thrum of conversation the three had awkwardly struck up as Andy's mind went other places.

"What what?" Andy spun to face Amanda in panic, still expecting a ghost attack at any moment, but he just ended up blinking at the girl as absolutely nothing else happened. Then he realized what he'd just been thinking.

Gah!

Andy raised his hands, fingers spread in little frantic waves. "It's not what it sounds like-"

"What are you talking about?" Scott hedged a little nervously, body already turned partially away from them like he could shield himself from all this if he just turned around, stuck his fingers in his ears, and sang loud enough until he couldn't hear them anymore. That, or run for it. Andy would put his money on the running.

"What *what* sounds like?" Jonathon snapped, his posture getting, if anything, even stiffer. The dude was the literal representation of a live wire.

Oh, god, Andy hoped that wasn't his power.

"What are you talking about?" Amanda shrieked and Andy winced.

"No one's talking about anything!" Scott half yelled, getting a tad hysterical himself. He threw his hands in Andy's general direction. "He didn't say anything!"

Andy waved at Amanda with one hand, the other still raised placatingly. "She can read minds, okay, and my thoughts were, uh, not really pleasant a second ago."

"You said we were all going to start killing each other!" Amanda yelled, the freak-out currently over-ruling her surprise at Andy not only aware of her ability, but also seemingly okay with it. Like it was normal. But, really, there were more pressing things to be panicking about, so the relief of not being found a freak was taking a back seat at the moment.

Jonathon's tension-rigid body physically moved him with a jolt, fists curling where they rested against his arms, but Andy didn't notice. He was busy waving his hands like a drowning man at the almost-panicking college girl.

"No, *no*," he insisted, well, insistently. "I said there was no reason for us to do that."

"Why would we do that to start with?"

Okay, touché, college girl.

"What are you two talking about, no one said anything!" Poor Scott really did sound on the brink of a mental breakdown. He kept edging further and further from them, one little shuffled heel back at a time. He was hugging himself like the comfort might actually help and Andy spared him a sympathetic, apologetic glance.

"What do you mean, she reads minds?" Jonathon spoke, voice icy in a way that made Amanda flinch. Andy didn't like it.

"We all have powers," he offered as some sort of cool down. Lord knew they needed a bit of calm right now. He turned to each of them, hands still up but less frantic now as he went from instigator to mediator. Andy wished he'd started with the mediator. "I can make people do anything I want just by telling them to. I'm pretty sure Amanda reads minds, considering she told me she hates cats, and I definitely didn't say that shirt looks like a glorified cat toy. Well, at least, not out loud."

Scott just stared at them, shoulders hunched up around his ears. "You're insane. You're all insane!"

Amanda crossed her arms defensively over her chest, shoulders pulled back and attitude slapped back in place like a shield. It was definitely a defense mechanism to hide how scared she was, Andy realized.

"You don't have powers?" His question back at Scott silenced him immediately. The poor kid shriveled up like a raisin, mouth pinched so tight it practically puckered. Andy almost felt bad about it. He was clearly pretty troubled, and Andy wondered what his powers were that he was so damn nervous to even admit he had them.

Of course, maybe he was just nervous to be around a mind reader and a Jedi. That was plenty of cause.

"They didn't start about a year ago?" Andy continued, taking a more gentle tone as he tried to get back into the mediator feel. He'd never been great at playing referee. "When you turned twenty-three, right? And your mom, she probably died in a house fire when you were super young?"

Scott dropped his arms, eyes wide, and Andy took it as a victory that his shoulders didn't stay up around his ears. "How did you know that?"

At the same time, friggin' *Jonathon* just scoffed loudly. "My mother never died in any fire."

"My mom lives in Phoenix," Amanda said in the silence that followed, voice hesitant with new concern as she glanced between the four of them. "Is she- she's alright, right? I just talked to her yesterday-"

"She's fine," Andy interrupted, trying hard not to get frustrated with how difficult this was proving to be. Like herding cats. All he wanted to do was get them to listen to him, agree they shouldn't start killing each other, and *get the hell out of here.* Was that really *so* much to ask? "Some of us with powers, our moms died in a house fire when we were six months old. Mine was my adopted mom. Never, uh…never met my biological mother."

Andy's offered smile, pitying as it was, completely faltered at the memory of his own home and family. A mother he'd never met, murdered by a brother he'd known for all of ten minutes before he'd had to kill him.

He practically felt more than saw Amanda go still again, and shook his head to physically shake his mind from thoughts she didn't deserve to be burdened with. So instead he turned to Jonathon, trying to give the utter jerk a little leeway. Everyone reacted to waking up in the middle of a ghost town differently, right?

"It sounds like it didn't happen that way for everyone. But we're all still connected."

And he'd put money on Scott Carey having powers too, even if the poor kid didn't want to own up to them.

Jonathon crossed his arms once more. "By *what*."

"The yellow-eyed man."

This dick of a kid had never, for a second, been relaxed since joining their little group, but any sort of tension they'd eased out of him over the last three and a half minutes snapped back into his spine like one of those bracelets from the nineties. Andy could practically hear the snap, and he certainly saw the jerk.

Hell, the kid twitched so hard at the exact same time Andy blinked, it almost looked like his whole body flickered, kinda like ghosts did. But Andy had made physical contact with the kid when he slapped him on the back, so he knew he wasn't a ghost. Just an optical illusion and weird timing.

"No way," Scott whispered on a low, trembling exhale. Distracted,

Andy turned to him, not entirely surprised but also not having expected their fourth and most skittish member out of all of them to have been visited by Azazel.

"You've seen him?" The Jedi asked, trying to keep the words, thick in his throat, gentle and encouraging and not at all the shaking mess of trembling terror they really were. Because Andy really, *really* never wanted to see that messed-up, creep of a dude ever again. His chest ached just at the thought, and he found himself absently patting his t-shirt down, once more expecting blood and torn flesh. When he found nothing, he tried to shake off the fear and focus on Scott, and getting his new friends out of Cold Oak. "Let me guess. Bad dreams?"

Scott looked truly shaken, but he never took his eyes off Andy. He folded his arms around himself again, fingers fidgeting with the cuffs of his jacket self-consciously. "He…he tells me to hurt things. Hurt people. But I don't want to!"

He'd killed his neighbor's cat. He'd electrocuted Mr. Tinkles just by touching him. Fried his insides like a hamburger.

Scott started to shake.

He'd buried him. Dug a hole in Mrs. Davidson's garden, in the back where she wouldn't notice, and buried her cat there. He'd never meant to hurt anyone or anything. He'd just…the yellow eyed man had told him he had to test it. Told him he'd never know if he didn't *try*.

Scott had thrown up all over Mrs. Davidson's geraniums.

"That's great!" Andy exclaimed, completely ignorant to the poor, shaking kid's internal trauma. His smile brightened, gaze sliding over to Amanda. "See, I told you, we don't *have* to start killing each other."

"Again, why *would* we?" she barked back, voice still several pitches too high and hand wrapped very possessively around the handle of her skillet.

"What do you mean by that?" Jonathon talked over her, eyes locked on Andy in a way that made the Jedi feel kind of like a frog pinned to an autopsy tray. His eyes snapped from Andy to Amanda, causing the girl's breath to hitch in a little gasp. She clearly didn't think much of *Jonathon* either. "Can you read all our minds?"

Rude, Andy thought, not particularly liking the way he'd said it like an accusation. It wasn't like it was Amanda's fault. These powers

weren't *any* of their faults. None of them had asked for this.

"N-No," she replied, body language bouncing between faked confidence and cowering away. "I…um…. You guys are all…muffled." Her gaze dropped, and she unconsciously picked at a fleck of rust on the iron pan. "Usually, it's so loud. I can't block it out. I-I don't even go out anymore. I can't even go to class. Everyone, all the thoughts, it's just so *loud*." Amanda's breath hitched again, but with a deep breath she physically gathered herself back together. "With you guys, I don't know, it's just…muffled. I can only hear your thoughts if I focus really hard on you. Like…I was doing with Andy."

She spared him a sheepish smile, but he just shrugged. Not like he could take offense to her scanning his thoughts to make sure he wasn't a murdering psychopath who'd dragged her here himself. Dude, if his powers actually worked on them, he'd have done the same thing and demanded she tell him who she was and how she – and he – had gotten there. If he hadn't already known why they were there, that is.

Across from them, Jonathon seemed to relax a little more.

"So what's your power?" Andy asked Scott, going for another bright smile as he tried to pull Scott out of his nervous shell and maybe lower the tension between everyone to more a reasonable level.

"Did the yellow-eyed man tell you anything, then?" Jonathon interrupted his attempts once again, and it took everything Andy had in him not to glare at the asshole. He turned to him, sucking on the inside of his cheek in a ten count that he repeated in German just because he could. It didn't do much to help.

He really wanted to punch this kid. If his powers just worked on other special kids, he'd have already told the jerk to give himself the most painful wedgie physically possible. Andy had used that one before; there was a lot of grey area in 'physically possible' it turned out.

"Not much," he answered slowly instead, lifting his shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. He was seriously starting to think they'd be better letting *Jonathon* go on his way. The three of them could find a way out without him, Andy was more than sure of that. "I found a way to block him out. But I know he's a demon and he's got plans for us."

"A *demon*?" Scott echoed, that hint of '*you're all insane'* back in his voice as he glanced between Amanda and Jonathon for backup.

"He wants us to fight to the death, and we're not the only ones. There's

a bunch of us." Andy met each of their worried, hesitant, and suspicious gazes in turn. He knew what he was saying probably sounded crazy, but it was the truth. And he really needed them to see that *before* shit started hitting the fan. "But we don't have to do it. We don't have to play his game. If we work together, we can all get out of here. Alive."

With speech imparted on his fellow man (and woman), Andy turned to look down the last thoroughfare they'd yet to check. There could still be a road out of this place, since he didn't feel much like taking Jonathon at his word. They should start with that. Maybe a little travel would help improve the mood and build a little group trust. Or, at a minimum, comradery. And, if not, they could at least put some distance between them and this town while they argued.

It occurred to Andy far too late that he shouldn't have turned his back on them.

There was a presence behind him that he felt more than saw. It was way too close, way too quickly, but Andy didn't think enough about it, not in time. He never saw the hit coming. The side of his head exploded in pain, and his vision whited out at the same time his body hit the dirt.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Special thanks to superlc529 for mentioning devil-trapped bullets in a review and therefore reminding me those are a thing! Despite having already used them once in this story, I totally let their existence fall through the cracks. With a beast this size, it definitely happens at times, so please keep flagging things you see that are either missing, wrong, or possibilities you can't tell if I've just forgotten or actually have a good reason for not using XD

Special Kids: If you are busy trying to figure out who's who and which episode they're from, Jonathon and Amanda are cobbled together OCs for the sake of originality (since we only met a handful of special kids on the show), but Scott Carey, his therapist, and Mr. Tinkles the cat are actually from the show :D

Reviews: I know the longer wait between chapters is rough, but I would really appreciate all the encouragement and good feels you guys can send my way. I am utterly struggling in real life right now – I think I'm fast approaching the time for a major change and that scares the crap outta me – so any of the good feels you

can send my way would be amazing right now.

Up Next: What can I say about the next chapter…hmm, I'll keep it succinct: Andy does not have a good time in Cold Oak. Yes. Yes, that about sums it up.

I am not sure if the next chapter will be up in one week or two, but I have been successfully stockpiling chapters once more, which bodes well for future updates. I'll try to keep you guys in the loop on that as we go. For now, I really appreciate your patience and for sticking with me through all the delays and tough times.

Chapter 80: Season 2: Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Short chapter this time, I'm afraid. Also, we are back on cliffhanger row for a bit, and while we remain in that most unpleasant of places I will resume weekly posts so as not to torture you all unduly.

Chapter Warnings: Andy does not have a good time in Cold Oak. I have no idea where this persistent need to hurt the poor boy came from, but it's apparently a thing. Um, sorry, kid.

Actual Chapter Warnings: We get a bit violent in this one, folks. There's a decent stretch of gore and quite a bit of blood, so please proceed with caution if you are squeamish. There is also brief mention (but absolutely no description) of animal cruelty. I probably should have warned about that last chapter, too, huh? Though, to be fair, that one was a direct quote from the show…

Anyway, in short, I'm a cruel, cruel author, so go forth prepared!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 47

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Jonathon Bailey was twenty-three years old, had discovered he had powers almost a year ago, and had been dreaming of a yellow-eyed man for six of those eleven and half months. He'd killed his first animal two months into the yellow-eyed man's lessons, his first domestic pet not long after that, and any more he could get his hands on in the weeks since.

But this would be his first human kill.

"Heya there, kiddo."

Jonathon sat up with a gasp, chest heaving for air he didn't need. That's how these dreams always started. Like his body knew he

shouldn't be there. Jonathon ignored his fight or flight instinct, viciously forcing it down and focusing instead on calming his raging heart and desperate lungs. Yes, the yellow-eyed man was certainly a threat worthy of his body's automatic response. Jonathon wasn't an idiot; the man definitely wanted something from him and until he found out what that was, he would remain on his guard. But for now, the yellow-eyed man was a mentor of sorts, and he'd promised to get Jonathon out of a worthless home existence that was wasting his potential and holding him back.

The yellow-eyed man crouched down beside him. Jonathon was sitting upright in the middle of a dirt road, which ran through what looked like a very old town. Nowhere he'd dreamt of before. Jonathon could see the older man from his side vision, but didn't turn towards him. Not yet. Not until he was back in control. Jonathon was all about control.

"Welcome to Cold Oak," the yellow-eyed man said with a toothy grin. Jonathon imagined that smile unsettled most people, but Jonathon wasn't most people.

"Why are we here?" the human asked once he'd gotten his breathing back to an acceptable rate and his voice came out close to a normal timber. He chanced a glance around at the old Frontier style town in the middle of a late-fall, early-winter forest. Certainly not southeastern Florida where Jonathon begrudgingly lived with his ailing grandmother and deadbeat dad who, he had hoped, would be his first human kill.

"When you wake up, you're gonna be here for real, kid."

That didn't answer his question, but the yellow-eyed man had a habit of that. He kept control of the conversation entirely in his court. It infuriated Jonathon to no end, but he did not let it show.

"And?" Jonathon ignored the questions he wanted to ask: how, why, and fucking where? They were irrelevant when talking with this figment in his mind. Or, whatever a person who showed up in your dreams but was likely real elsewhere was properly called. Jonathon didn't know or particularly care about vernacular.

"You won't be alone."

The human male straightened, finally turning to look at this mental mentor of his. So, this was it. This is what the yellow-eyed man had been training him up for. He'd said there would be challenges ahead,

something he'd have to take down that was a lot bigger than his ex-girlfriend's family wiener dog.

"Will Sam Winchester be there?" he asked reflexively. It was the only name this man had given him, weeks ago, now. A battle was coming, and Sam Winchester was the one to get.

"Not yet, but don't worry, he will be soon enough."

Jonathon rolled onto his side and got his feet beneath him. He dusted the dirt from his khakis – not what he'd gone to bed wearing last night – and looked around the old ghost town. "Are there weapons here?"

"Wouldn't be much of a challenge if there was, tiger," Yellow Eyes answered with a wicked grin, and Jonathon let the implication roll off of him in waves. He was confident in his ability. He'd been working up to this. He could do it. He would do it.

"Anything else you want to tell me?"

The yellow-eyed man appraised his cold confidence for a long moment – a life time – before he started smiling again. "Only one of you gets out. But like I promised, you'll be rewarded. Anything you want, kiddo. If you're the one to survive, of course."

And then he was gone, and Jonathon was sitting up for real, lungs heaving for air they actually did need, in the middle of a road running through an abandoned mining town.

-o-o-o-

'Which one do I kill first?'

Jonathon weighed his choices carefully, observing each of this three potential victims in turn. The dark-haired male – Scott? – was clearly no threat. He looked ready to piss his own pants at the next stiff breeze. Jonathon could take care of him easy. The girl was more of a problem. Her jacket suggested an athlete's musculature and reflexes. Speed, if nothing else. Plus, she'd managed a meager form of protection in that iron skillet, clutched in a white-knuckled grip at her side as she shrieked and wailed away at the last kid. That one – Andy, was it? – didn't seem to be much of a threat either. Average size for a twenty-three year old man, with barely a muscle on him. Jonathon could take him one handed. He wouldn't be much to handle.

Of course, everything went out the window when the kid started

talking about abilities.

Jonathon felt the first flickers of panic since he'd woken up. It had not occurred to him the others would also be able to do things. Careful to keep it off his face, the twenty-three year old sneered internally. How convenient for Yellow Eyes to leave out that detail. Still, it changed nothing in the long run. The outcome of this would still be the same and Jonathon was determined to come out on top.

Hearing he was among a potential mind-reader was of immediate concern, but the idiot of a girl was overly trusting. She confessed right away that she was too weak to read more than one person at a time. Which shifted her from top of his list to second, so long as she kept her focus on Andy and off of him. Which left his crosshairs open for the kid playing at leader and trying to take control of the situation. A person who could make people do anything he wanted with just his voice would have to go immediately, before he tried to use that power on Jonathon.

Especially since the kid knew about the yellow-eyed man. If he'd been getting training in his dreams as well, then he was the biggest threat, by far. And while he didn't seem to want anything to do with the violence Yellow Eyes demanded, he could easily be lying to them, keeping them off their guard so he could strike first.

Well, not Jonathon. He wasn't going to give this kid time to trick him. And if it wasn't a trick, well, then this would-be leader was a pushover. And Jonathon wasn't.

"I know he's a demon," the pushover was saying, much to the other kids' shock and disbelief, "and he's got plans for us."

Covertly, Jonathon patted down his pants, ignoring the mindless and useless chatter happening around him for the time being. He checked his front and back pockets, then more cautiously the cargo folds on his right side so as not to draw attention to himself. He might not have gone to sleep wearing them, but if they were his pants then his pocket knife should still be in there.

Yes, there it was!

Jonathon felt the reassuring weight of his SB440M tactical blade hanging in his pocket, the bulky shape of it a familiar comfort beneath his fingers. He and that knife had been through quite a lot together the last few months. Still exercising caution, Jonathon slipped his fingers into the slit of fabric and withdrew the knife, transferring it to

his front pocket so it was out of sight but easier to reach quickly.

He would take the kid out before he could speak. Target the throat. Getting in close wouldn't be a problem, it was Jonathon's specialty. But the actual kill itself…

"If we work together, we can all get out of here. Alive."

Well, that was as apropos a cue as Jonathon was ever going to get. His fingers wrapping securely around his switchblade, he focused both his physical and his mental eyes on his victim. Then, with intense concentration and steeled nerves, Jonathon disappeared.

-o-o-o-

"I know he's a demon, and he's got plans for us."

Amanda Figuerro wanted to trust Andy. She did. There was something charming about his carefree demeanor, even in the middle of a nowhere ghost town, having woken up with no clue how or why they were there. The problem was, she was having a very difficult time coming to terms with all that herself, and it was hard to trust someone who took it so easily in stride.

Did he know something? Was he somehow a part of it? Was he just *crazy*?

That's why she'd worked so hard to hear his thoughts, something that had shocked her when she'd first woken up in the small town. Amanda assumed she was alone, because she'd heard nothing but silence. Even locked in her bedroom in the back of her house in a fairly suburban part of Berkley, she still *heard* everything. A passing pedestrian walking their dog, reminding themselves to replace the poop-bag roll when they got home. A car passing by, the radio loud enough she could hear it through the walls, but worse, the man singing along with it. Even in his head, he was *terrible.* Their backyard neighbor who was nervous for a date coming over that night, and spent more than three hours picking out an outfit. She was very concerned about the size of her boobs, or what she perceived as a lack-there-of.

She'd spent all of that time over thinking most of it. Given what Amanda had been stuck hearing from *both* of them for *hours* into the night, the date had gone just fine. Although the guy had, repeatedly, thought about how much better it would be if the chick had bigger boobs.

Amanda had wanted to take a drill to her skull that night. She'd probably have taken it to the dude's skull, if she could have managed to leave her room, let alone her house. Because that, all of that, had just been inside her home, locked away as much as she could be because she could no longer handle being out among others. It was so loud, and people were so terrible, and there was nothing that could block it out. Despite several different friends, family members, and even a shrink trying to convince her, worryingly, that she might be having some form of breakdown, Amanda knew she wasn't crazy. She just knew. But, in so many ways, it didn't matter, because she was still going crazy.

But here, waking up in an old ghost town she didn't recognize in a State she was pretty sure wasn't California, Amanda had almost stumbled straight onto the kid without hearing a thing first. And once she realized Andy was there, she could hear a kind of muffled chatter, like being underwater and hearing people talking above the surface. It wasn't until she'd really focused on him, harder than she'd ever focused on anything before, that could she hear his thoughts more clearly.

Now, almost an hour later, she was starting to get one hell of a headache from it, though. But, considering Amanda had no idea where she was and he had been the only other person around, it was a worthy sacrifice.

Amanda wanted to trust him, and there wasn't really anything in Andy's mind that told her she shouldn't, other than that he was *crazy* because he believed in monsters and demons and people with yellow eyes. But, then again, she could hear people's brains and they were both in a ghost town in, she was going to guess, Nebraska. So what was crazy, really, anyway?

"If we work together, we can all get out of here. Alive."

She really wanted to trust him. She did. Andy had a happy-go-lucky calmness about him that she could really, really use right now. They all could, she figured, given how terrified and uncertain Scott seemed as he stood beside her. Amanda had actually been a pretty trusting person before her twenty-third birthday, when she'd suddenly started hearing the thoughts of her friends and family and complete strangers. It had not taken long at all to learn that she was far too trusting and so very, very many people were not trustworthy.

But maybe this was a good time to try again. It wasn't like there was a

great deal of other options available.

Andy turned his back on them, looking down the only road he and Amanda hadn't searched before running into Scott and Jonathon. And then something happened. If someone asked about it later, Amanda might not have even been able to explain it. It felt like she'd blinked and lost time. One second Jonathon was on the other side of Andy from her, and the next thing she knew…

Andy hit the ground *hard*, his body suddenly boneless as Jonathon blinked into existence right behind him, swinging his arm up and slamming a fist into Andy's temple. Amanda screamed, Scott scrambled backwards, and Jonathon was on Andy in another blink. He straddled the injured kid, opening his fist to reveal a switchblade, which he flipped open with a flick of his wrist and a metal click.

They were all going to fight each other to the death.

Amanda didn't know why she thought it, why she remembered Andy's words, so loudly in her head. The words that had rooted her, frozen, to the spot in terror she didn't understand and hadn't wanted to believe.

They were all going to have to kill each other to survive.

Amanda started shaking. Andy kicked his legs, pinned beneath the larger boy, and swung his arms but his movements were disoriented, his thoughts clouded with pain. Jonathon grabbed a fistful of Andy's hair, the kid crying out as his head was ripped back, throat exposed, and it was suddenly terribly, horribly obvious what was about to happen.

'Oh my god, oh my god, he's going to slit my throat!' Andy thought, at about the same time Amanda thought it too.

She slammed her eyes shut against the cry that was so much louder than any sound Andy made out loud. He was struggling for all that he was worth, she could hear them rolling on the ground – she could *hear* him in her head – and the sounds she couldn't block out with her hands over her ears or her eyelids slammed shut were so much worse.

'Stop, damnit, you don't have to do this! My powers don't work on you, you asshat!'

"Stop it!" Amanda suddenly found her voice, realizing in tandem with

Andy just why Jonathon was doing this. Her eyes snapped back open in horror. "Stop, his powers don't work on us!"

But it was too late, and far too little. Jonathon didn't stop, didn't even act like her heard her, and she knew, just from Andy's earlier thoughts about them all potentially killing each other, that he probably wouldn't even if her words had made it through.

While Amanda had stood there trying to block them out and Scott was useless by her side, too scared to run, too scared to do anything, the two boys had clearly rolled in their struggle. But Jonathon still had Andy pinned, now sitting on his chest as the smaller man kicked out uselessly beneath him. His hands were wrapped around Andy's throat, open knife still in his fist. Andy was turning red, sputtering and struggling to speak through the punishing grip. He was gawping like a fish on land, and the sight was almost too much to bare.

Scott was frozen beside her, clutching at his head. Amanda didn't feel frozen. She felt way, way too aware of absolutely everything that was happening. That was about to happen. But she couldn't move.

Jonathon pulled one hand away to position the knife under Andy's chin, having to bat away the kid's hands as he tried to stop him, slicing open Andy's palms and the pads of his fingers and a good stretch of his wrist as he fought off his own death.

The skillet was heavy in Amanda's hand and her fingers tightened around it with sudden realization. She wasn't frozen. She wasn't, and someone had to do *something* to stop Jonathon. Amanda surged forward before she could think about it, raising the iron pan in two hands – the sure and firm grip of a batter – and swung.

-o-o-o-

'Oh my god, he's going to slit my throat!'

Andy struggled for all that he was worth as his hair was yanked back in a vicious grip, neck exposed and the intent of his attacker perfectly clear. He kicked and twisted, trying to get his legs under him, to buck this psycho the hell off him. The fight spared him precious seconds of not-bleeding-to-death-yet-again, as Jonathon lost his balance and his grip. Andy threw him off his back and scrambled onto his hands and knees. But the blow to his head hadn't been a joke, and he teetered to the side, hands shuffling in dirt and dried leaves.

Jonathon got to his knees far faster and launched himself at Andy

again, taking the two of them back to the ground. The murderous lunatic managed to wrap his legs around Andy once more, pinning him to the ground and sitting, heavy and obnoxious, on Andy's chest.

"St-"

Hands curled around his throat with the kind of desperate speed that suggested a life or death struggle. Which was just plain ridiculous. *Andy* was the one in a life or death situation, here, not this crazy person! But even as Jonathon's fingers dug in hard enough that Andy could feel his neck bruising under the pressure and knew he'd have a crushed wind pipe if he didn't get out of this quickly, the Jedi realized what *exactly* was happening.

Jonathon thought his powers were a threat. He was keeping him from talking!

Andy struggled to speak through the grip, to tell him just how absurd and useless an idea that was, but nothing made it past the punishing hold. His neck hurt in a way he couldn't even describe, something hard but breakable inside his throat starting to creak beneath the pressure, soon to give, and he knew he'd be lucky if he walked away from this without permanent damage at this point. Andy scrabbled for Jonathon's hands, his fingers, his wrists, slapping and clawing at his forearms, internally reeling in pain as he caught himself on the knife still in the kid's hands, and yanked his now-bleeding arm away. But he couldn't stop trying. What would a nick to the wrist or a missing finger matter if he was *dead*? Andy swung his arm up to try and land a hit to the man towering above him, but Jonathon was built like a brick shithouse, and nothing was lessening the insane grip.

'It doesn't seem fair,' he remembered telling Dean, way back when in the safety of the Impala with that gun sitting in his lap and a distant future of bloodshed too unbelievable to imagine.

'No, it sure as hell doesn't, kid.'

Good god, he was going to die. Friggin' *again.*

'My powers don't even work on you, you asshat!' he screamed and raved and ranted internally at that unfairness, kicking his legs desperately. But the weight on his chest remained, and his vision started to dot black and white from oxygen deprivation. He heard Amanda screaming, but it was muffled and far away.

Amanda. She and Scott needed to run. This psycho would surely turn

on them as soon as he was done murderizing Andy.

Then the chilling pressure of cold metal was back at his neck, just beneath his jawline. Jonathon still had the knife, and he'd released one hand from Andy's neck in order to finish him off. Andy grabbed at that hand, but a slash to his palm and another catching two of his fingers weakened his body's resolve to fight, and worse, any grip he might have had even as he forced that fight to keep going.

'*Top of the neck*,' Andy thought in response to that cold metal touch, really far too rational for everything else his body was screaming. '*That's where the larynx is.*'

The paranoid son of a bitch really was going after his voice, and was gonna friggin' kill him to do it.

Burning pain ripped across his entire neck and Andy suddenly found himself with a whole new problem. Liquid, thick and hot, flooded his throat, clogging his airway, and he was choking on his own blood. The weight from his chest vanished in an instant and Andy scrambled to roll over, desperately thinking he had to make gravity a friend and not his death sentence. He clutched at his neck as blood spilled from beneath his hand in a terrifying tidal wave of dark, deep red. It splattered on the dusty ground beneath him and he choked and gasped and spat out gobs of it.

He could still breathe. Andy couldn't quite wrap his head around the fact that, despite the blood dropping out of him like Niagra friggin' Falls, and the thick, sticky clogging in his throat that tried to choke him, he was still breathing. Well, mostly. The panicky, shallow, hyperventilating way his lungs burned and his brain screamed in terror wasn't great, but his vision wasn't spotted anymore, and he was *actually* getting oxygen to his brain.

His airway must still be partially clear.

That, and the fact that he wasn't spurting blood six and a half feet away in a fountain of red the likes of which Quentin Tarantino would be creepily inspired by, meant Jonathon hadn't hit his carotid artery. Of course, that didn't mean the amount of blood spilling to the ground and running down his arm wouldn't still kill him.

God damn it, he was *not* dying like this *again*! It hadn't even been a whole twenty four hours since the last almost-bleed-to-death fiasco! He wanted to file a complaint with the manager!

"Andy!" He heard Amanda's cry and felt her over his shoulder, a hand on his back, another to the side of his face but he tried to pull away. "Oh- Oh my god…"

'*Oh god, don't touch it*,' he through frantically, terrified of the pain she'd inflict while trying to help. Not that it mattered; he was gonna be dead in about three minutes, if his math was correct. Which it probably wasn't. He was terrible at math. Not that that mattered, either.

"Move!"

That was Scott. Where was Jonathon? They needed to run. They should probably run. Andy was a goner, and he really didn't want them to be next.

The pressure of Amanda's hand on his back vanished, and Andy wanted to cry in both relief and absolute terror. He knew what he'd just said, what Amanda could probably hear through the panic and the pain. What they should absolutely be listening to and doing. But he also really, really didn't want to die alone.

And then a new hand was pulling his hand away from his neck and he tried to cry out – and *that* was a bad mother effing idea! – but nothing came out except gargles and globs and trickles of blood and pink-tinged bubbles, and oh god, he took it back, death was okay, now. Any time. Totally fine. Just let it be over.

Then a hand wrapped around his ruined throat, slick and slippery in the blood and split flesh.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, just hold on. This is going to hurt, I'm so sorry" Scott said frantically, leaning half over Andy as he clamped his hand down on the wound.

Andy tried to scream, the pain of foreign touch on a fresh and fatal injury so intense he just wished it would end. All of it, whatever that meant, whatever it took. It could just end now and that would be fine by him.

Then something so, so much worse happened. Fire erupted in his throat with a jolt through his body, traveling like an electric charge. Every muscle in his neck and shoulders seized, his whole upper body shook with a vibration so strong it was almost numbing, and the last thing Andy knew was the smell of his own flesh burning.

-o-o-o-

Amanda swung her skillet hard enough at Jonathon's head to wrench her good shoulder, but that wasn't what shocked or worried her. The guy straight up disappeared. In the span of a single blink, she'd been aiming for his head and then swinging clear through empty air. Jonathon was, just…gone.

Andy made a desperate, gargling cry beneath her, rolling over onto his hands and knees and Amanda's mind blanked at the sight of blood. So much blood. So…so much…

She stumbled away from him as a damn waterfall of red fell from his neck and hit the ground before he could begin to staunch the flow with his hand. Even that didn't do much to limit the outpouring of red.

So much blood…

Movement made her jump, and she immediately raised her makeshift bat, ready for a second swing. Jonathon was a dozen feet away, in the open alley beside the nearest building, staring at them. He had blood on his hands and shirt, and he regarded them with a look Amanda had never seen on another human's face.

And then he was gone. Another blink, another disappearance.

"Where'd he go?" Scott asked, voice trembling as he spun around, back almost flush to Amanda's. She understood why, it felt like safety in a situation that was anything but.

Andy made another pitiful, terrible, *horrible* noise and Amanda decided it didn't matter where Jonathon had gone. She dropped to her knees, skillet still clenched in her hand, her other settling uncertainly on Andy's back.

"Oh god…" There was so much blood. She didn't even know how to help. Their makeshift weapon hit the ground as she raised her second hand to try and…she didn't even know. Staunch the blood flow? There was no use! "Oh- oh my god…"

"Move," Scott suddenly said, the urgency in his voice making it the most steady she'd heard since meeting the nervous young man. He pushed her out of the way and she let him, shuffling a foot to the side. Scott leaned over Andy, keeping clear of any contact other than to pull the poor boy's hand away from his throat by his wrist

"I'm sorry," Scott muttered, and Amanda got a terrible feeling as he wrapped his hand around Andy's bleeding, slashed throat. She had to look away from the two hanging, jagged pieces of flesh folding beneath Scott's hand. "I'm so sorry."

Then Andy was screaming and writhing and shaking. He shook like he was having an attack – a seizure – and Amanda screamed again. She stumbled away from the horrific sight as a terrible smell filled the air. Scott was…oh god, Scott was *electrocuting* him.

Amanda slapped her hands to her ears to block out Andy's ruined, gurgled screams, ripped out through clenched teeth and a locked jaw, but she could hear so much more, his full anguish, straight into her skull.

"Stop, stop, you're killing him!"

Scott did stop, but not before Andy passed out, collapsing to the ground in a heap of blood, bonelessness, and seared flesh. Amanda stood to the side, shaking, hands trembling against the sides of her head. She stared in horror at the cauterized wound, no longer bleeding, but a hideous sight of mangled, blistered, melted red flesh.

"What…what did you…?"

Scott grabbed the skillet off the ground and backed away from Andy. He was shaking himself, enough so that the iron pan visibly trembled as well. He was panting, though not from exertion as much as sheer terror.

He'd never used his powers on a human before. And though he'd been trying to save Andy, his screams… and the smell of burning flesh…

Scott turned away, anxiety spiking to the point of physical pain in his chest. He might have killed him anyways. Might have let the electricity travel too far. Get too strong. Fry his insides like hamburger meat. Like Mr. Tinkers all over again.

Or maybe he'd just stopped his heart.

"I…I can't…" Scott couldn't breathe. His chest hurt and his heart pounded and he was pretty sure he was having a heart attack. "I can't be here."

"No, wait-" Amanda started to say, Scott's intention to run clear in every inch of his panicking body. But he stumbled away from her,

turned and took off before she could stop him. Panicking herself, she glanced between Andy's unconscious body and Scott's retreating figure, taking the only weapon they had with him.

She never got to make that choice. A shift of air from behind brushed against her hair and clothing. A tremor of fear ran through her. Strong arms wrapped around her from behind before she could turn around. Before she could scream, in the blink of an eye, Amanda was gone.

The road was as empty as the town but for Andy Gallagher's bloody, unmoving body.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: …okay, but I didn't *kill* him? [insert weak smile here]

Really, this is all your guys' fault. I was gonna let Andy walk away from Cold Oak relatively unharmed, just traumatized enough to go seek out some corner of the world where he could smoke a bong till the end of the world (I swear to Chuck, that was the original plan) but nooo, you all wanted him to stay in the story! And Draconis Domini was like, just slit his throat and he can stay, problem solved! And I was like…huh. I can do that.

I am, after all, a woman of the people. [insert weak ass, slimy politician smile here]

(Draconis, I promise, another A/N is coming further down the line where I *don't* throw you under the bus for this idea :D)

On a Slightly More Serious Note: There was a lot of jumping back and forth in both POV and timing this chapter, which as you know is not quite my usual style. Again, please let me know if was confusing or didn't really work and I'll address it for future readers.

Up Next: The follow-up should be posted in a week. I may bounce back and forth between one and two week updates for a while going forward, but as long as I'm leaving you with nasty cliffhangers, I won't make you wait more than a week for the next chapter.

Chapter 81: Season 2: Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Boy, did I struggle getting this one up today, guys. Partly because I was very busy this week with RL which is being quite difficult lately and then Halloween prep for a party last night. But also partly because I was very listless today and it took me the entire day to edit this. Bah Humbug.

Posting Delay: I am off to paint a mural in my sister's nursery next weekend (I'm going to be auntie to another niece!!! (for anyone confused on turnaround times, it's two different sisters (okay, it's a sister and a best friend but, really, no difference there))) which I am very excited about. But it means I'll be very busy traveling and getting covered in paint, so they'll be a two week delay between this chapter and the next. Luckily, this is another very long chapter! And it doesn't even really have a cliffhanger for once! Well...mostly.

Chapter Warnings: Andy continues to have not good times! Because I'm apparently a monster. Dean and Sam are on their way, though. Not that it's going to end up helping, it turns out, because I am a monster.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Nothing as descriptive as last chapter, but there's a couple paragraphs involving some blood, of the spitting-up-oh-gross-my-throat-just-got-slashed-and-also-fried-and-it-turns-out-that's-quite-nasty variety.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 48

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

When Andy woke up he was alone, the sun was lower in the sky, it was freezing and absolutely none of that meant anything to him because he *hurt*. God, the pain in his neck was unbearable. Andy immediately tried to climb off the ground he was lying face down on. The movement alone had him doubling over as he got to his knees,

forehead pressed to the dirt in a silent scream. Tears leaked from his eyes and he couldn't touch his neck – wanted to so badly, wanted to grab that stinging, stabbing, *burning* pain from chest to cheeks, rip it out of his skin and throw it far, far away – but he couldn't.

Oh god, it hurt. Death would have been better than this. He would have been *fine* with dying if it meant not waking up to this.

Andy's stomach heaved and he was damn lucky he hadn't eaten anything in more than a day and a half, because just the bile alone coming up through the damage almost knocked him back out. His vision whited as he hacked and spat onto the dirt. Globs of blood, both congealed and fresh, spattered the dirt like a Halloween rendition of the world's worst water balloon fight. Andy was pretty sure chunks of flesh came up too, given the gooey, bloody, disgusting mess beneath him and the additional searing, raw agony inside his throat.

Oh god, he was going to throw up again.

It was the longest five and a half minutes of Andy Gallagher's life. On his hands and knees, fingers clawing at the dirt, tears streaming down his face as he fought each panic attack that came with every bout of nausea, Andy tried to focus solely on breathing. But even that hurt. Everything hurt. His hands looked like they'd lost a fight with an overly aggressive paper shredder, his head was pounding, and his heart didn't feel right. It pounded away in his chest, way too fast and painfully hard beneath too-tight muscles. It kept skipping erratically, setting a harsh, unpredictable beat beneath his ribs.

Andy gave it a minute, and then another dozen, before he tried just a simple, single swallow. His fingers shook against the hard ground in anticipation of the pain, and the pain did not disappoint. His throat convulsed, neck straining as he unconsciously stretched his head forward to physical get away from the clamping sensation of his neck internally strangling itself. His eyes slammed shut, face and body clenching up at the fresh wave of pain, searing and unbearable. Oh god. Andy dug his fingers into the ground, dirt caking under his fingernails, and tried not to scream. Not that anything would come out if he did.

It took time – what felt like hours but was surely only minutes – for the pain to subside from an eleven back to a meagre nine, and Andy made a mental note to just not swallow. Or breathe Or move at all. How hard could that be?

Slowly, and with his eyes only, not daring to turn his head, Andy chanced a glance around him. He was still in Cold Oak, but he was alone. It was growing dark around him, the sun touching the tips of the trees that surrounded the mining town. The ground beneath his palms and lodged beneath his fingernails was hard and frigid. Far colder than when he'd woken up here the first time. Andy shivered in his t-shirt, wishing once again for the jacket he'd left behind in Rivergrove, blood stains and all.

He didn't see Amanda or Scott anywhere. Or Jonathon, for that matter, though he was significantly more relieved for that.

Even slower, and with still trembling limbs, Andy climbed to his feet. He kept his head stuck out in front of him like a turtle, moving his neck as little as possible as he got legs that felt like jelly beneath him. Gingerly, *very* gingerly, he reached shaking fingers up to prod around the least painful sections of skin on his lower neck. The damage was incredibly localized, but the pain wasn't. Just that light pressure on clear skin made him flinch, and he quickly pulled away. His fingers came back sticky with partially dried blood, and he looked – *slowly* – at the ground he'd been lying on.

There was a puddle of red already turning into an ugly brown, drying across the ground in a disturbingly large spread. Although it was speckled with the fresh blood he'd just spent the last however-hellishly-long coughing up, the majority of it didn't look fresh. Whatever Scott had done to him clearly stopped the bleeding, but given the pain he was in, it had also damn near killed him.

Still might, he figured.

Maybe that had been Scott's intention. Maybe he'd been trying to kill Andy. The psychic started to shake as he looked around again. He was still alone. If that was true, if Scott was just as bad as Jonathon, then Amanda was in danger, if she wasn't dead already. But Andy didn't know that for sure and, despite the possibility and overwhelming pain he was in, he didn't want to believe it. Scott hadn't seemed the type. Unlike Jonathon.

Yeah. In hindsight, turning his back on that one had been a serious misjudgment.

Andy stared at the two roads running through the abandoned town. There were four directions to choose from, and just the energy it would take to make that decision sounded exhausting. He needed to

try and find Amanda and Scott. Try to learn what had happened after Jonathon attacked him. But the task seemed monumental. Insurmountable. It would be dark soon, he was unarmed and utterly unprepared to defend himself should Jonathon (or Scott (no, not Scott, he'd been trying to help, Andy was sure of it)) still be around. In fact, death pretty much awaited him in every shadowy doorway and darkened window. It really wouldn't take much at this point. The next stiff breeze had as good a chance of offing him as anything else, Andy figured.

Even now, alone in the cold and the dimming light, he was pretty damn close to passing out just from standing. There was no relief from the pain, which pulsed away at a steady, unbelievable nine. No give and take, surge or relief, and Andy really didn't know how much longer he'd be able to stay conscious. Keeping his feet under him and body upright was already possibly the hardest thing he'd ever done. Walking sounded so much worse. Searching was out of the question. Even breathing was a struggle, forcing air through the damage that burned and seared and cried for an end with every inhale. He was pretty sure his trachea was partially collapsed, if not sliced up and then somehow sealed shut in the most painful procedure *ever*. Andy shook just remembering the pain.

So now he was faced with a choice he never, ever wanted to make. A choice that wasn't even a choice, but still Andy faltered to make it. Dean had told him to survive. Whatever it took. And right now, he wasn't even sure he could make it out on his own. Half bled out, shaking like a leaf and about an inch and a half from being back on his ass, Andy knew he wouldn't be any good to Amanda or Scott even if he did find them.

That still didn't make leaving them behind any easier.

The Jedi stared at the town around him, water filling his eyes for an entirely different reason. Survivor's guilt was already kicking in, even though he certainly hadn't survived yet and didn't know the state of anyone else. Swallowing past the lump in his throat almost sent him to his knees. That was probably the only reason Andy managed to pick a direction at random and stagger down the road as fast as he could. He would head for the forest and his original plan to hike out of this Hell.

-o-o-o-

He found the skillet lying in the middle of the road two hundred feet

from where he'd first woken up. There was no evidence of a struggle, no trail to follow or clues as to how it got there. Just an iron pan lying, abandoned, in the middle of an equally forgotten ghost town.

His fingers and resolve shook as Andy picked the weapon up from the ground, but he resumed his path for the trees.

-o-o-o-

There was something in the forest with him.

Andy was sure of it. He'd left the town behind, surrounded on all sides by endless trees that only grew more ominous with each inch of light lost. His breath puffed out in clouds of misty white as dusk fell around him, and he'd spent the last fifteen minutes of his walk rubbing at his bare, goose-pimpled arms. At least he was still cold. That was good. Awful. But good. Andy knew it was when he stopped feeling the cold that the real danger of hypothermia set in.

The ground was hilly, more than he'd hoped when he'd first set out of the relatively flat mining town. In the limited light, he struggled over the uneven terrain, rocks and roots catching at his feet from under a thick carpet of dead leaves. He'd fallen once, and that was just about the worst experience of his entire life (not really, but he wasn't in a mood to reflect on the actual worst experience of his life). The landing had jarred his entire body and snapped his chin right into his neck.

Andy had curled up into a pathetic little ball and cried. Cried and cried and cried on the hard ground and wet leaves, and it hadn't even made him feel better. Mucus gathered thick in his raw, swollen throat, causing him to choke and hack up more blood and flesh. He wasn't even ashamed of his breakdown at this point. He was so far past that. This *sucked*, and as far as he was concerned, could end any damn time now.

Only, no, it really couldn't, because a branch snapped behind him and to the left, at least a dozen feet away. But that was about six thousand feet too close, and Andy was back on his jelly legs in a heartbeat, that heart beating its new, terrified, erratic rhythm as he surveyed the trees. It seemed that survival instinct had once more won out against his morose acceptance of the inevitable end. Andy couldn't decide if he was glad or annoyed. Mostly he was just exhausted.

Still eyeing the empty woods around him, *knowing* something was there even if he couldn't see it, Andy pulled out his phone and checked service for the third time. Still nothing. He slipped the phone

back into his pocket, concerned about his slowly draining battery. Concerned about a lot of things, really.

It took a lot, most of what he had left, to get his feet moving again. To turn his back on whatever it was that was following him, and hope it wasn't hungry. At this point, though, he was focusing all his good will and happy thoughts on it just being *normal*. Like a raccoon. Or rabid, vicious wolf.

The next branch to snap a handful of minutes later was accompanied by the giggle of a small child and Andy froze.

Oh god. Oh god oh godohgod.

That was not a rabid wolf. Damnit, why couldn't it have just been a feral, bloodthirsty, dangerous *animal*?

'Because you're a Winchester,' Dean's voice rang out in his head, a memory of something he'd told Sam once when the younger brother had gotten a little tipsy and pessimistic one night in a motel in the middle of a nowhere hunt. He'd rambled on about the end of the world until Dean had gotten fed up, more hurt than angry, but with Dean it wasn't easy to tell. *'Our lives suck, it ain't fair, but we deal with it. Cuz we're Winchesters.'*

The words had been for Sam, but Andy couldn't help but resonate with them. He wasn't a Winchester, but his life had sucked, it sure as hell hadn't felt fair, and the brothers had been there for him through it. They'd become oddly like family over the last so many months. More family than Andy had ever really had before. His adopted father was a decent man, but Andy kinda had a feeling any real bond they might have had died in that house fire along with the man's wife. He had raised Andy, but he hadn't been a father so much as a guardian. And he wasn't even going to talk about the evil twin brother thing.

While Andy sure as hell hadn't been *happy* chasing monsters and running from demons after losing the only person who'd ever truly cared for him, he'd still gotten something he'd never had before. He'd been a part of something, at least. He'd mattered. At least, Sam and Dean had made him feel like he did.

'They'll never know what happened,' Andy thought, fear freezing his legs and something a lot closer to sorrow tightening in his chest. *'They're coming, Dean said they would come, but even if they do they'll never find me. I'll be dead and rotting in some god forsaken forest!'*

The anger in that, knowing the look that would cross Sam's face when they found nothing but an empty town, the fury that would overtake Dean until he started destroying whatever was closest until Sam got through to him, gave Andy a new resolve. A determination to live. To spare his brothers – more than Weber could have ever been – that pain. And if he didn't live, he'd sure as hell go down fighting like they would.

The Winchester's resident Jedi spun around, one hand fisted around the skillet, raising it defensively, the other reaching up to hover protectively over his neck. He couldn't help it, the thought of taking any more damage there *terrified* him more than death itself, he was pretty sure. But he would face whatever the hell was stalking him like a true Winchester. Stalking him and *giggling*. Creepy ass mother fucker.

There was nothing there when he turned. Andy wasn't really surprised, though he'd certainly worked himself into a tense, shaking mess. One thing he'd learned from fighting the supernatural was that even monsters wanted to make an entrance. So he kept his weapon raised, eyes surveying the darkening woods around him, and waited.

A light breeze, just the errant movement of air, across his back raised the hairs on his neck and Andy tensed. Slowly – god, *so* slowly – he turned again.

It was a little girl. A little girl with dirty blonde hair, an askew bow tying her tangled bangs back, and rags of clothing that might have once passed for a dress. A little Frontier girl standing two feet in front of him, staring up at him with innocent, dark eyes.

Oh, great.

Andy swallowed. A creepy…ghost, maybe? Andy hoped it was a ghost. Ghosts were nothing to scoff at, but at least *some* of them weren't homicidal. And iron worked against them. Iron was what he had. All he had. Andy's grip on the skillet tightened.

Her eyes suddenly glossed over with a metallic sheen, the surrounding skin darkened to a terrifying black, like miniature black holes sucking her eyes into her skull, and her fingers lengthened into savage claws.

Oh god, definitely not a ghost!

The thing hissed and Andy scrambled backwards as she swiped at him. Her claws sliced into the iron skillet as he blocked her attack with it, creating a burst of sparks and the creature's entire hand exploded into

smoke. She screamed – a high pitch, terrible, *deafening* noise that Andy would have sooner associated with a harpy than a… whatever she was – and flew backwards. The little girl didn't even bother with feet, just shot backwards, edges of her body blurring and fading into wisps of smoke.

A demon, Andy thought. Reactive to iron, body made of dark grey, blackish smoke. Wanted bloody murder and screamed for it. Yup. Definitely a demon. Probably a demon. Okay, Andy's guess was just about as good as a rock's at this point, but he didn't see anyone else around to offer suggestions. He was going with demon.

His hand shook around the skillet as he stared at the shifting body of a mostly corporeal and absolutely terrifying little girl. The smoke flowing from her wrist like a fog machine solidified into a hand, snapping into place in the same beat as the dread formed in Andy's stomach.

She launched another attack with a horrific screech, feigning right. Andy met that claw with the skillet, only to realize the trap too late. She latched onto his wrist with her other hand and slashed across his forearm. The hunter cried out, muscles in his arm spasming as flesh tore open beneath the onslaught. His tightly fisted hand, tendons straining under the weight of the heavy pan, flexed all on their own. The skillet dropped to the forest floor.

Andy tried to stagger back, knowing a second attack was coming and he was wide open for it, utterly unprotected. His t-shirt ripped beneath her claws as she made for a second swipe, but he managed to stumble away with nothing more than raised, red scratches across his chest and no broken skin. Thank god; he'd had enough of being clawed up and bleeding out to last a life time.

She jerked towards him again, clawing wildly back and forth as he dodged each swing the best he could. Whatever she was, she was fast. Fast enough to nick him more than once. Fast enough for Andy to realize, pretty quickly, that she was playing with her food. She kept him away from the only weapon that could harm her, abandoned and useless among the leaves. All Andy could do was keep his hand over his damaged throat to protect the one place he knew he couldn't take a hit. But he couldn't keep this up forever, and she knew it.

His left heel caught on a rock and he very nearly fell, staggering to keep on his feet. There was no way he could keep this up. Eventually he'd trip, or misjudge the distance, or she'd get tired of toying with

him and just charge.

It was the right foot this time, tripping over an exposed root, that almost sent him down on his ass. This time, though, the little girl caught up with him. Andy cried out as he gained four new, freshly bleeding wounds across his thigh. He knew from experience now that they weren't serious, but they *hurt.* Everything hurt! He was clawed up and bleeding from numerous cuts and gashes. He was so damn done with bleeding out! He couldn't talk, he had nothing to defend himself with, he was *useless*, and he was going to die in some Podunk backwoods where no one would ever find him or know what happened.

The stupid little girl just grinned, holding her hands up like she was showing off how he would die. And he knew he was going to die. Worst twenty-four hour second chance to live, *ever*. The creature, whatever she was, launched herself at him one last time, and Andy, royally pissed off and utterly done, threw the hand covering his throat out in front of him like he could halt her with a friggin' traffic signal.

'Stop!'

He screamed it inside his head with everything he had left, loud enough that an instantaneous headache split his skull and Andy ended up clutching at his temples. The pressure there was unbelievable and the psychic staggered, trying to keep to his feet under the onslaught. Blood dripped down his nose. He could taste it on his lips. Had the little girl got him in the head or something? This was…god, this was worse. Way worse. How could this possibly be *worse?* He took it back, let him bleed out!

But as the pain started to subside enough that he could at least see straight, a second attack never came. He lowered his hands cautiously, expecting to find them once more spattered with blood. But they were clean. Well, they were filthy, running around in an abandoned down, napping in the dirt, sprawling on leaves, spitting up blood and covered in a dozen or more defensive wounds, but they weren't coated in the fresh, sticky red he'd expected.

Andy's eyes flicked hesitantly to the little girl, terrified of what he'd find. Another attack as soon as he made eye contact, or maybe even worse. But she was still in the same spot, the edges of her form wispy and her feet completely dissolved into dark grey, coiling smoke. The edges of her body spasmed as she stood there, more of her appearance lost to smoke before it would convalesce back into a little school girl.

It seemed to be a cycle, like a record skipping. But she…she was just standing there. Er, floating there. Watching him with weirdly expectant eyes. Like she was waiting for something.

Andy took a step back, and then another. The girl – was it a demon? The smoke was kind of demon-esque – didn't move. Just watched him with glinting, dangerous eyes set in a blank face.

The Jedi hunter blinked. Then blinked again.

Had…had she stopped because he'd told her to? Or was this just a trick? Pointless trick, really…. She'd had him. He'd been good as dead, and now she was just…floating.

'Can you…hear me?' he thought very cautiously, not really sure what he wanted the answer to be.

The little girl blinked metallic eyes but didn't move, and Andy thought…holy shit.

Holy. Mother of Effing. Shit.

He was shaking again, but shaking was great. Shaking meant he wasn't dead. Wasn't bleeding out in the frenzied attack and spray of blood and pain that he'd fully expected to be his end. Andy raised a trembling arm and wiped his bleeding noise with the back of his hand, still staring disbelievingly at the demon.

Holy shit.

Andy took another unsteady step backwards, but the demon (probably a demon…) didn't move. Growing more daring, the hunter tried for a step to the left. Then another. It wasn't until he tried one forward (diagonal, actually. No way in Hell was he getting closer to the thing that had definitely almost killed him) did the demon shift. Her form broke, giving way to smoke which shifted and shuddered and swirled, reforming into a little girl back in front of him. She bared her teeth, but still didn't advance. Didn't raise those claws or attack him. Just… blocked his way.

'Let me pass,' he thought, swallowing roughly through fear and pain. He remembered what Weber had been capable of. What he'd made Tracy do without uttering a word. What he'd promised to teach Andy. Well, his goatee-less evil twin could suck it. It looked like he'd figured it out all on his own. And all it had taken was almost dying. Twice. Twice and a half (the throat thing totally counted.)

The little girl bared her teeth again, smoky edges vibrating with displeasure. Andy could tell she didn't like that order one bit.

'Let me pass,' he repeated, trying to keep his thoughts firm. He was in charge. *He* was in charge.

She hissed, head jerking forward in displeasure and Andy scrambled back a half dozen feet before he could stop himself.

Yeah. Right. *He* was in charge. And also the Queen of England.

Hands shaking, Andy gathered every last inch of false confidence he'd ever possessed, and straightened up, shoulders back and chest out.

'Let me pass!'

"Hungry!" the thing suddenly hissed, breaking apart in a mini smoke explosion had Andy damn near wet his pants at the realization that it could *talk*. Jesus. Her voice was like nails on a chalkboard, and Andy shuddered. "Want blood!"

'Yeah, well, you're not getting mine,' he bit back darkly, not even sure the demon could really hear it. Or understand. But the way she sort of imploded back into the shape of a little girl, whose glittering eyes shifted over Andy's shoulder to the woods behind him and the town beyond that, made Andy think she had heard him just fine.

She was setting her sights on the food she could have.

'*No.'* Andy moved an inch to the right, into the demon's eyeline, blocking her view from whatever she was contemplating. And given the glint in those eyes, Andy really, really didn't want to know. Amanda and Scott could still be back there. Or in the woods. He couldn't let this thing go after them.

"Hungry!"

'No!' Andy yelled again, his head exploding with pain at the furious cry. The demon's smoke form burst back out, edges vibrating in contained anger, but she didn't move. Andy's shoulders sagged under the tension in his neck and head, the pain partially whiting out his vision, but he pushed through it. With a hand to his forehead, pressing back against the explosion contained behind his skull, he straightened up and glared at the creature for all he was worth. *'They're just kids!*'

But the demon didn't care, and Andy could tell he was losing his

tentative control over her. Okay…Okay maybe a compromise. She clearly needed…uh…blood (Andy was not thinking about that. He wasn't, he really, really wasn't). Maybe there was another solution. Morally speaking, not a great one, but Andy was running a *little* low on options and a lot low on patience, energy, and fucks.

'Okay,' he thought, eyeing the demon warily. *'Okay, you can kill, but only Jonathon. Only the one who tried to hurt the others. You only get him.'*

Andy was offering up another human being on a silver platter. Jonathon. His life for Andy's. For Amanda's and Scott's. Maybe, if they were still alive, if Jonathon hadn't gotten them yet or if they'd managed to escape, the decision might even save their lives.

…Yeah. He was okay with that. Sort of. Mostly.

'You let the others leave,' he added, realizing that orders to a demon probably had to be pretty damn specific. Loopholes had probably been invented in Hell.

The demon bared her teeth again, wispy edges agitated. She didn't particularly sound or look like she was pleased with this arrangement. But after a minute (a damn tense eternity), the smoke convalesced fully back into the little girl, solid as any living, breathing kid. Then she smiled. The freakiest, creepy smile Andy had ever seen in all his life and would surely have nightmares about for years to come.

For a terrifying moment, Andy wondered if he'd just screwed himself. His hands weren't exactly clean. He'd hurt people; he'd killed people.

But the thing just giggled – *giggled*, the sound echoing in the empty trees, and yup, Andy was definitely going to have nightmares – and smoked away, zigzagging back towards town in an eager stream of grey and black.

Andy turned to watch it, not quite ready to believe that was the end of it. That he was safe. For now, at least. The last of the adrenaline that had definitely, absolutely just saved his life, was draining, and fast. Shivers wracked his frame and, once they started, he couldn't make them stop. Andy wrapped his arms around himself in a pathetic hug – it did little – and gave it another minute – gave *himself* another minute – before he started moving again. He picked up the skillet, having to waste precious seconds and even more precious energy searching the leaves for it. It felt even heavier in his hands, and Andy wondered how long he'd be able to carry it.

The hunter moved at as fast a pace as he could manage, limping on his newly bleeding thigh, and watching the ground with the kind of concentration that bordered on obsessive. He was pretty sure if he went down again he wouldn't be getting back up.

He just had to make it out. Out into the world of cell service, shotguns, demon-warded Impalas, and Sam and Dean.

-o-o-o-

The Winchesters were gunning down a barely paved single lane road Dean remembered well. If you'd asked the man from 2016, he never, in a million years, would have ever thought he'd be flying down this road again at borderline dangerous speeds beneath quickly darkening skies in hopes of rescuing a missing brother from Cold Oak *a second* time.

With his luck, he'd be doing it a third time when they went after Sam.

"Anything?" he asked, glancing sideways as his brother lowered the phone from his ear, shaking a mop of brown hair.

"Still not going through," Sam answered, voice tinged with frustration and worry. They'd hoped as they got closer and closer to the abandoned mining town and still had service themselves that they might reach Andy. They weren't talking about the possibility that his phone was dead, possibly along with its owner.

A ringtone bursting out in the dead silence of a tense car caused both Winchester's to jump. The younger practically fumbled the phone in his hand in an attempt to answer it, telling himself it was just going to be Bobby, not to get his hopes up, but as he turned the phone over it was Andy's name and goofball face flashing up at him. The kid had stolen Sam's phone a month ago, when the younger Winchester had been on a food run, and taken about three dozen selfies. Half of them had been with a trying-to-act-annoyed-but-actually-more-annoyed-that-he'd-never-thought-to-do-this-himself Dean in the background. As punishment, Sam made one of those pictures his contact photo for the idiot.

"Andy!" Sam yelled as he hit the green call button, immediately switching the phone to speaker so his brother wouldn't crash the Impala trying to listen in.

The line crackled with static. It was very obvious the connection was shoddy. Wherever Andy was, it was right on the edge of a tower, and

Sam immediately worried they might lose him again. But there was something else down the line. They could hear the background noises of a person moving – walking through undergrowth – and heavy, labored breathing.

A long, utterly irritated noise – a frustrated huff – broke the minimal sounds coming from the other end of the line, and Sam and Dean shared a worried look. The frustration in that breath of air was worrying but, worse, it was damn near heartbreaking for the Winchesters, who could tell something was very wrong.

"Andy?" Dean tried, clenching his hands around Baby's wheel and trying not to imagine one of a thousand terrible, horrible scenarios for why their friend wasn't – couldn't – answer them. "Andy, man, you there?"

They got a series of noises, almost grunts, that were desperate and pained, like someone struggling to speak, and Dean's stomach dropped straight through the seat to be left sitting on the road miles behind them. But then a new noise – an exclamation of air alone that could only be described as a non-syllabic eureka – came down the line, followed by shuffling, more huffing, and then the sound of a tree branch snapping, right next to the phone if the volume of it was anything to go by.

"Andy?" Sam tried again, equally worried as his brother about what condition their friend was in that left them with a mostly on-sided phone call. At least the latest noises, a shift from frustrated pain to invested pain (not much of an improvement, but Winchesters took what they could get), steered them away from worrying that Andy might not be alone on the other end. That this was a ransom call instead of a rescue. Or a butt dial during a life or death struggle. "We can't really hear you. Are you hurt? Where are you?"

A series of taps – short and flat – started coming through the phone. Dean took his eyes off the road to stare at the device. It sounded like…like Andy was tapping something against the phone. Sam blinked down at it, equally confused.

"Andy, man, talk to us. You still there?" Dean voice cracked with a whole new level of concern as he glanced at Sam.

But the younger Winchester was staring at the phone, brow furling as the taps kept right on coming. Suddenly, the younger hunter was a flurry of movement, reaching into the backseat for his backpack and

digging through it as he talked into the phone, "I got it, Andy, we hear you! Hang on, let me grab something to write on!"

"Sam?" Dean asked, bouncing his attention between the road, his brother, and their injured friend coming through the phone. That attention was no nowhere near equally (or safely) split. "What's going on?"

"Morse code!" Sam exclaimed fervently as he landed back in his seat, a worn notebook and pen in hand. He tore the cap off with his teeth, spitting it out to be found at a much less important date. "He's tapping Morse code. He's trying to talk."

Dean frowned, but the minute the taps started up again, he realized Sam was right. "Son of a bitch. Andy, keep going. Where are you?"

The taps stopped, then started up again, and Sam wrote out each letter. Thank god both kids were total nerds, Dean thought.

"Cold Oak," was the first thing out of Sam's mouth as he got the word almost completed on the open page.

"Okay, man, we're already on our way. Ten minutes out, Andy. We're coming for you." Dean leaned over to speak closer to the phone, voice almost at a shout, which was completely unnecessary. Andy could clearly hear them, he just couldn't talk back. The amused, if not still frustrated huff they got in return was evident of that. Dean lowered his voice, but remained leaning into the passenger seat, all but talking into Sam's hand with eyes still (mostly) on the road. "You keep walking, we'll find you. Are you hurt? Why can't you talk? Are you safe? Or being followed?"

"One question at a time, Dean," Sam admonished from the passenger seat, knowing that they'd only get confused. "Andy, are you hurt?"

But the kid was already tapping back, and as Sam recorded the responses and read them aloud, '*K', 'Yes', 'Throat', 'Safe',* and a long pause, then *'ish*'. Dean couldn't help but laugh. Andy was still Andy, and the relief alone flooded Dean like friggin' morphine. Or really good pie.

"Okay. Okay, buddy, hang tight, keep walking, we'll be there in no time."

The tapping started up again, this time faster and a little more frantic.

"Hang on, hang on," Sam muttered, trying to keep up with the taps and translate multiple words into a half-stringed sentence filled with short hand. "Okay, wait, Dean, he's not in the town. He's in the woods."

The Impala came to a stop with screeching breaks and a painful lurch to the passengers within. Sam didn't say anything, but he did have to catch himself on the dash to keep from meeting the windshield up close and personal.

"Shit, does he know where he is?"

Another huff of air through the phone was easily interpreted as, *'He right here and can hear you, you know.'* Dean ignored it as the tapping started up once more and he watched Sam's hand intently on the open page of the notebook.

The long answer was something about southwest out of Cold Oak and an approximation of how far he'd walked. The short answer was Dean dug out his phone, pulled up the network website on a data stream so slow he almost chucked the phone through the windshield multiple times, and activated the GPS on Andy's phone, complete with a map of his location. They'd probably ring up a small fortune in data charges, but Dean didn't give a shit about that right now and it wasn't like they planned to pay them anyway.

"Okay, Andy, you're about a half mile from the road we're on," Sam translated Dean's bark of 'go left' into something the clearly exhausted and hurting kid could actually use. It was the younger Winchester's turn to lean into his brother, reading off his phone. "Head to your left, as much of a ninety degree turn as you can, and just keep walking. Even if you don't manage a straight line, you'll hit the road."

A long tap, a short tap, and a long tap followed.

"K," Sam translated aloud, not that Dean needed him to for that one.

The older Winchester slid the car back into drive and handed his phone to Sam, GPS location of the Andy's cell still pulled up. They would track it as they drove and meet him wherever he came out. Sam kept a running dialogue to the silent kid on the other end of the phone, Andy only stopping his trek through the woods when responding was imperative.

Six minutes later, Andy tapped that his battery was about to die. A minute and forty five seconds later the call dropped. Sam and Dean

sat in a tense, rigid silence for the remainder of the drive, Sam's eyes locked on the GPS location of Andy's phone, blinking steadily on Dean's cell and moving ever so slightly every couple of refreshes. Dean kept glancing over, if only to confirm the little red dot was still there. Eventually, the Winchesters came to a point in the road closest to that marker, and Dean slid the Impala into idle.

It was the longest four minutes Dean had sat through in a long, long time. Then Andy was stumbling out of the woods to their left, onto the road a hundred feet ahead of them, right into the beam of Baby's headlights.

"Andy!"

Both Winchesters were out of the car, running to him before he could even turn their way. He was carrying something heavy in his left hand, dangling from fingers barely able to grip its weight. It was an old frying pan – an iron skillet – and it hit the ground with a heavy, flat clang as Andy spotted them. The kid was a wreck. His clothes were torn and dirty, his skin equally so. Multiple cuts and scratches marred his bare arms and face, and his neck-

"Oh god," Sam whispered as they got close enough to really see the full extent of the damage. There was something *wrong* with Andy's neck. Really, really, *terribly* wrong. Dried blood covered most of his throat, the neckline of his t-shirt completely soaked through with it, and beneath the blood, the skin was…it…was…*melted*.

Andy's legs gave out beneath him as soon as they reached him, most likely out of relief, and the Winchester's caught him, lowering him to his knees. His teeth were chattering, arms covered in goosebumps, and shit, he was in nothing more than a goddamn *t-shirt*.

"Jesus, kid," Dean breathed out, eyes locked on his neck even as he shucked off his jacket and his flannel, wrapping the kid in them. It was fucking November in South Dakota, for Christ's sake. Sam helped Andy get his arms through, and the shivering Jedi hugged the newfound warmth tightly to himself. He opened his mouth to respond, lips moving wordlessly, nothing but puffs of air coming out, before he frowned, the frustration on his face quickly morphing into so much more. Desperation and fear and pain and hurting.

Sam grabbed him by the shoulders, large hands curling over shaking, drooping shoulders like a gentle giant, trying to anchor him. They'd both been there. That realization that you'd survived. That the ordeal

was over, but you shouldn't have made it. Never thought you would. And now you had to deal with everything you'd shoved to the side just to get through. It all came flooding back, and that could be just as terrifying, just as overwhelming and gut wrenching and heartbreaking as the ordeal itself.

"It's okay, Andy. It's okay. You're safe, and it's going to be okay. Just breathe." Sam kept the contact to just his hands on Andy's shoulders, not wanting to risk more out of concern for any post-traumatic reactions or injuries they didn't know about. And he definitely wanted to steer clear of that neck wound. God, he could see *cartilage,* matte and glaringly white through patches of abused, bright red, glossy skin.

Something had *melted* Andy's damn neck. No wonder the kid couldn't talk.

Sam looked at his brother. They needed to get him a hospital. This was far beyond their ability as hunters to handle. Andy needed professional help, major help, and soon. Dean understood the look, glancing back the hundred feet to his still idling baby.

"Andy, are you hurt anywhere else? Is your neck the worst?"

Sam patted down the kid's chest as gently as he possibly could, barely even putting pressure on his stained and ragged shirt, let alone skin or muscle. The slashes he'd last seen in Andy's shirt, sliced across his chest and soaked red, were no longer there. He had a whole new set of injuries and none of the old.

Andy started to shake his head, grimacing immediately as the movement pulled at his brutalized neck. He reached up towards it, but hesitated at the last minute, choosing not to touch it. Instead, he held the same hand out, palm flat, and shook it back and forth as a surrogate 'no' instead.

Sam met Dean's eyes and nodded. The older Winchester rose to his feet and took off ahead of them for the car, intent to drive her the remaining distance and get Andy the hell away from here. Sam started moving towards getting the kid back on his feet.

"Okay, we're gonna get you out of here. Can you stand?"

Andy gave him a look that told him to stop asking him questions he couldn't answer, but flapped the hand up and down as a 'yes' of sorts. The kid let Sam pull him up, the younger Winchester supporting his weight well before Andy actually got on his feet. Dean had reached

the Impala and gunned her forward the last hundred feet, at way too fast a speed given the short distance. The car lurched forward as he slammed on the breaks, threw her into park, and hopped out to get the back door open.

But as Sam guided their injured friend towards the backseat, Andy put the brakes on, suddenly digging his heels in and shaking his hand back and forth frantically. Sam blinked back at him, momentarily at a loss.

"What is it?"

"Come on, kid," Dean urged, gesturing to the open rear door. "Let's get the hell out of here."

But Andy kept shaking his hand in lieu of shaking his head, insistently if not a little hysterically. He wouldn't move any closer to the car, and instead gestured with a thumb down the road. Back towards the ghost town he'd just escaped from.

"You want to go back?" Sam asked, at first incredulous. But, as Andy paled at the question, Sam adjusted his words and tone to be softer. "We need to go back?"

The hand flapped yes again, Andy's dark brown eyes filled with pain and exhaustion and fear, but the latter was taking over and Sam suddenly realized it wasn't all for himself. The younger Winchester straightened as the full situation dawned on him – Andy's injuries, the state of him, his panic – and looked down the dark and empty road towards Cold Oak.

"There are others. Other kids," he realized quietly, looking back to their resident Jedi, who kind of sagged in his arms as he got it. Sam swallowed thickly. Azazel's Battle Royale had begun, and he couldn't help wondering what state those kids could possibly be in if Andy was this bad off.

They were probably dead. He didn't want to say it, could see that it would break Andy to hear it. But then, it didn't matter if they were, the younger Winchester realized. They couldn't just leave them in that place. And if they were alive, they needed the rescue as much as Andy.

Dean stared between his younger brother and his younger, younger (actually they were the same age) surrogate brother. The dawning horror of the exact same realization and what Andy was asking them

to do fought for control of Dean's expression, warring with the need to get the kid somewhere safe, somewhere with help. His duty as a hunter was now battling his sole purpose as a big brother.

"Andy, we need to get you help. We'll come back," Sam tried to reason, realizing Dean wasn't going to be able to say that in anything even remotely resembling reason or calm. As soon as he'd said it, though, it became clear it was the wrong thing to say. Andy's shoulders hunched with a sob he tried to fight down, but forced its way out of his throat. The sound raw and painful, and he practically choked on it. Sam kept the poor kid from doubling over, still supporting most of his weight, and Dean took an aborted step towards him, concern and helplessness stretched across his face.

Andy started gesturing frantically, lips moving but nothing coming out, tears streaming down his face and Sam didn't understand. Their friend was breaking down, but all Sam could do was keep the kid upright. It was Dean that finally got it. Dean, the older brother who'd had to make the same choice Andy made, more than once, and saw it in his eyes.

He grabbed the kid by the bicep, waiting until a dirt and tear streaked face met his. "Hey, it's not your fault, Andy. You did what I told you to do. You survived."

Devastated brown eyes closed, face crumpling as water leaking free from crinkled corners. Dean would have hugged the kid if he didn't think it would only cause more pain.

"Okay," the older Winchester muttered, squeezing Andy's arm with a decisive nod. He gestured to the back seat with his head. "Get in. We'll go back for them. But you're staying in the car."

Andy's eyes snapped open, his body rigid with tension and eyes frozen wide in clear fear. Sam, still supporting him with one hand on his back, felt the change immediately and tensed as well. Andy's pulse was rocketing. Sam could almost feel his heart race beneath his skin.

"Andy?" he prodded, looking at the kid with worry. But Andy's breathing was staggering, coming way too fast, he was shaking his head in short, aborted gestures, the mangled skin of his throat pulling with each movement. Sam recognized the signs of a panic attack a mile away. *There* was the PTSD he'd been waiting for and the cause was obvious. "Breathe, Andy. It's okay, you don't have to go back there, okay? We won't take you back."

The poor kid was still trembling, but nodded, then winced in regret, and flapped his hand up and down.

Dean glanced at Sam, frustration formed more from confusion than actual anger. "Alright, we'll head for the hospital."

Andy's grip on his forearm immediately said *'no*,' to that option, and Dean actually growled.

"Kid, if you won't leave and you won't go back, what do you want me to do? Those are your options!" But Andy just stared up at him, all stupid big, scared eyes that made Dean's big brother heart squeeze so, so damn painfully. Realization that there was, in fact, a third option caused the anger, boiling just beneath the surface and having nothing to do with the kid, to take over, as was wont to happen with the older Winchester. "We're not *leaving* you here, Andy."

The psychic flinched at the suggestion, the sound of it so much worse than the mere thought had been inside his mind, but Andy canted his head ever so slightly (actually he went too far, winced, winced again from the first wince, righted his head, and mentally told himself to *stop doing that*.) Dean let out another, louder growl.

"We are not leaving you here," he repeated, *firmly*, like the first time must not have been clear enough. "Not an option. It's *not* happening.'

Yes, it was. It had to, Andy insisted. Scott and Amanda needed the Winchesters. Andy had left them. No matter what Dean said, he'd *left* them for his own safety. Well, he was safe now (-ish) and they weren't. And that was his fault. He was the one who'd run his mouth about their powers, he was the one who'd turned his back on a clearly psychotic kid. He was the one that had taken responsibility for them, who'd told them they'd find a way out. He was the hunter, he was the one who'd known what was going on. He'd known when he'd found them that *he* had to be responsible for them. A choice he'd made, knowingly. And he'd failed them.

But his limbs shook and his heart *pounded*, still skipping a beat when it shouldn't, still hurting and not quite right beneath a too-tight chest, at the thought of going back to that town. That town with a man who had slit his throat, with a demon roaming its streets, streets soaked in blood. Andy's blood. He knew it wasn't logical. He knew what fear and trauma did to the mind. He understood that, and because he thought he understood it, he also thought he should be able to control it. Push it to the side for the twenty minutes it would take to go back to Cold

Oak and save Amanda and Scott. It's what the Winchesters would do. He could freak out later, Andy told himself. Tried to tell himself. But his body wasn't having it, and he hated himself for it.

And, beneath all of that, there was just…nothing. He had nothing left in the tank, no fight left in him and no energy, either. He couldn't go back there. He knew he couldn't. He wouldn't survive. He'd barely survived the first time. And as much as death had seemed okay an hour ago in the face of a blood-thirsty demon, five hours ago when he was being electrocuted in the middle an abandoned town, twenty-four hours ago as he bled out in a school in Rivergrove – hell, even if it still sounded somewhat okay as he stood, rescued and safe (ish) with these two men he'd somehow come to adopt as family – his body wasn't moving from his spot. Wasn't facing death down again.

The Winchesters could, though. They could survive anything. And if Scott and Amanda were alive to be saved, Sam and Dean would save them.

'You have to go,' he thought, speaking the words even when no sound came out. Dean didn't seem to hear him, not like the demon had, but the words on his lips were enough. Either Dean could read them or he just understood.

"Andy, we can't leave you here," he said, softer this time. The kid was hurt. *Bad.* And he was still shaking, even in Dean's extra layers. That wasn't all from fear. Andy was pale – too pale – and had spent hours in near freezing temperatures in nothing but a t-shirt and what looked like significant blood loss. He needed help. They needed to get him help. "I won't do it."

The kid just held out a thumbs up and offered a wary, weary, watery smile that was more misery than encouragement, but suck it, he was tired.

'I'll be okay, Dean.'

The older Winchester wanted to bury his hands in his hair and pull every last strand out. But he looked at Sam and could already see that they were going to do it. This insane, stupid, reckless, terrible, no good, dumbass thing. They were hunters, all three of 'em. Saving people was what they did. Saving themselves was something they sucked balls at, always had.

Dean growled low in his throat, but started pulling Andy by his arm towards the nearest tree. He tossed his head towards the Impala and

called out over his shoulder, "Sam, get the salt."

The younger Winchester nodded, already on the move as Dean got Andy settled at the base of the largest tree just off the road. He helped Andy lower himself back onto the ground and the kid gingerly leaned against the trunk, realizing Dean's intention. The older Winchester hesitated for a second, staring down at him, before he shook his head with another noise close to a growl, and jogged back onto the road. Dean swiped up the iron skillet Andy had dropped, walking back to the downed hunter.

"Iron," he said, like the word was a weapon all itself, and shoved the skillet into Andy's arms and against his chest. The way his hand held it there against the kid was a clear indication that he expected Andy to keep it on him. Like a shield. Andy just offered that same weak smile and ignored the way Dean looked at him like this was a terrible, dumb, awful idea and he didn't want to do it.

Sam made it back over to them carrying a large bag of road salt and just about every warm article of clothing they had between the three of them. He dropped the clothes next to Dean, who immediately started bundling the shivering kid up, taking his own jacket back in exchange for warmer options, while Sam started a liberal circle of salt around the base of the tree, wide enough to encompass Andy's stretched out legs. Once Andy was in enough layers to look like a toddler prepared for his first snow day, Dean pulled his gun from his side and slid the magazine out of the base.

"You see that?" he asked, kneeling beside Andy and gesturing to the top bullet. Andy blinked at the metal casing, which had a small carving of a five-sided star etched on the tip. He knew what that symbol was. "That's a devil's trap. Shoot a demon with it, it'll paralyze them."

Dean slid the magazine back into his gun, grabbed it by the barrel and held the weapon out to Andy, grip first. The psychic stared at the offering in shock. He looked up at Dean, then back to the gun. Dean's gun. Dean's *favorite* gun. The ivory-inlaid one his father had given him when he'd turned eighteen, with the initials D.W. carved into the grip. Andy had asked about that gun once, the matching pair both brother's had. Dean had been so damn proud as he told the story.

Andy's hand shook as he took that gun.

"You sit here, you stay in the circle, and we'll be back in…" Dean

glanced at Sam as the younger Winchester completed his salt circle, leaving the half-empty bag to the side and standing just over Dean's shoulder. Dean looked back at Andy. "Two hours at the most."

As he said it, Dean dug into the front pocket of his jacket, removing his phone and handing it to Andy. The kid's, if it was still on him, was dead and no good to them now.

"If we're not back by then, you call Bobby. Speed dial two." At the words (bossy demand), Andy gave him a look and Dean rolled his eyes, realizing his word choice wasn't spectacular in this situation. "Text him. Whatever. You get a hold of him, he'll come get you. He's seven hours out. And kid, I don't care if we have to break you out of a hospital, you think you're gonna pass out, you call 911 and get an ambulance on its way. You hear me?"

Andy took the phone, the smallest amount of amusement in his eyes that left Dean just reeling at the strength of this kid. A damn good kid. Dean shook his head as Andy had to juggle the skillet, gun, and phone, but he took it all in stride. He ended up with his arms crossed over his over-stuffed torso (Dean had gotten about six layers on him), hugging the pile of defenses to his chest like a scared kid with too many stuffed animals to hold.

"I'll have my phone too," Sam added as he crouched down beside them, long beanstalk legs looking like a cricket. He had something else in his hand, which Andy realized belatedly was the Winchester's med kit. "You need anything, text us. We'll keep in contact as long as we have service."

Dean nodded in agreement, and the younger Winchester got to work opening the kit. He didn't dare wrap Andy's neck, even if he knew they should. Burns were the most susceptible injury to infection, and they would have to deal with that, hopefully at a hospital that would have even stronger pain killers than what he was about to offer the kid.

"Morphine," Sam said as he held out the small clear bottle, a needle in his other hand. "We can't give you much, but it'll take the edge off."

Even as he said it, he wished he could give the kid the full dose he more than deserved and obviously needed. Sam wasn't even sure what was keeping Andy on his feet. Or, well, his butt now that he was sitting. But a proper dose of morphine would leave him too vulnerable if something did come looking for him. Not to mention too incoherent

or unconscious to stay in contact with the Winchesters or call for that help should he need it.

Dean stood as Sam readied the needle into the bottle, withdrawing a miniscule amount into the syringe. The older Winchester pulled his knife from his side and started carving a basic warding symbol into the tree above Andy's head, just something to keep away anything interested in doing harm. It wouldn't work on anything stronger than, say, a wandering spirit, but it should keep away anything completely-normal-just-hungry that might be found wandering the South Dakota woods at night.

Sam moved to administer the needle to Andy's elbow, but the kid grabbed his wrist with a sluggish movement. He looked like he was struggling to figure out how to say something, and Sam realized that was entirely the problem. He needed to tell them something.

"Use the phone," Sam offered, nudging his chin towards the device resting between Andy's chest and forearm. "Type it out."

When Andy ended up juggling the three things in an attempt to get a proper hold on the phone, Dean leaned down to take the gun from his left hand, laying it in his lap instead with a fond roll of his eyes. Andy got the phone into his hand and started to type one handed. He ended up tucking the skillet beneath his other arm so he could use both hands for speed. After a moment of quiet clicking in which both Winchester's waited as patiently as possible (one far more patient than the other, but Dean was doing an admirable job for it being him), Andy turned the screen towards them.

Sam ended up taking the phone gingerly to read aloud, "Good kids: Scott, emo. Amanda, girl. Bad kid: Jonathon, blonde asshole."

Dean snorted beside him, but Sam kept reading.

"Demon – question mark – in woods, little girl. Claws. Wants blood."

"Well, that's not creepy at all," Dean muttered, Andy sharing a look with him. But that unbreakable spirit that was Andy Gallagher started to falter, the smile fading to be replaced with tentative fear. Fear for them. Dean took the phone out of the kid's hand, putting the gun back into it and pressing his arm back across his chest like a shield once ore. Andy stared up at him with way too vulnerable brown eyes. "We'll be okay, kid. We got it from here. You did good."

Andy didn't feel like he'd done anything close to good, but he nodded

anyway (very carefully) and clutched his little pile of weapons closer to his chest. Sam administered the partial dose of morphine, and Andy sank back into the tree as the very edges of his awareness and pain clouded over into blissful fog.

He opened his eyes again to nod at the Winchesters, not only to let them know the drug was working (and really, ridiculously, so much appreciated), but that he was okay. He would be okay. They had to go now.

The two exchanged hesitant glances, but both nodded, telling Andy they would be back soon – two hours, max, Dean promised – and to stay safe. Stay in the circle. Then they were leaving, jogging back to the car and peeling out. The faster they left, the sooner they would make it back.

Andy watched them leave, dizzy with conflicting emotions. Or maybe that was the morphine.

Chapter End Notes

Why Isn't Andy Dead Dear Chuck You've Like Killed Him Six Different Ways in Two Days You Monster: Okay, I just, I have to say it because…well, I just have to. I know this is not how injuries work and Andy should be like almost dead or really dying and definitely not left alone for another two hours. I'm absolutely pulling from the show for this one. You know, the show that has Sam take an undercut to the jaw from a man with *super strength* and sends him flying twenty feet away through a wooden fence, but no, he's totally fine and wins that fight. Yeah. That show. I think I'm still safely canon here XD

The Boys Leaving Andy: So I thought this up, thought 'that's cool, I like it' and then thought '...but would they really leave him? Am I forcing it?' So I took some time and realized...no, I don't think the boys would ever leave Andy there. Not really. But...do I think the show writers would have done it anyways? Absolutely. They do stuff that's borderline out of character *all the time* Which then makes it canon and...so...it becomes in-character by default...and, just gah!! Anyway, I am trying to keep in the spirit of the show as much as possible so...yup, totally doing it. And hopefully I pulled it off as believable and mostly within character for the Winchesters.

Also, I loved the image of Andy, bundled up and holding onto a

skillet and a gun sitting in a salt circle while the boys went back to save Amanda and Scott. There was something heartwarming and also heartbreaking about it? Dunno. I went for it.

Dean's Gun: Soooo, I think I once read a story (I *think* it was Family Matters by 29Pieces/29Pieces of Me) that had the D.W. carved into Dean's gun, and S.W. carved into Sam's, and they were given to the boys by John when they turned 18. Then I did that thing I do where I adopted it as head-canon (*cough* remember Uriel with actual character depth? *cough*) Only, I convinced myself over the years it was actual canon. Turns out? Can't find anything to that extent, but I like it a lot so I am most definitely adopting it for this story :D

Special Thanks: Goes to **Draconis Domini** for the idea of slitting Andy's throat and killing his ability to talk, therefore letting him stay in the story longer. (Look, DD, a note where I don't throw you under the bus! :D Well, mostly.) When Draconis mentioned it, I had just re-watched the season 2 Battle Royale, where Andy developed a secondary power which always bothered me. Not the ability itself, but because it felt thrown in last minute just as a way to get Dean to Cold Oak and was not used for anything else the entire episode. But DD's idea of removing Andy's ability to talk meant that power suddenly made sense, and I loved it as a fix-it :D Plus...I apparently like hurting that boy...

Please Review! I love hearing from you guys and as RL still sucks at the moment, I could use the smile your comments always bring.

Chapter 82: Season 2: Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Guys, guess what? It's my 30th birthday this weekend (holy crap, right?) I can't even. No, really. I can't. Anyway, I think an early chapter is a good birthday present for all, and I do like to spread the love ;)

(Also I won't have time to post properly on Sunday XD But sure, let's go with the altruistic reasoning, yeah?)

Chapter Warnings: Well, after a fun post like that ^ I regret to inform you that absolutely nothing in this chapter is fun. No one has a good time in Cold Oak! (Don't feel bad, Andy, it's not just you!) But oh boy, guys, it's a bad chapter to be an OC…

Actual Chapter Warnings: Lots of off-screen death in this one. Oh, and Jonathon gets what he deserves ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 49

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Cold Oak was a bloody mess.

It wasn't obvious at first. It took time, both Winchesters jogging quickly down the three empty streets that made up the town, checking inside pitch-black buildings in the silent night. There was a decent moon out, but that didn't help them inside. The two hunters swung flashlights inside each interior as quickly as they could, trying to hit all the dark corners and crannies, but they were on a time limit and searching an entire town took time. Too much time. All the while, a feeling of eyes on them persisted. Human or other, though, they didn't know. One brother always kept watch, shotgun in hand, while the other searched for the missing kids, but nothing came out of the dark for them.

The Winchesters found the first body about ten minutes in. Scott,

going off Andy's description of an emo male.

"God damn it," Dean muttered, turning away from the body. The kid was on his back, eyes wide, terrified and sightless, staring up at the ceiling of an old general store. He'd been strangled and stabbed. The bruising on his neck was grotesque, finger-shaped dents pressed so far into his skin they were more black than purple, and his chest was a bloody mess, shirt punctured in more than half a dozen spots.

Sam stared at the innocent kid – a kid just like him – and closed his eyes, lips forming a silent prayer. They couldn't have saved him, he told himself. His skin was cold, the blood congealed and drying. He'd been dead for hours. They couldn't have saved him, but it still hurt. Still made him angry.

Another life stolen by Azazel's pointless game.

"We should burn the body," Sam said quietly. This kind of death was just asking for a vengeful spirit and Sam didn't want Scott, whoever he had been, to suffer that fate.

"Later." Dean was already headed out of the store, not out of a lack of respect for dead, but because they were on the clock. "We got more kids to find."

Both could only hope they'd find the other two in a different condition. A futile hope, it turned out.

They found Amanda next. She was four stores down in what had probably once been an apothecary or doctor's office of some sort. Her neck was riddled with the same, deep bruising, her chest covered in even more stab wounds than Scott. Dean was really starting to hate this Jonathon kid.

There was a lot less remorse when they found his body. Dean didn't even bother with a moment of silence or regret for not finding the kid alive. He just grabbed one bloodied, shredded leg while Sam grabbed the other. They started dragging the kid back towards the others. As they pulled him down the road, they left a trail of blood and a lot of body parts, internal and external, that they'd have to go back for. The demon Andy spoke of had done one hell of a number on the kid.

Dean didn't have a shred of sympathy for him.

Sam eventually called it, telling Dean they'd have to do more cleanup dragging the body in pieces than just getting the other two and

burning them right here where Jonathon lay. The more they left behind of the man, the more chance they took that something would get missed and Jonathon would come back an angry spirit, emphasis on the angry. Cold Oak had enough of that already.

So they left him in the middle of the street and went back for Amanda and Scott. There wasn't time to make a clean burial for each; all three bodies would have to be put on one pyre. Andy didn't have the luxury of them doing this right, and no way was Dean spending the night scouring those woods or this town for wood. It was regrettable, but as far as both Winchesters were concerned, the living was their priority.

Dean carried Amanda back to where they'd left her killer, Sam a couple dozen feet behind him with Scott's body. They laid the two of them down with a hell of a lot more care than they'd dropped Jonathon, and the Winchesters started gathering wood. Dean wasn't shy about it. He ripped loose panels right off the buildings and walkways around them while Sam ventured into the woods for what bigger logs and limbs he could find.

"Stay in sight," Dean insisted, as he had when they'd first entered the town and Sam suggested splitting up. No way in hell was Dean letting his little brother out of eyesight in this town. Not *this* town. They were tempting fate and the damn timeline plenty enough just being here, and the sensation of being watched hadn't ceased since they entered the damn town.

Both Winchesters had already spotted a ghost each, the incorporeal specters watching silently from windowsills and doorways. There had been no sign of the demon Andy had mentioned, and Dean hoped she'd fucked off back to the woods.

The woods Sam was currently scouring the edges of for fuel.

So the younger hunter didn't push. He stayed within eyesight. He knew what Dean had witnessed once before in this place and he had no plans of making his brother repeat that experience. He took care to stay where Dean could see him and didn't venture further than a half dozen feet into the woods. Sam felt Dean's eyes, as well as others, locked on him the entire time.

It took them forty minutes to build one large pyre. Probably not large enough, given the three full-grown humans they needed to fully burn atop it, but it would have to do. Dean was already growing anxious to return to Andy, and Sam was right there with him. He'd sent the kid a

text just before they lost service, telling him they were almost to the town and would text as soon as they were on their way back. But he knew if their places were switched, Sam would spend every one of those one hundred and twenty minutes wondering if that text would ever come or if he'd just be left waiting, wondering what had happened.

"We shouldn't have left him," Dean muttered for perhaps the twelfth or thirteenth time as he climbed down off the pyre, having gotten the last of Jonathon up on it. The rest of the pieces of him they just chucked onto the stacked wood as they picked it up piece by piece. Kid was in more sections than a jigsaw puzzle. Dean still didn't feel a shred of sympathy.

"Andy'll be okay," Sam insisted with far more confidence than he felt. But he had to believe it was true. They couldn't lose Andy now, not when they'd just gotten him back. He was going to be fine, and in the meantime, this was something they had to do. Something Andy needed to do and couldn't. So the Winchesters would do it for him.

"He could have waited in the car," Dean argued, still muttering darkly. Sam spared him a look as he picked up one of the two gas cans they'd both gone back to the Impala for once the pyre was fully built. They didn't split up. Not in this town.

"I'm surprised you didn't make me stay with him," Sam said it in lieu of telling his brother that he understood exactly why Andy didn't want to come back here, no matter the protections the Impala offered. How Dean should understand that too, even more than Sam. The man from the future probably did, he was just too worried not to be angry about it.

The look Dean shot him was not a pretty one, and despite Sam standing in the middle of Cold Oak about to light a massive fire and call the attention of every supernatural thing in a mile radius, that look was a parent daring their kid to make them turn the car around.

"No one comes to this town alone," Dean finally said, the words a declaration of a rule that hadn't been spoken aloud previously but might as well have been carved in stone in the Winchester's mind.

Sam actually stopped chucking gas onto the wood to stare at his older brother. His older brother who would *never* admit to not being able to do something on his own, especially if it meant keeping his kid brother safe. But Dean hadn't said *Sam* wasn't allowed to come to this

town alone. No, he'd very specifically included himself in that.

The older Winchester ignored Sam's staring, circling the wood pile to dump more gas on the back. "It's taken enough people, Sam. No one comes here alone."

The younger Winchester stared a moment longer, a quiet, private part of himself taking that moment of silence, of condolence, for what this Dean had lost here. It spoke volumes to Sam, as it would to anyone watching their loved one grieve them. Even another version of them. Then Dean was circling back around to him, and Sam emptied the last of his canister on the pile. He stepped back as Dean dug a handkerchief out of his back pocket, soaking it in the last of his gas and lighting it with his Zippo. He chucked it on the wood pile, and the thing went up in flames in mere minutes.

"We should burn the whole town down." The man from the future watched the fire take, orange light flickering in his eyes. Sam huffed in agreement before he realized Dean was serious, and then he was once more staring at him, this time more out of worry.

"We can't," he replied cautiously, still not quite sure Dean had been serious. But the older Winchester sure as hell looked serious, staring at those three bodies as their clothing started to catch along with the wood. "Dean, we *can't*."

"Why not?" The older hunter turned towards him, shoulders back in a clear challenge. But Sam knew it wasn't him Dean was angry at. "This place is no good, Sam! It's soaked in blood, and I'm not just talking those kids!"

He threw an angry arm out, finger pointing at the burial fire. Sam knew that. He did. This town was once so haunted all its residents fled in fear of their lives. A demon in the woods was hardly the only thing lurking in the dark. They'd both felt it. They were both surprised nothing had attacked them yet.

That would change in a heartbeat if they tried to burn the place down. Sam knew that, too. And two hunters, Winchesters or not, weren't a match for an entire town of ghosts and evil spirits.

But that wasn't the only reason not to do it.

"This doesn't end with them," Dean added darkly, no longer looking at his brother but those burning bodies. He hadn't stayed behind to clean up Cold Oak the first time. Sam's death had been all consuming, but

he knew how many bodies they would have found in that town had he and Bobby stuck around. How many more funeral pyres would have been built. How one of them would have been for Sam, and still could be. "Azazel won't stop. Being stuck down in Hell isn't going to hold him back for long. He'll bring more of you here, and they'll die too."

'You'll die too.'

Sam was quiet, hearing what his brother hadn't said as much as what he had. The brunet watched as flames licked against the night sky, illuminating the buildings around them in flickers of light. He could still see the ghosts, hovering behind rotting wood and broken glass. They were watching the Winchesters, orange and yellow dancing in their sunken eyes.

"If we burn it down, he'll just find another." Sam turned to his brother, shotgun in hand and a knowing pain in his eyes. "A place we won't know. If Azazel takes me, takes Andy again, heading here is still our best bet, Dean. Your best chance to stop it."

Because he no longer believed they could prevent it. Neither of them did, not really.

Dean sucked on the thought like it was a sour lemon, face screwed up in anger and distaste. But he didn't argue and he didn't bring it up again.

When they were sure the fire would continue to burn and the bodies with it without supervision, the Winchesters headed out of the town. They made it back to the Impala with the eyes of a dozen ghosts on them, but nothing tried to stop them. They never did find Andy's demon in the woods.

It had been an hour and fifty minutes since they'd left him.

-o-o-o-

When Sam gained service again on their mad dash back to Andy, his phone pinged with three missed messages. But only one was from Andy, acknowledging his text that they were entering Cold Oak. *'Please be safe'* was all it said. Sam was happy to have obliged, even unknowingly. He texted back the minute he could to let the kid know they were on their way back. Then he shot a reply filled with only good news to Bobby, who'd been wondering on their progress repeatedly for two hours.

With Dean driving at ridiculously unsafe speeds, Andy didn't even get a text back to them before their headlights were illuminating the kid in the darkness. Their Jedi was still sitting at the base of that tree. He was a bit shaky perhaps, but still in that circle of salt, weapons pressed to a chest buried beneath a half dozen layers of clothing. He'd never looked so relieved to see a car barreling down a dirt road towards him in the pitch black.

As Sam helped Andy to his feet, Dean accepted his gun back with a grim smile, tucking it into his jeans. The younger Winchester pulled their friend into a hug, half under the disguise of warming him up and supporting him towards the Impala. As he pulled back, Andy smiling shakily at them both, the psychic looked between the two brothers only once before he caught both of their grim expressions. Andy realized almost instantly, and yet belatedly, that they were alone. Brown eyes darted frantically to the Impala, but the car was empty.

'No,' he mouthed, then again, and again. Sam took him by the shoulders as his expression crumpled and he tried to shake his head, pulling at his damaged neck. The younger Winchester immediately shifted his hands to either side of Andy's face, touch gentle – cautious – as he stilled Andy's agitated movement, which would only cause him pain.

"There was nothing you could have done," Sam said, trying to comfort their friend, this goofy kid who had somehow become a Winchester when they weren't looking. "You did everything you could have, Andy."

Even without knowing what had happened in that town, the wound to Andy's throat, the fact that he was even alive, was proof of that to both hunters.

Andy understood the logic, Sam could see it in his eyes, but it didn't take. Not really. It was the final straw in a never-ending night that had started more than forty-eight hours ago. Andy broke down against him, and it was all Sam could do to wrap his arms around him and support his weight.

He shouldn't have left them. He never should have left them. He mouthed it over and over into Sam's shirt, soaking the plaid fabric with tears and slobber and snot, but no sound came out of his wrecked throat. The younger Winchester just held him all the tighter.

Dean stared helplessly at the two, meeting Sam's equally lost and

grieving eyes, looking for guidance. Hesitantly, the older hunter reached out, settling his hand on Andy's back, fingers curling over the edge of his shoulder. He squeezed lightly, wary of hidden hurts.

"You can't save everyone, kid," he started quietly, knowing that truth was little comfort here. He'd been on the other side of this, too many times. "And it *sucks*, we know that. But you survived. You kept yourself alive. Man, if you'd been one of those bodies we found back there…"

Dean faltered, voice cracking as the reality of just how bad that could have been, of just how much Andy had come to mean to both of them and how close they'd come to losing him, hit Dean like a punch to the gut.

Damnit, like he didn't have enough adopted strays to worry about.

The older Winchester swallowed heavily, knowing he didn't mean a word of it. The flood of water he was angrily blinking back was proof enough. He swallowed past the growing lump in his throat, stinging pain he knew was nothing compared to what Andy was fighting through. Their Jedi was tough as nails, breakdown and all.

"Kid, I know you're hurting, but you did exactly what I told you do. You stayed alive until we could find you. And I'm…I'm so damn proud. So damn happy you're alive." He met Sam's eyes as he said it, so friggin' bad at any form of heartfelt declaration that he couldn't even do it unguided. Emotional affirmations really weren't his strong suit. But the equally watery smile his brother shared with him told him he'd been right to say it.

"Me too, Andy." Sam tilted his head down, chin brushing the top of Andy's hair as he held the kid, wary of his injuries. "We don't want to lose you."

Andy's shoulders shook beneath Dean's grip and the hunter risked more pressure. He settled his second hand on the kid's back, feeling him shudder with sobs, silent not by choice but by something taken from him with force.

"Let's get you out of here," Dean said quietly, and Sam nodded in agreement.

"You need a hospital," the younger Winchester added, voice equally soft. "And drugs. Lots of really good drugs."

A choked sound escaped the kid's mangled throat, and it almost sounded like a broken laugh. Dean patted their favorite Jedi on the back before he pulled away and made for the Impala's back door. He held it open as Sam got Andy settled on the seat, and the two Winchester's took their places in the front.

They headed away from Cold Oak at as equally pressing speeds as they'd entered it, Dean gunning it for the nearest hospital and the most distance he could put between them and that hellhole town.

-o-o-o-

A passing ranger driving down FSR 297 on a fairly routine night drive through the National Forest spotted what looked like smoke rising above the treetops to the northwest. It was hard to tell for sure, even with an almost full moon high in the sky illuminating the dark night a silvery blue, but Ranger Danson thought he saw a faintly orange glow to the trees.

Forest fire.

He reached for his radio to call in the potential blaze, turning his patrol car in the direction of the old mining town that lay that way. Danson passed only one other car on his way to the scene and, at the time, he didn't think much about the sleek muscle car flying past at far too fast a speed as was safe on these back forest roads.

A forest fire trumped some yahoo thrill seeker any day.

-o-o-o-

Andy was quiet in the backseat on the drive out of the forest. Not that anyone was really expecting him to be otherwise, for both physical and emotional reasons. The woods stretched for miles, and Andy shuddered to think about being stranded, alone, so deep within them, in the dark and empty. He tried, and failed, to turn his thoughts to other things.

He understood what the Winchesters were trying to say and appreciated their compassion and care. Logically, and even from a philosophical and psychological standpoint, Andy understood what happened in Cold Oak hadn't been his fault. There had been nothing more he could do for Amanda or Scott. But that didn't stop his brain from turning the events over and over again in his head, searching for where he'd messed up, what he'd done wrong that might have ended with all three of them walking away if he'd made a different choice.

So, yeah, he understood what Sam and Dean were telling him, but it didn't really change anything, either.

The woods around them didn't thin but the roads got better paved, then bigger, and then turned into an actual highway with other cars. Eventually the National Forest ended and the Impala's windshield shone with the lights of an upcoming city.

Andy made a choked, adverse noise from the backseat as Dean pulled off the highway at the first sign for a hospital. At the sound, the older Winchester all but slammed on the breaks, cars blaring their horns as he made somewhat of an emergency pull off to the side of the road. Sam turned in his seat (though only ever so slightly more, considering he'd spent the entire drive partially turned towards the backseat, not so subtly watching Andy for signs of discomfort or worse), but all Andy did was shake his head, wince, and then raise and shake his hand.

"No hospital?" Sam hazarded, tone incredulous. His fingers gripped the top of the Impala's front seat tightly. "Andy, you *need* a hospital. Your neck…that's not something we can patch up ourselves."

Not to mention the kid was *still* shivering. Even with the heat blasting on full in the front, Dean having stripped down to just a t-shirt, and Andy with his seven layers of clothing, the kid was still shaking away in the backseat.

The Jedi made a frustrated noise at his inability to communicate. He considered, just for a second, trying to talk to them the same way he'd talked to that demon. The memory of the headache he'd had for more than an hour afterward ultimately ended that idea. He was too tired and too drained to try something like that, anyway. So instead he made a broad pushing motion with his hand, trying to tell them they needed to go further.

Dean and Sam exchanged glances, and Andy kinda wanted to hit them both. He was too tired to do that, either.

"You…want to go to a hospital further away?" Sam tried again and this time he got the hand-flapping Andy had been using as a surrogate yes.

"Kid, you need a doctor," Dean argued, though there was no heat in his tone, only worry.

Movement followed but faltered as Andy clearly tried to figure out

how to communicate what he was thinking. Frustrated, he pointed at his eyes, then looked around for something. When he couldn't find whatever it was he wanted, Sam dug his phone out of his pocket and handed it to the struggling kid. Andy looked even more annoyed that they hadn't thought of that sooner, and started typing. After only a moment, he handed the phone back.

"Yellow Eyes," Sam read aloud. Dean caught on first. Andy wanted to go someplace Azazel wouldn't find them.

"He's gone, kid," the older Winchester said, though the way he couldn't quite meet Andy's eyes told the psychic there was a lot more to it than that. "He's not coming after us. Not anytime soon."

Andy didn't understand.

"Cas exorcised him," Sam offered, one shoulder raising up as he put his arm on the back of the seat. He sent a cautious look Dean's way, adding to the dull alarm bells ringing in Andy's head that all was not right.

'Cas?' Andy mouthed, looking between them. The last thing he remembered from Rivergrove was Azazel asking him to give the angel up and Andy refusing. That…hadn't been pleasant. None of that had been pleasant, actually, and Andy had been doing so good at not thinking about it. Granted, the only reason why was that he'd had plenty worse to focus on since.

"She's okay," Sam was quick to say. Too quick. Those muted alarm bells got a little louder. Dean was downright rigid in the front seat, refusing to look at either of them. "She was injured, but she'll heal. She went back to Heaven so her, um, brothers can help her."

Yeah, something was definitely not right. More than that had clearly gone down. Andy remembered how nervous talking about Heaven made the Winchesters, especially Dean. The man was so tense right now and trying not to be that clearly their opinion on the place hadn't changed. But Andy was too tired to think about it, so he chose to accept Cas would be alright and hoped it would turn out true.

He made the shooing motion with his hand again, adamant, and Dean frowned.

"Andy, I get it, I do. But we're seven hours from Bobby's, which is the only safe place between us and, well, *anywhere*. And I don't think you should wait that long."

Bobby's was the only place they'd be truly protected from Hell; a place with another hunter watching their back and a panic room available for the worst case, need be. Every hospital in between, be it the one a mile in front of them or the one in Sioux Falls, would be the exact same level of safe or not safe if a demon really came looking for them.

Dean glared at the road sign a hundred feet ahead, a large, reflective white "H" and arrow pointing them in the direction of the Regional Health Rapid City Hospital. He understood Andy's need to get further away, and given what they'd left behind in Cold Oak, it wasn't even an outlandish request. But the kid shouldn't wait the hour and a half to the next town east, and no way Dean was making him. Clearing his throat, the older Winchester made a decision. "We'll go a town away, alright? Sturgis is half an hour north of here. But then we gotta get you looked at. Burns are…they're just not something you leave alone."

That was putting it lightly, Sam thought, casting a furtive look at Andy's neck. They'd given him another dose of morphine once in the car, and Sam had wrapped his throat with a single layer of gauze as incredibly cautiously as he could. Andy had only been able to take three laps around his head before he was calling it quits, tears streaming down his face and looking a half a breath away from passing out.

He didn't look thrilled now at the idea of staying so close to the forest, which stretched north a good distance, but he conceded because he was too exhausted, too emotionally numb and finished, to argue further. Dean pulled back onto the road. True to his word, they turned away from the sign to the hospital and traveled another thirty minutes to the town of Sturgis.

-o-o-o-

Sam and Dean flashed their FBI badges the minute the doctors and nurses starting asking questions. And boy, did they have a lot of questions. Luckily, the Winchesters didn't actually have a clue what happened to their friend, which made their declarations of confounded cluelessness (edging towards irritated cluelessness for one brother) very convincing.

The hospital staff wheeled Andy away on a gurney, surrounded by medical professionals shouting stats and needs loudly and insistently over top him as they unwrapped the gauze from his neck and assessed the incredible damage. Both brothers watched, somewhat helplessly, as their friend disappeared from sight in a whirlwind of commotion

and efficiency.

Sam settled into a chair in the now-too-quiet waiting room with a long, low sigh. Dean started pacing in front of him, and the younger Winchester wondered where he was even getting the energy. They'd both been awake for more than forty-eight hours now, through some of the most traumatic events they'd ever had, both in physical demand, sheer stress, and emotional upheaval. Suddenly, Sam was all but boneless in that hospital chair. His limbs felt like they'd tripled in weight, and he braced his arms on his knees just to breathe through the abrupt adrenaline crash. His hands were shaking again, but he was pretty sure that, for once, it had nothing to do with the persistent buzz in the back of his skull. He'd managed to forget about that for the last so many hours they'd spent searching for Andy.

Dean paced for another six and a half minutes before throwing himself into the chair next to Sam, restless energy a mask for the fear, frustration, and uselessness that had kept him on his feet.

"He'll be okay, Dean," Sam consoled quietly, hands clasped lightly between his legs to hide the fact that his fingers were still trembling.

Andy would be okay. They'd had worse hospital waits when the fate of the loved one behind surgery doors wasn't known. But Andy's injuries weren't life threatening. They most assuredly had been, but the kid pulled through all on his own for hours. Traipsed through haunted woods, fought off a demon, and survived it all. He'd keep surviving, Sam was sure of it.

"I know," Dean replied, tone both exhausted and terse at the same time. He started up that absent-minded rubbing across his sternum, and Sam knew he was thinking of Cas.

"She'll be alright, too."

Dean dropped his arm after casting Sam a warning look. Not a topic he wanted to talk about. He sat up straighter, leg starting to jiggle against the metal leg of his chair as he stared past the nurses' station at the doors Andy had disappeared behind. He didn't want to think about Cas, because there was nothing they could do about it.

At least, not right this second.

Dean bit his cheek and pushed the thought away. They had enough on their hands taking care of Andy. He'd just have to trust that Sammy was right (since he usually was), and Cas would be fine until they

figured out a way to get her back.

-o-o-o-

In Washington D.C, as the sun rose on the city of politicians, agencies, and museums, Victor Henriksen was only an hour into his day and already elbow-deep in reports. Cross-checking the files beside his keyboard as he typed, the FBI agent looked up from his work when David Attingwood, a relatively young data analysist known for a rock steady work ethic and even more so for his enthusiasm on the job, tapped the edge of a paper he was holding against the surface of Victor's desk. Given the thickness of the cardstock and the glossy sheen of the white back, it was a photograph of some sort.

"You are not gonna believe what just came in."

Victor raised an eyebrow at the overly chipper agent. David had taken a strange liking to Henriksen almost from the get-go. He was just about the only one, given Victor's propensity for burying himself in his work with ferocious concentration (the agency shrink had called it obsessive, if he remembered his psych eval correctly). So a junior agent not being terrified of him was the talk of the town, given that everyone at the water cooler was fairly sure the young man was gay and just about no one could get a proper read on Victor, despite his referencing multiple ex-wives over the years. In fact, the 'multiple' part was most likely what added fuel to the fire that was the J. Edgar Hoover Rumor Mill.

It irked the astutely professional Agent Henriksen more than it probably ought to. Data Analyst Dave didn't even seem to know there was a rumor mill, let alone that he was a monthly feature, at least.

David eagerly held out the photo, flipping it around so Victor finally got a look at what it was. The reports only half finished on his computer were completely forgotten about as he reached forward and snagged the photo from David's hands. He blinked at the grainy, black and white image before looking back up at the data analyst.

"Where was this taken?"

"Black Hills National Forest, South Dakota," David answered with a grin. "Six hours ago. A Ranger spotted smoke and headed for the scene, only it wasn't a forest fire, it was a funeral pyre in the middle of an abandoned mining town."

"How many bodies?" Victor asked, practically on rote. He stared at the

photo in his hands, the best lead he'd gotten yet in the largely stagnant, often outlandish case he'd been working on for the better part of six months. It was a nighttime capture of a '67 Chevy Impala, black or a very dark blue, license plate KAZ 2Y5. But what Victor really cared about were the faces of the two men riding in the front seat. The passenger was half turned towards the back, but even partially obscured and only a profile, that was very clearly Sam Winchester. And the driver was undeniably an angry-looking Dean.

They had 'em. They finally had 'em.

"Three: two male, one female." David rolled on the balls of his feet. "Partially burned, about eighty-five percent, so identification is going to be a while. Rapid City and Custer PD are both working in junction with the Forest Service, but given that Ranger Danson's 'dash cam winner of the week' here alerted us the second they ran facial recognition, it's about to become a federal case."

Henriksen stood from his desk, reports now completely forgotten, and pulled his suit jacket off the back of his chair. "Get me on the next flight to South Dakota."

"I'm not your secretary," Agent Attingwood huffed in wry amusement, smirk wide and only the least bit smug, as he handed over a second piece of paper. A freshly printed flight itinerary, the United States Air Force seal bright on the top of the page. "But already done, boss. You leave in two hours."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Dun dun duuuuuun! Booyah, FBI not only on scene, but really on scene! (Run, boys!)

Amanda and Scott: ...so...I did it again, apparently. I went and made minor or original characters likeable enough that people didn't want them to die... I want to apologize, but making OCs feel real seems to be a thing with me. I didn't even know it was before this story. Straight up, Angela Garrett taught me this about myself. But I do apologize for any attachments formed. I'm not *trying* to be that cruel. I save that for the intentional crap I pull with Dean and Cas XD.

Cold Oak/Season 2 Ending: Many people were thinking this was it, that this was a clever way to kick of the Season 2 Finale, with Sam in Cold Oak. And I...I...guys, you mean I could have WRAPPED it up HERE?! *turns to muse* WHY DIDN'T YOU

THINK OF THAT? Nooo, we have to have ANOTHER TWENTY CHAPTERS to this season! *head thud* *head thud* *head thud*

The muse's response, you might wonder? That bitch shrugged, said something about Uriel and Heaven and Cas tied up in need of rescue and Gabriel coming into play (not necessarily in that order) and then she just sauntered off set to find a lollipop or maybe take a nap.

-_-

Chapter 83: Season 2: Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Medical Mumbo Jumbo: So I do a lot of research for this story – like a stupid amount. Like looking up actual haunted mining towns in South Dakota, finding the one with the closest name to Cold Oak, then using it's county and local Forest Service Roads to keep the story *as accurate as possible* because I am a freak who enjoys that sort of stuff buried in stories – but one thing I am no good at is medical research. That stuff takes multiple layers of combing through to get a handle on and there's a lot of contradictory information out there on the internet. I like research, I hate going in circles. So there's gonna be some winging it in this story when we come to injuries and treatment! Hopefully I managed to cleverly disguise my utter lack of knowledge beneath broad statements and general vagueness that doesn't read like vagueness :D

Review Replies: I am quite behind in this, but hoping to get back to the majority of you throughout the day! I seem to be on an every-three-chapters schedule. Also, I have to confess to the ff dot users that I am better at answering comments on A03, as their system is easier for it. But I am still trying to get to everyone, because answering you all, even with a simple thank you, is important to me!

Chapter Warnings: The boys finally, finally get a break. Andy needs patching up via actual professions, Sam and Dean need sleep via actual beds, and Persephone needs other things entirely via a drunk Prophet and the Winchester's personal stash.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 50

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chuck stared at his editorial assistant, less than subtly, from the safety of his writing desk. She'd finished the most recent chapter almost a full minute ago, lowering the papers into her lap and now was just…

staring at them. The writer was trying – and failing – not to notice. Or think about it. Or let it get to him once he did think about it. Or think about how much he was letting it get to him that he was thinking about it.

Steph was being quiet. Really quiet. She didn't often have much to say about the story, but she wasn't usually *quiet*, either. Hesitantly, and with the kind of nerves of steel that whispered *'well...she hasn't told you you sucked yet…?'*, Chuck cleared his throat.

"What- uh…what did you think?"

Stephanie turned to him with a deep inhale in and an oddly blank expression, as if she'd forgotten he was there altogether and the discovery of him was less than enlightening. Man, he knew quiet wasn't good. Quiet was never good. *He* should have just stayed quiet.

"Azazel is gone?" she asked, voice finally breaking the weird tension in the room created entirely and felt only by Chuck. The writer blinked at the question, the least of what he'd been expecting her to say, if she was going to say anything.

"Uh…well, not forever." The writer shrugged a little self-consciously and then tried for a smile, thinking maybe his editorial assistant was worried about where the story might go now. "Just back to hell. Can't kill my best villain."

The curve of her round face twitched in a smile that was anything but happy, and Chuck tried, again, not to read too much into that terrifying look. It reminded him of that woman in a blouse and high heels that he'd first greeted on his doorstep three months ago.

"And To- the other demon that was with him?"

Chuck blinked again. Even slower this time. And again for good measure.

"Uh…" What a weird question. The demon – which Chuck was referring to as Tom in his head because he had an uncle named Tom and he'd needed some sort of name for him other than 'that other demon, number uh maybe sixteen I think' – was kind of a nobody to the story. Sure, with Azazel back in Hell now, he figured the demon might become a somebody now…. Huh. He might actually have to name him for real in the story.

Wonder if 'Tom' is really the way to go…

"Right, the uh…Azazel's other protégé…demon…guy." Chuck flapped his hand in a dismissive wave and turned back to his computer. "He's a minor character. He'll get a new meatsuit quick enough."

That seemed to end whatever tension Chuck had imagined all on his own anyway. Steph lingered in her chair for another few moments, then got up and placed the chapter on his desk, beside his laptop. He paused in his writing, keys silencing as his fingers stilled, and looked cautiously over and up at her. She was still standing there. Usually she'd be back in her chair by now or packing up. It was actually past the usual time she left…

Steph smiled at him prettily, and this time Chuck was definitely reminded of that woman on his doorstep with her terrifyingly tight hair bun and ugly purse. "Chuck?"

The writer gulped.

"Do you know how to hotwire a car?"

-o-o-o-

It was well into the early-hours of the next morning before the Winchesters heard any news. One or two of the nurses had come out now and then to inform them of Andy's state, what stage of surgery they were in or what test they were running. X-rays for his throat, MRI's for the head trauma the brothers hadn't even known about, heat wraps and fluids for the blood loss and hypothermia, and an astronomical number of stiches for the defensive wounds to his hands and arms, as well as an array of other cuts and scrapes across his body.

Boy was beat up, apparently. Not that the Winchesters were surprised. They'd seen the damage firsthand.

"What about his neck?" Dean would ask every time. What the hell had happened to their friend's neck, and what kind of damage were they looking at, what kind of treatment, here. But the nurses would only shake their heads, a pitying kind of horror crossing their faces each time. It wasn't until a doctor emerged in the early hours near dawn that they got any sort of answer.

"You gentlemen are with the FBI?" were the first words out of the doctor's outh, tone a touch skeptical, as he finally emerged from behind the double doors. His ID hanging from a pocket of his pristinely white lab coat read *Dr. Richards*, and he was regarding them

and their less than pristine jeans and flannels with obvious hesitation.

Rude, Dean thought, though he didn't necessarily blame the guy.

"We were off duty when we got the call," the younger of the two Winchesters answered the question that hadn't been asked with a shrug and a weak smile.

The story they'd given the rest of the hospital staff was that they were on the trail of a killer – couldn't say any more, confidential case – and Andy, their junior agent, had gone missing in the middle of it, almost twenty-four hours ago. They'd been out searching for him when they got a call from him, and the kid was able to Morse code them his location. The most believable lie, after all, was the one closest to the truth. In the meantime, this guy could judge or doubt them all he wanted, just so long as he patched up their friend.

"Is he alright?" Dean asked gruffly, in a far less amenable mood than Sam.

"He's not in any immediate danger," Dr. Richards confirmed, holding his hands out in front of him like every doctor explaining medicine ever. "But he's got a long road of recovery ahead of him."

Sam and Dean exchanged relieved, though complicated, glances.

"Before I get into the extent of his wounds…" Hank Richards hedged hesitantly, looking between the two agents and their obvious concern for the third currently being stitched up in his OR. "I need to ask. Usually, at this point in an attack as severe as this, we would be informing the police…"

He let the words trail off in a clear indicator that the ball was in their court for next steps. Hank didn't actually know the protocol when an FBI agent was involved; Sturgis didn't see a lot of federal officers in their hospital.

"Our supervisor's already on it," Sam answered quickly, but not too quickly. He might still be pretty green when it came to committing a felony, but he'd been lying his whole life. "He's got local LEO's and the Forest Service securing the scene."

"You can call him if you feel it's necessary." Dean dug into his back pocket, pulling out his wallet and Bobby's bullshit business card – the FBI one – from within. The way the Doc took the proffered card and slid it into his front pocket with a nod, not even looking at it,

reassured the Winchesters that he'd never feel the need to make that call. "In the meantime, we'll handle the interview of our agent ourselves."

No need to involve the police.

"That's going to be a bit tricky, I'm afraid." Dr. Richards followed the card with his hands, sliding both into the large pockets on the front of his coat. "His throat wasn't just burned. It took us a while to get at it, since we weren't expecting that level of damage when we first went in, but… It looks like his throat was slashed."

"Slashed?" Sam echoed, head ducking forward in disbelief. He looked at his partner, distress clear in his expression, and for good reason. The other agent looked a bit green around the gills.

"Yes, someone made a rough, shallow incision from here-" Hank raised his finger to point at a spot on the left side of his neck, tucked beneath the edge of his square jaw- "to here, high up on the neck and just under the chin. We had to do a lot of repair work on the inside of his throat, but he's lucky, really. Up there, you start running into extra layers of muscles controlling the jaw. It's more to cut through to hit the carotid, which curves inward there to dip under the jaw. Most wounds to the lower throat bleed out in minutes. The location of the cut probably saved his life."

"That's where the larynx is," Sam mentioned, voice oddly quiet, knowing what Andy's assailant had likely been after with such an attack.

The doctor spared them a sympathetic look. "Yes, and it took the full brunt of the slice. We might have been able to salvage his vocal chords from the cut alone but…the burn was *electrical*, which I can't even begin to understand, let alone explain how or what caused it." Here, Dr. Richards shook his head in a little disbelief of his own. He slid his hands back into his pockets, offering the two men a small, compassionate shrug of his shoulders. "I've never seen anything like it. But due to the current that traveled through his system, there was a lot of damage to the soft tissue and muscles in his neck. His vocal chords were completely fried; there's nothing we can do to repair them."

"So he'll never talk again," Dean muttered, running a hand over his mouth and working his jaw to keep from clenching it. "Okay. That's… that's fine, he'll pull through. That's what matters."

"Agreed," Hank said with a small smile. Talking to the relatives and friends was always hard, but he'd learned firsthand that those able to accept and move towards treatment were already ahead of the game. He shouldn't be surprised from federal agents, he supposed.

"Doctor, is there any other damage from the electrocution?" Sam asked, big brown eyes filled with worry for Andy's future. He'd hazarded half a guess that the burn hadn't been from fire, given the lack of charred skin when he'd inspected the wound and helped Andy wrap his neck. An electric burn, like a lightning strike, had been a possibility, but made less sense than some other form of heat. Not to mention it came with far more secondary risks Sam wasn't ready to consider.

"We shocked his heart out of AFib," the doc mentioned completely casually, and Dean jerked. Sam understood what he'd been asking, but Dean clearly hadn't thought as far as heart complications. Dr. Richards wasn't startled by the reaction but did seem to realize his mistake, and directed his next words specifically to the shorter of the two agents. "It's a perfectly normal procedure. The electricity knocked his heart out of rhythm – atrial fibrillation, AFib for short – and we simply put it back on beat."

"Right." Dean didn't seem nearly settled by that, but the lack of concern by the doctor and, even more so, Sam helped him relax. Well, sort of. As relaxed as he'd been before he found out they'd been shocking Andy's ticker. Which was to say, not relaxed at all.

Dean had rather personal feelings about electrocution and damaged hearts, after all.

"The rest of the damage is minor. He lost a lot of blood and his core temperature was pretty low, but he's already mostly back to normal levels now, and we've got him on his second transfusion. We don't expect any lasting complications from it. His MRI scans came back clean, we're running the gambit of antibiotics through his system, and we'll be monitoring him for a couple of days to be sure he doesn't pick anything up from that burn. There was some significant ulterior bruising to his windpipe and esophagus beneath the rest of the damage that will take time to heal."

Meaning someone had tried to strangle the kid before they'd upped the ante to a knife. Dean was really, *really* starting to hate this Jonathon kid.

"He'll be on intravenous nutrients for the next twenty-four hours, then we can switch to a liquid diet and, eventually, soft foods. But nothing solid for at least a week, I'm afraid," the doc continued, not noticing (or at least not calling out) Dean's increasingly dark mood. "There were defensive wounds on his hands and arms that we're stitching up, some cuts and abrasions, one hell of a skinned knee. All consistent with running in a wooded area. Looks like he might have tussled with a wild animal of some sort, too. We found some evidence of claw marks, but given you said you found him in the Park, and he would have been stumbling around at night covered in blood, running into a predator really isn't that unheard of. Luckily, he seems to have fought the creature off with minor injuries."

"He's a tough kid," Dean practically growled out, and Sam nudged him with an elbow. The older man cleared his throat and repeated his words with a more encouraging ring than the dark thing they'd started as.

Hank had seen far worse reactions, so it didn't really faze him. "I can't begin imagine the entire ordeal he's been through, gentlemen. I'm only in charge of his physical recovery, but I caution you both to get him some psychological help, too. Surviving an ordeal like that is going to leave the kind of scars we can't fix here."

"We understand, doctor. He'll be taken care of," Sam assured, tone still very gentle. It wasn't quite his speaking-to-a-victim voice, but it was definitely his hospital-staff-please-continue-to-fix-my-friend-slash-family voice. "Can we see him?"

"He's heavily sedated now," Dr. Richards answered with a steady shake of his head. "And he'll need to stay on the heavy duty pain killers for at least the next couple of days. Frankly, I can't believe he was conscious when you brought him in. He needs to rest."

"We won't disturb him," Sam insisted, words as placating as his hunched over body language. "But we need to file a report. We'll need his clothes, take pictures of the wounds, that sort of thing."

Anything to get them in, to see Andy with their own eyes, and then ward the shit out of that hospital room.

"We've already taken photos of his injuries. Standard procedure in any attack. I can have them sent to you, and if you leave the nurses with your contact information, I'll be sure to file a complete report for your investigation." The doctor nodded with the end of his sentence, a

finality that had both Winchesters frustrated. Hank seemed to pick up on it, though. He hesitated, realizing that their push to see the injured agent had nothing to do with duty or responsibility. The man bit back a sigh and tilted his head, relenting. "You can see him, if you're quiet and don't disturb him. No more than five minutes, and only *one* of you."

The doctor put extra emphasis on the last words when both men lit up with relief. The two exchanged a quick glance, speaking a silent language that Dr. Richards didn't even try to decipher.

"Thanks, Doc." Dean grinned his first real smile since before they'd left Baby a mile outside of Rivergrove, Oregon and walked right on into this nightmare.

Dr. Richards nodded absently at their gratitude. "Now, if you gentlemen don't mind, I need to get on that report."

It was a dismissal if they'd ever heard one. Sam reached out to shake the man's hand gratefully. "Of course, thank you, doctor."

Hands back in his pockets, Dr. Richards gave them a nod in farewell and then turned on his heel. He checked in briefly at the nurse's station, then headed back through those double doors to see to his patient. The woman behind the counter stood as he left, gesturing to the two men.

"I'll show you to your friend's room. Just one of you, for now. Doctor's orders."

They both nodded while Sam stepped forward, the two already having agreed on which one of them would check on Andy in the six-second glance they'd shared. Dean, in the meanwhile, would ward as much of the hospital as he could covertly get his hands on.

"I'll meet you outside," he said to his brother. Sam nodded at him before he followed the nurse down the hall to see their friend. Dean watched him disappear around a corner, then rubbed a hand through his short hair and headed for elevators. He'd start with those first, then make his way to the lobby, and every other entrance. No demon was getting within a hundred feet of this hospital.

-o-o-o-

Chuck had not known how to hotwire a car. He'd stared at Persephone for several long moments of confused silence – enough so that the

woman had to resist the urge to snap in front of his eyes to make sure he was still in there – before confessing that, uh, no, that…wasn't really something he'd ever done before.

"Not even for research?" she'd asked sweetly. "The Winchesters hotwire vehicles all the time."

Chuck rubbed at the back of his neck, avoiding her gaze. "Ah- no…I… sort of gloss over those parts. I just say they did it and then…you know."

Persephone, knowing the writer rather well by that point, just hummed, noise filled with as much disapproval as she could fit in it. It did the trick. The man all but tripped over himself pulling up the internet browser on his computer and a website called YouTube. She leaned over his shoulder as he began searching for videos on how to properly hotwire a car.

She had one such video pulled up now on Chuck's phone, which she had misappropriated after encouraging the man to imbibe in several more evening drinks than was his usual. He shouldn't miss it, or his credit card, until tomorrow morning, and Persephone would be sure to return them before then.

With the phone propped up on the dashboard and video playing, she reached under the steering column of the car once again, grabbing the ends of two wires she had already cut and stripped. This would be her seventh attempt to hotwire the vehicle. It would seem, Persephone was realizing, that humans greatly exaggerated the ease of such tasks in their entertainment. Why, she could not fathom. If movies and television made this task far more realistic, it would certainly discourage people from attempting it. She would have just stolen Chuck's car keys instead of his phone.

The wires sparked and the engine rumbled to life. Persephone dropped them in surprise, and the engine died.

"To the crows with you!" she hissed in Sumerian. Modern curses were still…unfamiliar on her tongue. Though there were several she was coming to like and needed to practice more.

Grabbing for the wires, Persephone pressed her cheek to the steering wheel once more, cautious not to lean too much of her weight to it. The first time she had, the thing had made a god awful blaring noise, and Persephone had incidentally learned where the horn was located, as well as spent the next five minutes on lookout for anyone who

might have heard the noise. The two ends sparked once more, and this time the woman was quick to twist them together, permanently entangling them as the video instructed. The engine remained at a steady rumble as she cautiously released the wires and leaned back, waiting. When the car continued to run, Persephone let out a whoop of excitement, striking the edge of the steering wheel with the heel of her palm.

"Ha!" She took the phone off the dash, turning the video off and chucking the device into the passenger seat beside her. With a congratulatory huff of air, the woman composed herself and wrapped one hand around the gear shift. "Alright, step two."

Step two was driving, which couldn't possibly be as difficult as getting the car to run.

-o-o-o-

It only took three tries to hotwire the next car.

As it so happened, crashing was exceedingly easy, driving less so. Persephone confused both gear directionality, as well as the gas and brake pedals, applying far too much pressure to both at opposite, and ultimately very incorrect, times. The vehicle had not handled being driven into the parked car directly behind it very well at all. Persephone had also learned what a car alarm sounded like. Several of them going at once, in fact. Which was why she'd had to relocate entirely to find her next car.

The noise could still be faintly heard, actually, from her new location several blocks away.

A few more YouTube videos and Persephone was confident she would not make any of those mistakes a second time. She was, however, never trusting human entertainment ever again. It might prove problematic beyond this fiasco, given the majority of her education in modern society was via that medium. Perhaps she could discuss an alternate, more realistic source of information with Chuck when she returned his wallet and phone.

Persephone slid her second stolen vehicle into drive – YouTube had also taught her the difference between the little letters and numbers beside the gear stick, a valuable lesson for her second attempt at making the car go in the correct direction at the correct speed – and pulled away from the curb.

-o-o-o-

Sam did, indeed, ward the shit out of that room. Given that the hospital thought Andy was a federal agent and there had been an attack on his life, the kid had a private room, which suited Sam's needs well enough. The beanstalk of a Winchesters pulled a small pouch of salt out of his jacket pocket the minute the nurse pulled the door back closed behind him. He got a generous line going across the single windowsill and again on the small ledge atop the doorframe. He drew a general ward against all things evil into the back of the door, then shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the hook, the fabric covering the symbol quite inconspicuously.

The hunter eyed the rest of the room over his shoulder while he rifled through the pockets of his hanging jacket. Sam pulled out a hex bag. Their last. Dean had come back from a trip to the Impala about two hours ago, after the nurses gave the most recent update and it sounded like they might actually see Andy sometime soon. The older Winchester had come with salt, a Sharpie, canteens of holy water, and a hex bag which he pulled out of his pocket and handed over to Sam.

"It's the last one we got," he said, voice casual but they both knew what he was thinking about. Or, morelike *who*. Cas was the one who had gotten them the ingredients and without her, they weren't even sure they could restock. There were other ways to ward and hide themselves, of course, but nothing quite as succinct. That had been the whole point of the angel's hex bags to start with.

More than that, it was just another reminder of where Cas was (and wasn't).

Azazel had taken and burned Sam's hex bag. Andy's too. Dean walked out of Rivergrove (or, well, flew out) with his intact; apparently a session of Beat-The-Crap-Out-of-A-Winchester by Demons Anonymous did not require the removal of it. That, or Azazel's minions just hadn't thought to check for one.

"Baby's still got hers," Dean added, since technically it wasn't their last, *last* one. But removing the Impala's primary source of cover from eyes demonic and celestial alike was a last resort if Dean had ever heard one. Keeping her off radar also kept all manner of trackers, spells, and eyes off the Winchesters.

Also, after the last one had gone missing via suited-angel-douchebag-of-the-week, Dean had made the new one's location a lot more

discreet.

"We'll call Bobby," Sam had replied, voice still soft, trying not to trigger any of his brother's multiple emotional constipated traumas at the moment. "See if he can get any of the ingredients. We'll work on the ones he can't."

Dean nodded, though they both knew that if Bobby Singer couldn't get his hands on something occult, the Winchesters sure weren't going to have any more luck.

So, Sam slid their last hex bag between the frame of the hospital bed and the mattress, making sure to tuck it far enough in that no nurse would stumble on it accidentally when changing the sheets. It would keep Andy out of visual range of any demon looking for him, at least for now. But that wouldn't keep Andy safe alone. Not completely, at least.

The younger Winchester pulled one last protection of out of his front jean pocket. Sam stared at the small, crudely formed Persian sleep coin, the head of a long-dead emperor staring up at him. With Azazel exorcised and trapped back in Hell, he didn't even know if Andy would need it. But he wasn't willing to risk it, either. Sam slid the coin between two of the four pillows propping Andy up at a forty degree angle. For drainage, most likely, Sam thought, as he pulled back and studied his sleeping friend.

The doctors had wrapped his damaged throat, a hell of a lot better than Sam had managed, leaning over into the backseat of the Impala. Andy was pale, the circles beneath his eyes an unsettling blue-black, but his breathing was even. Despite the pallor of his skin, he looked pretty peaceful, considering everything the kid had gone through.

Sam sunk onto the edge of the bed slowly, staring at his friend. Their friend. At the moment, one of their only friends. Dean might say that was going to change, but Sam was more comfortable dealing in the present. And right now, Andy was their closest friend.

Probably the closest Sam had ever had. The only real one, actually. Brady had never known about his past, his family's business. And, it turned out, he'd been a demon for two of the four years Sam had thought they'd been friends. Before that…Sam didn't really think much about before Stanford. Certainly not in terms of friendships.

The young hunter's shoulders sagged as he finally let himself feel – really feel – everything that had happened. Rivergrove and the virus,

Azazel, losing Andy. Finding him again, in the kind of state where Sam still couldn't quite believe they hadn't lost him permanently.

God, he'd thought they'd really lost the kid. Yes, it had been logical to insist Andy was alive the entire time they were searching for him. It wouldn't have made sense for Azazel to stash Andy away only for him to bleed out in minutes. But Sam hadn't known. He really, truly hadn't. Staring at Andy now, injured, mute and powerless, but *alive*…. He didn't know how to feel.

Guilty. Incredibly guilty. Relieved. And happy, if he wasn't currently consumed by so many other, more pressing, negative emotions.

Sam scrubbed at his face and the water welling in his eyes. It wasn't just Andy. It was his own fear, experienced at some level almost constantly for the last forty-eight hours. Self-loathing, for the buzzing beneath his skin, his own weakness, a craving he had, even now, and an inability to protect those closest to him.

Azazel had only taken Andy, only hurt Andy, because he'd wanted something from Sam that the hunter hadn't been prepared to give.

It was Dean, too. And Cas. His brother was falling apart, keeping it together in appearance alone. Sam could read it in every tension-filled line of his body, every rigid muscle and stiff movement. Dean was radiating fury and fear from every pore, and Sam knew the older Winchester was approaching limits of his own.

It was three people lost at Cold Oak. Three 'special' kids whose lives Azazel had stolen. Like he'd stolen Max Miller's.

Sam sniffed back the rest of the waterworks in the near-silent room, wiping at his cheeks and eyes for the few tears that had slipped free. He climbed back to his feet, pulling the last item he had to give from his back pocket. Sam tucked the kid's phone, now fully charged, into Andy's limp hand, curling his fingers around it. It would be the first thing he would notice when he woke. The hunter crossed back over to the closed door, digging around his jacket some more for the charger. He made sure to plug the device in, though it was a bit of a challenge to get behind the heavy hospital bed frame to the only plug within distance. He'd have to bring an extension cord on their next visit or talk to the nurses.

Now Andy would have a phone that would never die, within reach at all times. Both Sam and Dean would be keeping their own phones on them twenty-four-seven. At least until they returned at the start of

visiting hours tomorrow.

Sam squeezed Andy's hand, took a quick moment to scribble a note – *'You're safe, the room is safe, text us when you wake up.'* – on a small memo pad beside Andy's bed, and headed for the door. He checked the room one more time, eyes scanning over potential weaknesses or flaws in his warding, but the hunter nodded with satisfaction and slipped back into the hall.

Andy would be safe until the Winchesters could come back in the morning.

-o-o-o-

Dean was waiting for him outside the hospital, leaning against the Impala, parked in the drop off rotunda outside the main entrance. At four in the morning, there really wasn't a lot of traffic – foot or vehicular – at the Sturgis Hospital. Sam sucked in a shivering breath of cold, early-winter, early-morning air that was thick with humidity. It was supposed to start raining soon, possibly in the form of sleet, or so the weatherman had reported several times throughout their time in the hospital, the local news running on a TV that hung in the corner of the waiting room. Sam resisted the urge to rub his arms.

How Andy had survived these temperatures in nothing but a t-shirt, wandering the woods for hours, Sam really didn't want to think about. He was just glad the rain hadn't come sooner, or they would have been looking for a popsicle out there in the woods.

If Dean noticed Sam's lack of jacket as the younger Winchester wound around to the other side of the car, he didn't say anything. Just cranked the heat as they both climbed in, pulled away from the curb, and headed to the nearest hotel. Dean had gotten friendly with one of the older, scarier nurses in the hospital in order to get them some additional information on Andy's condition. He'd come away with a good hotel close to the hospital, one or two decent restaurants nearby, and when they could return in the morning (a full thirty minutes before visiting hours, even. It was amazing what a well-placed compliment and a little shameless flirting could get you.)

The Winchesters had six and a half hours until visiting hours started. They needed sleep (as much as they could spare), a resupply run, and a plan. At least some sort of a plan. Any sort of a plan, actually. For what they were going to do with Andy. What they were going to do about Azazel and Hell. Did they even need to do anything? It sure as

hell felt like they needed to do something. Hell was getting too brazen, too daring. Too *close*. Something had to be done.

And then there was Cas.

Sam was under no illusion. The time would soon come when Dean would not be put off by his brother's calm and logic any longer. He would need action. Movement, however useless. An achievable goal with a strategy to get them to it.

In other words, a plan.

Well, they had six hours, Sam thought sarcastically. Plenty of time. But first, before anything else, *sleep.* In a very heavily warded motel room. And then an overdue call to Bobby in the morning.

-o-o-o-

She stood in front of the 1967 Chevy Impala, staring at the Kansas plates, the edges of her sneakers wet from the puddles still drying on the uneven asphalt of the parking lot. The car was a sleek black beneath fresh droplets of water, not all that different from the several renditions she'd seen on various covers of the *Supernatural* series. Persephone stared at the vehicle, then shifted her glowing green gaze to the motel room it was parked right outside of.

Sam Winchester was in that room. A dozen feet away, if that. Sleeping. Completely unaware. Perfectly vulnerable.

Persephone stared at that door, gaze sliding over to the window, curtains pulled closed, everything beyond dark and hidden away. Then she dropped to a crouch in front of the Impala's trunk, running her fingers over the lock cylinder. She dug out Chuck's phone once more, video already pulled up and ready to go, along with a set of lock picks from her purse. Courtesy of Chuck's stolen credit card and a hardware store three blocks from his house.

At this point, she was under no illusion of how difficult picking a lock would be, considering how easy the video in her hand made it look.

It took precious minutes, in which Persephone had to resist glancing towards that motel room door more than once. But when the trunk popped open of its own accord, the struggle was decidedly worth it. She stood, pulling the cool metal the rest of the way up, wincing slightly when it made a groaning sound louder than she'd expected. Green eyes did glance back towards the curtained window then, but

no light turned on inside.

Breathing out more than her first relieved breath since Chuck had passed out drunk on his couch and this endeavor began, Persephone reached into her purse and pulled out the papers the writer had gifted her almost a month ago. He'd had no idea what he had handed over when he'd given her the recipe to a hex bag capable of paralyzing demons, but Persephone didn't plan to let that information go to waste.

Unfortunately, the Winchester's personal supply was the only place she knew where to get the ingredients.

It had been a risky choice, coming after the same location Tom would first set his sights on the moment he got a new meatsuit. But with Azazel exorcised back to Hell (and what the *hell* had that creature in Rivergrove been, capable of performing an exorcism of that scale on a Prince of Hell? Chuck hadn't specified, only calling her '*Cas'*. The writer had been mysteriously – smugly – tightlipped when she'd asked him about it. Persephone feared she knew the answer, which made *this* moveall the riskier) and Tom missing a meatsuit, this was possibly the only chance she'd have to get those ingredients. The demon's first goal after he found a new host would be to relocate the Winchesters. Particularly so, since this 'Cas' person had not only iced his Boss but also transported the boys back to Sioux Falls, South Dakota (not completely confirming Persephone's suspicions, but certainly not dismissing them, either). Between identifying or killing that creature and finding the Winchesters, Tom's top priorities would be filled, leaving Persephone at least a few items down the checklist. Which meant, for the first time since Azazel had dug her out of her own personal hellhole, she had temporary freedom. Multiple days, at least, where she wouldn't be leashed to a motel room, under the supervision of a demon when he was around or she wasn't babysitting the Prophet.

The potential of turning that temporary freedom into a more permanent one was worth the risk.

Persephone reached into the trunk, lifting the trick bottom the *Supernatural* series had been pretty specific about, and stared at the arsenal of weapons, paraphernalia, and spell components within. Everything a growing hunter might need to battle the paranormal. With another look towards the room, lights still off and all else quiet, she started digging through the supplies for everything on Chuck's list.

-o-o-o-

Despite the fact that he hadn't slept in two days – Cas's chest-draining making that number feel a lot closer to ten – Dean did not sleep well. He might have been out as soon as his head hit the pillow, but there was anything but rest in the three hours he managed to get.

He dreamt of Hell. Of fire and darkness. Of an empty void he was eternally lost in, searching for someone he couldn't remember. He dreamt of Cas, trench coat tossed over the library chair, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, eyes a magnificent, terrifying, horribly wrong red as he stared at Dean with a smile that promised he'd skin the flesh from the hunter's bones and enjoy it.

Dean woke up gasping, chest aching and sweat leaving his t-shirt damp.

The man from the future rubbed viciously at the hole in his chest, but no amount of pressure or friction could reach it. Dean climbed to his feet, leaving sweat-soaked sheets behind as he stumbled to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. He stood in the silent room afterward, lungs still too tight, needing too much air. The walls too close, the room too small. Sam's familiar breathing was a comfort in the too-dark room. Dean leaned back into the bathroom, switching the light on and pulling the door almost completely shut as he did. It wasn't much, but the disgustingly yellow light gave the illusion of warmth in an otherwise cold and empty space.

At least, Dean told himself as much.

Unable to get those red eyes out of his head or the warmth back in his chest, Dean crossed the room, walking right past the empty bed. He knew he wouldn't be getting anymore sleep. Collapsing in the chair next to the window, his back to a corner with Sam safely in view, Dean took another deep breath and tried to expand his lungs past what they seemed willing to give. When had he lost all his lung capacity? Was it something Cas had done to him, or something she'd taken away?

Movement – the flutter of the edges of the curtains resettling after he'd sat down – drew his attention to the window. Dean pulled back the dingy fabric, just a couple inches, and glanced through the rain-speckled window to the wet, dark, and quiet night.

-o-o-o-

Persephone took deep, even breaths, back pressed to the far side of the Impala, and counted off the seconds in her head. When she reached five minutes without the sound of the motel door opening, the woman chanced a glance around the edge of the muscle car. The curtains were swaying ever so slightly in the window, the faintest light coming from beyond, but all else was silent and still. She stared at those curtains, waiting for Dean Winchester's face to appear once more, but nothing happened.

She should leave. The ingredients were safely in her purse; she had what she needed. In fact, she'd been in the process of closing the trunk when that window had lit up. It hadn't been a full light, like the main room would surely give off, but to her enhanced eyes, the shift in light had been as obvious as night and day. Persephone had to drop to the ground, holding the damn trunk closed so it wouldn't pop back up and give her away.

She counted off another three minutes. Still nothing. Slowly, Persephone stood from the cold ground, jeans now annoying wet, and eyed that window and the hunters she knew were just a sheet of glass away. Slowly – *quietly* – the woman leaned on the metal surface until the trunk clicked shut.

Still no movement.

She really should just leave. But there was one more thing Persephone had planned to do, and it would be a shame to give up on it now, having come all this way. The woman eyed the driver side door. She knew where Dean had hidden the last of those hex bags that warded them from all manner of creature. Their only one left, if Chuck's writing was accurate. Persephone tapped her finger against the side of the car in contemplation, staring at that door. If she did it, she wouldn't have time to pick the lock, not in full view of the hunter should the older Winchester forgo sleep and decide to check the parking lot again. Not with her currently lock-picking skill level, at least.

Persephone strode over to the door, eyes darting to the window one last time, and pulled the vehicle door open, heedless of the crunch as the lock gave beneath her strength. Dean was going to be pissed, but what did she care? She didn't plan to stick around for that reaction. Persephone dropped to a crouch once more, sliding her fingers along the driver's side dashboard, around and over the lip of the air vent.

According to Chuck, it hadn't worked for years, so it made the perfect

hiding spot for something small. She pulled the ventilated plastic covering off with a dig of her nails and a sharp tug. It came free silently, and Persephone stuck three fingers into the dark, rectangular space. With little struggle, she pulled out the hex bag, it's tied off top pinched between her pointer and middle fingers.

The woman sat it in the palm of her hand and stared at the innocuous little thing beneath a clouded over moon.

If she took it, the Winchesters would be back on Hell's radar by dawn. While that didn't particularly bother her – Azazel was too good to lose track of the hunters permanently, so what did it matter if they were found sooner rather than later – she did rather despise Tom, in particular. It would be particularly disappointing if anything she did here tonight aided in his efforts to relocate the Winchesters. But having a handy-dandy invisible shield against demons and angels – *archangels* in particular– was too tempting to pass up. Perhaps if she could just open it up and get a look at the components, she could figure out the rest by herself.

Of course, she should have left the trunk open if she was going to make a second supply run.

Persephone glanced back towards the motel room, her eyes glowing green in the night as she weighed each option.

-o-o-o-

Dean fell asleep against all intentions, sitting in the chair in the dimly lit room, head lolling back against the drawn curtains. He didn't dream again, but when he jerked awake two hours later, it was to a feeling of eyes on him and someone in the room with them.

He was up, knife in hand, blinking at the empty space, still lit by the partially cracked bathroom door and rising sun outside the window. There was no one there but Sammy, still snoring away and getting a much better night's sleep than he had managed.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Gotta be honest, I'm torn by this chapter. I read it, and I like it. So I walk away, and I find myself thinking… 'what even happens in this chapter? Where's the good stuff?' Then I scrambled back to my computer for another read-through, thinking I have to improve it, which leaves me like…huh, no, I like it. So I walk away aaaaaand I find myself- *head thud, head

thud, head thud*

Despite being the kind of reader who enjoys the plot development and low-key chatter chapters more than the action ones (though I do, oh-so love the action), as a writer I seem the opposite. Like, if I'm not keeping you all hyped up on chaos-chaos-guns-explosions-chaos-and-that-sweet-sweet-adrenaline, y'all might not like the story anymore - . -

Human brains are dumb, guys.

P.S. Do not feel like you need to assuage my insecurities. I'm just rambling cuz it's good for you all to know where my head is at, and even better (I suppose) for *me* to know where my head is at.

But, um, where's Henrisken? *Siiiiiigh* He's coming.

And Cas? *bigger sigh* Also coming.

And what about- Look, I'm VAF and I can't help it! Back on chapter 46, I decided to sit down and plan out the rest of Season 2 chapter by chapter, just for an estimate of how many we had left. I briefly (veeeery briefly) outlined chapters 47-63, which got me to the season finale.

I have since written up to Chapter 58, and guys…I have only crossed off the events of 47 and 48 in my outline. Two events….took….TWELVE….CHAPTERS….GUYS.

head thud, head thud, head thud

Okay, I lied. Assuage me. Tell me you all like the fact I'm so verbose it hurts. Because it friggin' huuuuuuuuurts!

head thud, head thud, head thud

No, no, deep breaths. Deeeeep breaths Silence. Who cares how long the story gets? Or how many years it takes you to finish? As long as you're still enjoying, and they're still enjoying it, and your verbosity is neither boring nor pointless. Right?

…Right?

Guys?

Are those crickets I hear out there?

Guuuuuuuuuuuuuuuys!

Till next time,
Silence

P.P.S. Remember that you all can tell me to stop posting such long A/Ns at anytime. Although, not gonna lie, I get great enjoyment (translation: weird satisfaction) out of talking (*cough* ranting *cough*) to you all.

Chapter 84: Season 2: Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Hi guys, welcome back! Going forward, I'm going to try to be more aggressive about Chapter References for you all. We had a lot of people who (very helpfully!) admitted they forgot Persephone was in the story or didn't remember much about who she was. Thank you for being honest about that, guys. It is definitely something I need to keep in mind. This is a beast of a story and you all only get to read it a little bit at a time. Some characters or sub-plots don't come up for ten or so chapters, which is the equivalent of about four months for you guys (Oi vey!) So no worries, there. I will try to be better about putting things-to-remember at the start of each chapter.

Please continue to flag things you don't remember reading about or feel I should mention at the start of a chapter :)

Chapter Reference – Human Toe Mushrooms: For those who might not remember what is inside Castiel's hex bags, see **Chapter 58: Season 2: Chapter 25** for a refresher! The important thing to recall are the Japanese Mushrooms that look like human toes ;)

Chapter References – Bleeding Heart/Azazel's Girl: For those who don't remember waaaay, way long ago when we introduced Persephone, Sam mentioned she had been angry in his vision about the loss of life in Gomorrah. At the time, Dean wondered why Azazel would go dig up 'some bleeding heart.' See **Chapter 53: Season 2: Chapter 20** for a refresher. Last Dean and Sam heard/knew of Persephone, she had phoned Bobby under false pretenses to get the boys to go to Rivergrove, Oregon. Dean recognized the trap, and he and Sam realized Azazel had an unidentified girl leading them around. (Sa also recalled bumping into her in the bar). See **Chapter 73: Season 2: Chapter 40** for a refresher.

Chapter Warnings: The boys give Bobby a long overdue call about their no-longer-missing Jedi, Bobby's being awesome as always (because of course he is; he's Bobby), the Winchesters are in for a surprise when they head to the hospital (Dean is piiiiiissed), and Andy's finally waking up to face some facts he'd rather keep right on not facing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 51

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"'Bout time you boys called. Ya idjits.'

Sam leaned his head back against the headboard, the cheap thing thudding into the motel wall with his weight. It wasn't secured all that well. Definitely could use some screws tightened. The younger Winchester closed his eyes, both drinking and breathing in the irritated, tough love of their surrogate father figure, coming through the speaker of Dean's phone. It was a balm, really. Sort of telling of their childhood, that Bobby's gruff voice was at the top of Sam's comfort zone.

He'd barely gotten a full four hours of incredibly restless, nightmare-filled sleep before their alarm clock went off. Dean was already upright on the other bed, bare feet flat on the ugly carpet, phone in his hand and that hand on his knee. Given his wet hair and the damp towel around his neck – already showered and half-dressed less than five hours since they'd first gotten to the cheap motel – Sam doubted his brother had slept any better.

"Yeah, yeah," Dean groused back, running one end of the towel over his freshly washed hair, sending a spray of little droplets onto the mussed sheets. "We've been kinda busy here, Bobby."

There was a pause down the line, one both Winchesters could practically envision, before Bobby asked, voice a tad gentler, "How's the kid doing?"

Green eyes met hazel, but Sam let his brother do the talking. The younger Winchester was exhausted, in a bone-deep, buzzing sort of way that didn't speak of good things to come.

"He's a mess," Dean answered honestly. "Throat's all hacked up. He's never gonna talk again."

All information that Bobby already knew. They'd kept him updated as possible through a series of texts stretched over the hours, at least

until the older hunter had called it a night, keeping his phone on him for emergencies. Seven hours away with his own hospital patient to keep half an eye on and having been woken in the middle of the night the previous day by the same rag-tag group, Bobby wasn't gonna have a lot of help to offer from afar. Fresh eyes in the morning would do them more than a grumpy, tired old man in the middle of the night. Reasoning the Winchester hadn't rightly been able to argue with.

"Yeah, well, he's tough. He'll pull through."

Bobby had only met Andy twice in the three months he'd been puppy-dogging the pair of brothers. The first was in the middle of a hunt, neither Sam nor Dean available to talk to the older man as he walked them through how to kill the freak of the week. So the phone had been hastily tossed to Andy, who relayed Bobby's instruction from the sidelines as Dean fought a Daeva (yelling, all the while, about how the hell one fought a friggin' *shadow*) and Sam built a magnesium flare from the absolutely-not-flare-intended components they had lying around.

"Well…cool talking to you, dude. Thanks for saving our skins." Andy had grinned into the phone after the light finally burst into existence, bright and sudden enough to banish the shadow creature. Now they had time to put together the spell to eradicate the beast completely. At least, that's what Sam had said the moment they realized – belatedly and with wide, dread-filled eyes – just what it was they were dealing with. Up until the damn thing had pinned them down in the corner of an abandoned warehouse down by the docks, the Winchesters had thought they were dealing with a spirit. Salt rounds didn't do *shit* to a Daeva. "You, uh, you know the ritual to kill it next, too, right?"

Bobby just huffed down the line and called him an idjit. A doubting idjit, at that.

The second had been face to face, on a routine check-in as the Winchesters drove close enough to South Dakota to warrant a stop at the Singer Salvage Yard. Andy tromped right on up to the gruff old hunter and gave him a hug, the words, *'I hear you're awesome, Bobby,'* spoken with such confidence that they might as well have been laid down in law. Bobby just stood there blinking, slightly red, and definitely flustered with that *I'm-a-grumpy-old-scary-man-I-have-no-emotions-you-will-not-make-me-feel-no-eew-get-away* expression all hunters owned. It was practically a requirement to get into the job in the first place.

Needless to say, the kid had earned a place in Bobby's teddy-bear heart, reluctant as it may have first been given.

"Yeah, he'll be alright," Dean answered Bobby's firm claim that Andy would pull through, spirit and all. He didn't doubt it, but he also wouldn't blame the kid if it wasn't that easy. Andy had an indomitable spirit, an attitude that never wavered, but Dean couldn't help but think, *maybe this.* Maybe this one would be enough. Maybe this would be the time.

Losing his girl had done its best, but Andy hadn't laid down and died. Dean had no doubt that Tracy's death at his brother's hands had been chipping away at the kid, bit by bit. The temptation of a Crossroads demon in Mississippi was proof of that. But it hadn't conquered the kid. Azazel haunting his dreams, monsters and demons and things that went bump in the night, and near death experiences so near they might as well have been a Winchester Stamp of Approval death experience (those usually required actual dying, but for Andy, they both agreed he'd come close enough).

None of it had stopped their Jedi yet.

But losing his powers and his ability to communicate, all in one blow, all because he'd decided to associate with the Winchesters…

Dean wanted to think this spitfire kid would pull through despite all that, but he didn't want to put that on Andy's shoulders, either. Especially not when the Winchesters weren't going to stick around help to him through it. Not indefinitely, at least. They'd talked about it last night, on their way to the motel and before they'd both collapsed, dead tired, onto the uncomfortable motel mattresses.

Andy was obviously done. Both Winchesters had seen it in his eyes before Rivergrove, and Sam had only been further convinced during their desperate flee from the medical center with Andy's combined injury and possible infection. The kid wanted to be done.

Even if he did protest that, if he insisted he could go on, there was no way Andy could keep hunting with his current injuries, at least not for some time. After they healed up, he might have an argument for it, but they'd still have to find a way to work around his new communication limits. Not that it couldn't be done, just that it would be…a lot. A lot on top of everything that had already happened to him.

A moot point, Dean was already sure. Sam was too. Andy was

obviously done.

Speaking off…

"So, Bobby," Dean began a little warily, starting off slow. "With Andy laid up, we need to find him a safe place to hole up, at least 'till we can get him back on his feet."

"You gonna beat that bush a little harder, boy, or you gonna come out and ask me to house the kid?"

Sam cracked open an eye from the other bed, head still tilted back against the headboard, and gave his brother the *'I told you so'* eyebrow. He had told him so. Several times the previous night, when he mentioned Bobby as an option. Dean had hedged, because he didn't know how the old hunter would feel about them bringing him more strays to take care of. They already put a lot on Bobby, and put Bobby *through* a lot, too. Maybe Dean was more aware of it after ten additional years of crap they'd expected and needed from the old man than Sam might be. (Okay, fine, seven years, but in this new world it was going to be ten, Dean would make sure of it). But that didn't change the fact that they were about as bad at expecting unappreciated aide from the hunter as they were from Cas.

"He's not your responsibility, Bobby," Dean said quietly, voice in the rare spectrum of guilt and confession, all in one. The voice that said Andy was *his* responsibility. Not Bobby's. Not even his and Sam's. Just Dean's.

A notion Sam frankly found ridiculous. He was pretty damn confident what Bobby would have to say about that, too.

"Horse shit."

Sam snorted, both eyes open now and head picked up. There was amusement in his second *'told you so'* expression, and Dean wanted to roll his eyes at it.

"Bobby-"

"Responsibility's got nothing to do with it, ya idjit." Bobby's gruff lessened, just a little, on his token, loving insult. Down the line, he blew out a sigh. "I'm already playing nurse maid to one invalid, Dean. Might as well make it official with two."

Dean closed his eyes to avoid the telling blur of his vision. It had just

been a really long couple of days, was all. He was tired, in more ways than one (Dean had to fight down the urge to rub at his chest), and that's why something as simple as Bobby being awesome and a damn decent human being was bringing him to damn near tears. That was totally the only reason it would happen.

"You're a good man, Bobby," Dean said, voice totally betraying what he'd been able to hide behind closed eyes. Aw, shit.

The older hunter just guffawed, uncomfortable all his own, too. Peas of a pod, this family. "Your girl's doing just fine, by the way. I'll see you whenever you boys get back."

"Thanks, Bobby," Sam called from the other bed before the line went dead. Dean tossed the phone onto the comforter beside him.

"Don't say it."

Sam didn't have to. The look was still written all over his face. But, because he was tired, and tired of being tired, he decided to say it anyway. Because it made him feel all that much better.

"I did tell you so."

Dean threw a pillow at him, which Sam caught easily, and then the two got up. Sam got dressed while Dean packed up. They had a Jedi in the hospital to get back to.

-o-o-o-

Sam was the first out of the motel room door, and Dean promptly crashed right into his gigantor of a brother's back when the younger Winchester stopped dead less than a foot out the doorway.

"What the hell, dude," Dean groused, rubbing his dented nose with a hand weighed down by the straps of his duffle bag. But Sam wasn't moving, and the older Winchester knew that was, in no way, a good sign. He leaned around Sam's larger frame and stopped dead himself at the sight of the Impala.

Their last hex bag, the one he had hidden well inside the driver's side vent, was spread out on the hood. The bag had been unfolded into a square stretch of fabric, spread out across the gleaming, black metal of the car. Each ingredient and spell component it had once held was laid out all nice and neat on top of the bag. Even the twine they'd tied it shut with was coiled up in six perfect little rings, sitting on the cloth

beside the dried-out toe mushrooms. Like an A-to-Z manual of making a hex bag.

All across the hood of his car.

"What the hell?" Dean repeated, for entirely new reasons now. He dropped his bag and drew his knife (because his gun was in his duffle, damnit. They were supposed to be *safe* and just on the way to the hospital). He glanced around the parking lot, then up and down the narrow sidewalk that lined the motel doors to their left and right, but there was no one around. It was earlier than most of the occupants of this type of fine establishment got moving, and the main road didn't host much pedestrian traffic this time of day either.

Sam set down his own bag as well before moving slowly towards the Impala. In the center of the dismantled hex bag was a single small strip of paper, flapping in the light breeze of a late fall morning. Sam lifted the rock that had been placed atop it – not a component from the hex bag, but none of the other ingredients would have been heavy enough to weigh the paper down – and picked the note up.

"Careful," his brother muttered, sliding his knife back into its sheath but keeping his hand on the hilt, eyes still wary of the potential threats around them.

"'*Be more careful*'," Sam read aloud, trepidation in his voice but an ironic eyebrow sent his brother's way as he looked at him over his shoulder. Dean came up behind him, still alternating between monitoring the parking lot, closed motel doors, and the freaky-as-hell hex bag laid out on his Baby's hood. Sam offered Dean the note. "Crowley maybe?"

While the message was clear – someone had obviously gotten to them and anyone could again – it didn't seem particularly nefarious. At least, not yet.

Dean growled low in his throat. He hadn't seen much of Crowley's handwriting over the years. There wasn't often an occasion for the King of the Crossroads or the King of Hell to be giving them written instructions. But he had seen it once or twice before, and this carefully scripted hand, damn near perfect type like it had come from a computer rather than a person, wasn't anything like the crossroad demon's usual scrawl.

"I don't know," is what the man from the future said, because he honestly didn't. He curled his hand into a fist, crushing the paper into

an angry ball. "But whoever did this…. I find them, they're dead."

Sam gave his brother a look that didn't dare argue, but carried a lot more with it than just agreement. "We should get out of here. Switch motels tonight. And make sure Andy's still safe in the hospital."

The younger Winchester was already pulling out his phone to text the kid, who'd sent them quite a few back-and-forths that morning. He didn't really think Andy was in danger, not given the nature of the note and how its author had very specifically targeted the Winchesters. Still, if whoever had done this could get inside the Impala, they could get inside Andy's hospital room too.

Dean angrily swiped the hex bag components off the hood. That was the last of their ingredients and, while they could reactivate the spell with them, Dean was sure as hell going to go through every inch of them and make sure nothing had been tampered with before they did. Honestly, he'd rather throw the whole damn thing away – no telling what kind of damage someone could do by tweaking a hex bag – but they couldn't afford to. Not until Bobby got back to them with another way to ward themselves, or they got Cas back. So he'd make sure nothing had been altered before he tied the bag back up and reactivated the spell.

Dean's anger friggin' tripled – no, quadrupled – no, higher, but Dean didn't know the word for more 'pled's than four – when he rounded the car and saw the state of the driver's side door. The handle was intact and the door latched closed with no obvious damage, but he knew immediately when he grabbed the handle that someone had forced the lock.

Someone with superhuman strength.

"God damnit!" he seethed, throwing the door open and tossing the dismantled hex bag and his duffle into the backseat a lot harder than was needed. He pounded a fist on the roof of the car, silently apologizing to his baby for the mistreatment, both by his own hand and whatever asshole dared touch – let alone damage – his car. Sam raised his eyebrows from across the roof, asking an unvoiced question. Dean growled low in his throat. "They busted the door."

The younger Winchester, wisely, didn't say anything. There was nothing to say when it came to Dean and his Baby. They could fix it up once they got to Bobby's. Until then… Sam frowned, going to open his own door but it was still locked. Dean had to hit the button on his

door for him.

"If whoever this was took the hex bag from inside the car, than it couldn't have been a demon," Sam reasoned as he tossed his own go-bag into the backseat, careful not to land on any of the hex bag ingredients, which had spilled across the seat in his brother's fury. The younger Winchester glanced at the roof of the car even as he straightened back up. There was a devil's trap under the headliner, put there during her remodel. Dean had assured him, more than once, that no demon was getting into (or out of) the Impala, and Sam believed him.

"Could have been an angel," Dean said through teeth gritted hard enough to hurt his jaw. He hadn't been able to fully angel-proof the car because he hadn't yet figured out a way to do that without locking Cas out, too. It was on his growing list of things to talk about with the angel when they got her back. Dean slid into the front seat, slamming the door closed with a loud bang that made his brother wince as he climbed into the car beside him.

"What I want to know, though, is how the hell they knew where to look. I hid that thing well, Sammy." Dean's fingers curled around Baby's wheel, and the hunter shook his head. Sam raised an eyebrow his way – not questioning him, just…empathetic to his frustration and worry. "I get someone searching the car, but that kind of thing takes time, even more when you don't want to leave evidence of the search."

Tearing apart a car for all the possible nooks and crannies – the real nooks and crannies and not just the under-the-seat and glove-compartment places moms and dads hid their stuff in their minivans – was messy. They hadn't been in that motel room long enough for someone to make that kind of search and put the car back together. No, this stank of someone knowing exactly what they were looking for, where to find it, and going right after it.

Which stank of angels, damnit.

"We're going to have to be more careful what we say or do," Dean said through teeth clenched so tightly they squeaked against one another. "If we're being watched…"

"Right," Sam answered, nodding his head. "Okay, so…no talking about future- uh…top secret stuff outside of the car – once we get the hex bag back up – or a warded motel room."

"And we're going to have to figure out how to ward against angels,

even if it means locking Cas out until we can figure out another way."

Dean didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit, especially with the angel AWOL and no idea when – or where – she might come back. But they couldn't risk Heaven spying on them and there was no way they'd be able to police themselves a hundred percent. Dean knew that from experience.

"What angel would leave that message?" Sam asked quietly as they got on the road, voicing a question Dean had been avoiding asking himself. Because Angels spying on them? Totally in character. Angels removing a hex bag blocking the Winchesters from their radar? Sounded just like 'em. But leaving an only-semi-ominous but blatant warning that they weren't being careful enough with their warding? That was hardly Heaven's style.

Gabriel's, maybe, but Dean doubted that runaway (who wanted nothing more than to throw Sam and Dean to the wolves instead of facing his own family) really had anything to do with this. Gabriel would have burned the damn hex bag and let Heaven and Hell find them.

Or unwrapped it, breaking the magic on the damn thing in the process, then re-packaged it up and hid it back in the vent so Sam and Dean continued thinking they were perfectly protected when all they were doing was hauling around a deactivated and useless hex bag full of human toe mushrooms.

That was Gabriel's style.

Which, unfortunately, still left the question of who the hell belonged to this particular style (who wasn't also a demon, otherwise Crowley would be pretty spot on.)

"Ruby." Dean blinked at the realization that hit him like a lightning bolt. "This is exactly Ruby's style."

Except Ruby was a demon, which was the first thing Sam pointed out in reply. Given that the first thing they had both done upon climbing into the Impala was check the roof to make sure the devil's trap carved into the frame beneath the upholstery was still intact, it *couldn't* have been a demon that left them some OCD wet dream of a paint-by-numbers hex bag deconstruction. While Dean couldn't see the trap physically to be a hundred percent sure, there weren't any cuts, markings, or changes to the headliner, which meant it was unlikely anyone had managed to disarm the trap.

If they hadn't had time for a full car search, they definitely hadn't had time to reupholster the roof.

Maybe Ruby had a human helping her out. He wouldn't put it past the bitch. Though, that didn't explain how she knew right where to find the hex bag. There didn't seem to be just one answer to this riddle, and that made Dean nervous. He knew everything that was supposed to happen over the next ten years (and was pointedly ignoring the fact that most of it kept changing). This was new, and new was bad. New was very, *very* bad.

Dean almost hoped it *was* Ruby. While it might be exceedingly irritating that that nightmare of a demon could be on the playing field early, it also wasn't the worst thing Time could throw at them, either. Ruby had spent a good year, year and a half, pretending to help them out. At least half those times, she actually had helped them out in order to keep her cover. And now they knew her schtick. They could keep her on the end of a dangling string for quite a while with that. They'd probably have half a year at least until she caught on, Dean figured.

Still, he didn't like it.

If it was Ruby, then Dean was killing the bitch extra dead with her own demon-killing knife before she had a chance to dig her claws into Sam this time (regardless of that dangling string). But before that, he was definitely stealing the damn knife.

-o-o-o-

"Could it be Azazel's girl?"

Dean glanced to his brother just as they pulled into the hospital parking lot. Sam's brow was furled in concentration and he'd been quiet most of the ride from the motel.

"The bleeding heart telemarketer?" Dean countered, eyebrow up with incredulity. They didn't know much about whatever new creature Azazel had dug up, other than she had a soft spot for kids apparently, was probably pagan, had glowing green eyes, and liked to screw with them in bars and on the phone. Dean wasn't a fan.

"I don't think a 'bleeding heart' would have done that." Sam gestured with his thumb to the dismantled hex bag in the backseat. They'd have to get it fixed soon. They were on the radar of just about everything at the moment.

"Don't know, Sammy." Dean shrugged one shoulder, playing the devil's advocate role he usually slipped into whenever Sam got lawyer-y. The older Winchester wasn't even aware he did it, or how much it had honed Sam's debate skills over the years before he'd gotten into Stanford. Dean would never have called their family discussions 'practice', but they'd been half the catalyst for Sam wanting to become a lawyer in the first place. "She didn't take the bag. She could've taken it."

Or did the Gabriel thing and re-stashed it, utterly useless to them without their knowhow. Who knew, maybe she didn't have enough knowledge of witchcraft to know to do that in the first place. But something was telling Dean otherwise. First, *pagan.* Those guys were always all up in their different rituals, spells, and dark crafts (witchy or otherwise). Besides, you didn't go looking (or touching) hex bags if you didn't know how to handle them. Even the least knowledgeable of the supernatural knew that was just asking for trouble.

"No, you're right, she didn't take it," Sam agreed, but with a look. The lawyer look. Not quite a bitchface, just…*lawyer* face. "She just left us the message that she could have taken it if she wanted to."

"Yeah…alright," Dean agreed, pulling into a parking spot right in front of the hospital entrance. The lot was largely empty, for the most part. "That doesn't sound like a bleeding heart."

Guess they'd be adding pagan warding to the Impala's next upgrade.

-o-o-o-

Andy was bored out of his mind. He'd woken up around nine in the morning, confused and instantly panicking. It might have gotten ugly if not for the heavy dose of morphine running through his system – way stronger than what the Winchesters had chanced giving him – which kept him on the more acceptable side of calm. The cell phone in his hand was the second thing he noticed after *'hospital?'*, and the nurse coming into his room in response to his spiked heart rate was the third.

Her comforting smile and brief explanation of his location, injuries, and safety did nothing to calm Andy down until he spotted the note, Sam's familiar handwriting guaranteeing in not-so-many-words that the room was warded and this woman couldn't possibly be a demon. Then, and only then, was Andy able to relax enough that the doctor, when he came in, didn't feel the need to re-sedate him. As soon as the

two of them left with the guarantee that his fellow 'agents' would be in by eleven to see him, Andy pulled up the phone and got to texting.

Dean's response was *immediate*. That alone, even more than Dean's message that they would be there as soon as visitor hours opened (ten thirty, Dean insisted, though Andy was really sure the nurse had told him eleven, not that *he* was gonna argue with a Winchester on a mission), made him feel a million times better.

As for the rest, well, the morphine was taking care of that for now. Until he had to do otherwise, Andy was taking a page out of Dean Winchester's book and not thinking about it.

-o-o-o-

Okay, so the not-thinking-about-it thing had been a lie. Not an intentional lie, but Andy didn't know how Dean did it. How was one supposed to *not* think about shit? Especially shit this bad?

Andy tried several very hesitant, slow test swallows. His throat hurt only in the way where his body told him it was hurting but his brain didn't actually register any pain. Morphine was fascinating. But there was a tightness and a pull across his skin deep within his throat that clued him in. It was going to be ugly when they weaned him off the drug.

He didn't like the thought, but Andy hoped that wouldn't be anytime soon.

The painkiller made him both sleepy and fuzzy, which in term made it much harder to control his thoughts. Which meant the inevitable, *'I'm never going to talk again, am I?'* slipped out before he ever had a chance of wrangling it back in. It also meant, though, that the six follow-up thoughts (ranging from panic to regret to something like resignation, only more, hm, floaty) sort of fizzled off into the cosmos even as he thought them. Because his drugged up brain lacked any sort of attention span, too.

So, you know, could be worse.

Andy texted Sam and Dean no less than fifty times in the hour and a half it took them to head his way (both parties had agreed after Dean offered to be there in ten minutes, regardless of visiting hours, not to rush over. Andy knew he was safe in a room the brothers had personally warded, and harassing hospital staff so early on in an undetermined-length of stay wouldn't win them any bonus points).

The brothers had both showered and dressed (well, Dean had already showered before Andy's first text came through, dressing while he juggled phone and clothes, letting Sam sleep for as long as he could) while Andy snarked back and forth with them, complaining about being bored (Sam's response to that one had been an apology for not thinking to leave him a coloring book and crayons in the middle of the night after they'd rushed him to a hospital to be treated for a serious trauma wound. The jerk), about the lack of hot nurses (he could practically hear Dean's snort of agreement before a response very similar to just that had come through), and definitely complaining about the catheter (*'You let them CATH me?! How could you I thought we were friends!'* and Sam's answer of, '*Friends don't let other friends wet the bed, Andy.')*

Andy was right in the middle of composing a truly spectacular reply to Dean's last remark (which he was actually fairly certain was Sam's, since Dean would most definitely be driving the Impala. Though how much was Sam dictating his brother's response and how much was the younger Winchester's own added opinion was hard to tell) when the door to his room swung open and Dean loudly announced that whatever Andy had to say, he could say it to their faces.

It was ten twenty-nine on the dot.

The nurse who had opened the door for them, still standing in the doorway beside Dean, arm outstretched on the knob, did not look happy at either their presence or volume, but she also had the resigned kind of laughter in her eyes that told Andy she'd already lost any argument she'd had against the older Winchester. He wasn't surprised. She left with a prolonged glare to each of them (longer in Dean's case, and more of a second thought for Sam), as well as a warning that her patient needed rest and if she had to come back in here because they riled him up or upset him, they would *not* like the consequences.

Dean turned back to Andy with exaggeratedly wide eyes and raised brows as Nurse Ratchet shut the door behind them. "I see why you're whining if you've been dealing with *that* all morning."

Andy beamed, and it was only, like, half driven by the morphine. Honestly, Nurse Ratchet, or Charlotte as she'd introduced herself that morning (*'Lotte for short, though you better not be trying to say either of 'em right now with that throat injury of yours, hon'*), was pretty wonderful. Stern as all get-out and took no back-talk (not that Andy was capable, though you'd be surprised what a single look could tell a

person, apparently), but she was also kind and comforting. Without the Winchesters immediately around, Charlotte had been pretty awesome backup. She kind of reminded the kid of Bobby Singer, actually.

Just…slightly better looking.

Andy's smile only grew as Dean crossed over to the bed, dropping a duffle bag from his shoulder and nudging it under the raised hospital bed with his foot. It had a change of clothes for the kid, among other things, for whenever they got him out of here. Sam would be in charge of that talk with the Doc later today. Sam joined him as well, pulling something out of his bag and handing it over to the kid.

Andy snorted so hard at the coloring book and little pack of crayons that he actually *did* feel some pain through the morphine. He ended up wincing, reaching for his bandaged neck and ultimately aborting the move.

"Shit, sorry," Sam hissed, hands raising in apology, but Andy waved him off. This was the best he'd felt in, like, a week (morphine aside, because that was definitely helping), and he wasn't gonna regret a little pain to see Sam and Dean again. Alive, mostly in one piece, teasing him. Not a dream or a hallucination caused by the last firing neurons in his dying, deoxygenated, and blood-starved brain.

All was back to being right in the world.

Well, mostly. Sort of. Okay, really, barely at all.

Andy's grin faltered as those pesky thoughts slipped back through his mind, but he chased them away. There'd be time later, when he wasn't drugged and in enough pain to actually need the drugs, to think depressing things about his future. About a softball player from Berkley or an emo kid who no longer had one.

The smile came back with wavering force behind it. Sam seemed to understand. He took the book and box back, setting them on the table beside the bed. "It's going to be okay, Andy. Did the doctors talk about your condition?"

Sam waved his hand in an *'all of this*' sort of motion, mostly aimed at Andy's throat, but really, encompassing pretty much all of him, if they were being honest. Andy raised his hand and made a wishy-washy motion back. Both the doc who'd been in to see him (a different doctor than the one that had performed the surgery last night,

apparently, but familiar with his case) and the three different nurses he'd seen throughout the morning had avoided discussing the extent of his injuries completely. Andy guessed from their lack of directness that the prognosis was most definitely worse than the best-case-scenario. They were probably waiting to tell him until he was more stable, less druggy, and also maybe bolstered mentally by the presence of his 'colleagues'.

It was from all that that Andy easily reasoned he'd never talk again. People didn't get all hedgey with you unless there were consequences they knew you wouldn't want to hear. Andy couldn't blame them, and, honestly he didn't really wanna hear that truth yet, either. So he hadn't pushed.

Now, of course, facing Sam's big brown eyes of sorrow and sympathy, Andy internally sighed. There was no getting away from Sam Winchester when he switched those babies to puppy mode. He'd not met a single person capable of resisting that look. According to Dean, the older Winchester had yet to either. So Andy braced himself for the news he knew he didn't want to hear but would have to face eventually.

Might as well face it with the Winchesters by his side, he supposed.

-o-o-o-

Agent Henriksen landed at the Ellsworth Air Force Base at twelve forty nine pm, Mountain Standard Time, go-bag and jacket in hand. A captain greeted him, a car already waiting for him, and he directed his driver to take him to the U.S. Forest Service office in Custer, where he would meet with the District Ranger in charge and the lead homicide detectives on the case from both Custer and Rapid City.

From there, they would take him to Cold Oak, an abandoned mining town that was the scene of their triple homicide. And, Victor hoped, the first real break in the Winchester case.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Aaaaand it took an entire chapter just to get Henriksen in there. Gaaaaaaaah! I was totally like, "I'll bring him into the middle of this chapter and then keep track of his movements throughout the chapter!" Nope. Took an entire chapter just to get to noon *deeeeep breath in* *deeeep sigh out*

Acronyms: For anyone who might not recognize North American

acronyms or are reading this via an internet translator, AWOL is Away Without Leave. It's a military term for someone who has gone missing without permission.

(I will also be trying to add more of these descriptors after chapters for our non-English or ESL readers. Feel free to flag anything I miss and I'll add it)

Up Next: Andy contemplates a new existence without voice or powers, Sam has some ideas, Dean's contemplating Cas and gay porn (not in the same sentence or even context, and, I promise, still totally in character (I will win you to my side on this promise, just you wait!) ;), and Henriksen is on the move!

Chapter 85: Season 2: Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Henrisken is on scene and getting suspicious, Andy's healing up and contemplating things, Dean's mostly sleeping.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Baby cliffhanger warning! Like, as cliffhanger-y as we can get while the boys are having actual downtime.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 52

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Persephone stared at the snoring, drooling, curled up ball of a writer sleeping on the couch, right where she'd left him. He hadn't even woken to her usual knocking on his front door. So Persephone had let herself in, bearing gifts for the Prophet. In one hand she had two cups of coffee in a holder made of some sort of compressed paper, in the other a bag of bagels from the corner store bakery a couple blocks away.

An apology for borrowing Chuck's credit card and phone without his knowledge.

(A well-intentioned apology, although she'd had to use the last of the money she'd withdrawn from the card to buy the coffee and bagels so…)

She sighed at the sight of the author. It was at least partially her responsibility, she figured (though, that's what the coffee and food had been about…). Persephone crossed into the kitchen, setting her peace offerings onto the counter, and taking a moment to slip Chuck's wallet out of her purse and back on top of the toaster, where she'd found it last night (an odd place to store such a thing, but she tended not to question the Prophet…much). His phone she could safely chuck on the ground somewhere between his desk and the fridge; Chuck wouldn't

notice, let alone think anything of it when he finally found it.

A groan from the living room had her returning in short order. Chuck was upright, though he hardly looked awake or aware. He squinted at his editorial assistant, standing in the entrance to his kitchen at – it took Chuck three times to read his watch correctly; the sleeve of his robe kept sliding back over it before he could get the three blurry faces down to one (albeit, still blurry) – eleven fifteen in the morning.

Oh. She was actually quite late. And still way, way too early.

"Ugh, I hate you, why are you here?" Chuck slumped back over into the cushions, burying his face in the blessed darkness. His head was killing him, and the abhorrent hatred, loathing, and overall sensitivity to the dimly lit room suggested more than just a hangover. The couch was nice. It was dark and only smelled a little like Cheetos dust and dirty socks. Only a little.

"You have work to do."

The writer just groaned again, his objection somewhat muffled by the darkness. But the sound of something decently weighted being jostled in a paper bag caused Chuck to crack one eye back open and turn his head enough to take in the offering hovering inches from his face. The logo was a little crumpled, but he'd recognize it anywhere.

Aunt Sally's bagels.

Chuck sat upright in an instant, regretting the spike of pain straight through his temple only a little. He was greeted by another gift from on-high as his assistant held out a coffee from the gas station next to Aunt Sally's. Chuck took both offerings with an enthusiasm that bordered on desperate.

"Okay, you changed my mind. I love you again," the writer mumbled through his first bite of cream cheese and lox on a slice of breaded sesame heaven. He chased it down with scolding hot black coffee that only tasted a little burnt and a lot like sugar. Ah, gas station's finest.

"You shouldn't drink so much," Persephone said with absolutely no guilt, despite definitely being the one to encourage him to do so the night before.

"Not drunk," Chuck grumbled, raising a hand to rub at his forehead. His tone was only a tad defensive as he whined, "It's a migraine of inspiration."

Persephone raised an eyebrow. "A new idea for the story?"

Although she was loathe to admit it, Persephone found herself nervous at the idea of reading about her actions in the Prophet's writings, which would no doubt occur every time she inserted herself into the Winchesters' lives. Hopefully, as with the scene he had detailed in the bar that night with Sam, Chuck would not make any connections between the blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman he was putting in his story, and his new Editorial Assistant who happened to have blond hair, blue eyes, and the same damn fake name.

Persephone adjusted the strap of her stupid little purse, refusing to let her unsettled nerves show through her stoic face. The stolen ingredients were safe inside, waiting to be formed into the hexbag from Chuck's notes. The risks, while many (the woman's eyes darted, momentarily, up to the ceiling of the Prophet's home), were still worth the possibility of success.

Focusing on the present and the still groaning writer, Persephone walked a couple steps back from the couch, reaching across his desk to snag a bottle of pills. Holding it out to the man, she shook it a little when he didn't take notice. Chuck raised his head, eyes narrowed to tiny slits, and let out a grateful moan at the sight of his migraine medication.

"Did I say I love you? I meant I *really* love you." Chuck swiped the pills, dry-swallowing two as quickly as he could get them in his mouth and down his throat.

When the writer finally staggered to his feet, Persephone was already in her chair by the window, sipping at her own coffee (which she learned that morning she liked with copious amounts of something called French vanilla hazelnut creamer (which she assumed came from France, and must be what made it different than the plain cream)). She smiled at him as he blinked blearing at her. Then, adjusting his robe, Chuck stumbled towards his writing desk and slumped down in front of his computer. He hit a random key to wake it up with all the motivation of a man on death row.

He did have work to do, though, and writing usually helped with the headache, almost more than the pills did.

-o-o-o-

Henriksen surveyed the bare, lifeless town of Cold Oak with a clinical eye. He didn't pay much attention to the abandoned buildings or eerie

feel in the frigid early evening air. Victor had no interest in the history of the place, spewed to him by the nervous Forest Ranger on their hour long drive into the Middle of Nowhere National Park, or the many rumors generated over the years by the abandoned town, another topic of conversation during the car ride over. No, he was only interested in the three lives lost most recently and the two men that might have taken them.

"This is what's left of the fire."

Ranger Danson, the one who first spotted the blaze and ended up stumbling across the funeral pyre, bodies still burning within, waved at the now blackened, half collapsed structure of wood and broken down building materials. Victor glanced around with narrowed eyes, focusing on the different buildings around them, sections of side boards missing, probably pulled off by the Winchesters. He'd have to get them all dusted for prints if the local LEOs hadn't already.

The Forest Ranger was still talking, though. He seemed to do that a lot.

"It took a while to put the fire out. Didn't exactly have a nearby water source. So there wasn't much left of the bodies-"

"Rapid City took what was left," District Ranger McMarsson, the head of the Black Hills Forest Service department, interrupted his nervous Ranger. The broad-shouldered man stood between Agent Henriksen and Ranger Danson, giving the Federal Agent a bit of a break from the man's rather continuous blabbering. Danson was a good man, great Ranger, but he did tend to keep on endlessly, even more so when he was uncomfortable.

On McMarsson's other side was Detective Sharron Wells of the Custer police department. She was a smartly dressed, sharp woman who'd shook Agent Henriksen's hand with a steady grip bordering on painful. McMarsson didn't know much about the female detective, but she'd given him no problems so far and worked well with his people. And she didn't make Danson so nervous he spewed history facts like they were going out of style. Which was a bonus for everyone.

Although McMarsson's people had already been over the town, Custer PD had been called in immediately for obvious criminal investigation needs. Rapid City had gotten involved when it was clear this case was going to be more than the smaller town of Custer could handle alone, and they seceded lead on the case to their RPD counterparts, primarily

for use of their much bigger and better equipped labs. Between the three departments, Cold Oak had been gone through with a fine tooth comb.

McMarsson put his hands on his hips, staring into the depths of charred wood and murder. Things like this weren't supposed to happen in his park, and he didn't like it one bit. "The coroner is working on identification now. So far we know there were two males and one female, all in their early twenties."

"I'll want to see the remains," Victor announced in a professional, detached tone. He imagined the last hours of those three lives hadn't been pleasant, but it was not currently his concern. He had a job to do. Two killers to catch, so that they never hurt anyone like this again.

Ranger McMarsson shrugged his approval. It wasn't much matter to him. Forest Services knew they'd be playing chauffer to the fed as soon as they got the call from Washington that one was on his way. Apparently, the quiet county of Custer had been unlucky enough to host two serial killers for an unknown period of time. McMarsson liked that even less.

"We didn't find much in the rest of the area," Detective Wells took over, having been part of the initial sweep once her department had been called in. It had been late and she'd been on a rare graveyard shift when the call of three homicides in the middle of Black Hills went through the station. "We've located four potential scenes where the murders could have taken place."

"With three bodies?" Victor glanced over at her, eyebrow raised.

"There's two primary locations with blood evidence and signs of a struggle. We're pretty confident about those ones, though we sent the blood out to Rapid City's lab to confirm they're our victims. We should get that report in a day or two." Wells had her hands high on her waist as she addressed Henriksen, blazer hitched up around her wrists, and Victor found he appreciated her no-nonsense attitude. Unlike Ranger Danson, she wasn't intimidated in the least by the federal agent. "The other two sites didn't have much in the way of incriminating evidence; no significant blood pools or spatter, no murder weapon yet, and the coroner's still working on cause of death for two of the vics. But the interior of two buildings, one over there, the other a couple doors down, suggested a struggle. We're running prints and any DNA we could find."

Agent Henriksen nodded. It sounded like the police and forest services departments had this under control. Which meant he could focus solely on following the Winchester's trail. He turned to Ranger Danson, who over-straightened under his attention.

"Tell me about the car."

-o-o-o-

The Winchesters took turns with Andy in the hospital. For most of the first day, Andy slept. Once they told him about the damage to his neck, including the permanent consequences that came with it – which Andy had accepted with the resigned grace of someone already expecting it – the kid had pretty much passed out for the rest of the day. Fairly so, thought the Winchesters. Appropriately so, thought the doctors.

Still, the brothers stayed at the hospital throughout the day. Neither had wanted Andy to wake up alone, in case he did wake up. The kid drifted in and out on occasion, but the morphine kept him pretty out of it and he usually succumbed to the next round of sleep without much fight. The nurses kicked the brothers out at the end of visiting hours, Sam writing another note for Andy and putting his phone back in his limp hand. Then the brothers headed out for some sleep of their own. They had to find another hotel, this one a bit further from the hospital, which left Dean twitchy for multiple reasons. Their sleep was significantly less restful than Andy's drug-induced haze, which both Winchester's probably could have used, but it was sleep, at least.

Dean didn't dream of red eyes or wake to the feeling of someone in the room with them again, but he didn't wake up feeling like sunshine and rainbows, either.

The next morning, the two showed up at the hospital at ten-thirty sharp again, much to the partially amused, partially *don't-push-it-gentlemen* looks of the two nurses on duty who had apparently been warned by the previous days' shift. Andy was already awake and looking surprisingly more with it. They'd lowered his morphine dosage. Apparently, the doctors were quite pleased – and a little startled - with – the progress he'd made in only a day and a half.

Sam tried (and failed) not to wonder if Azazel had slipped Andy some demon blood as well back in Rivergrove.

Andy waved at them as they came into his room. He was upright and far more alert as Sam dug out a notepad and pen from the plastic bag

he was carrying, something they'd picked up on their way back in that morning. It wouldn't be the fastest form of communication, but it might be easier than typing everything out on the small phone screen and passing it back and forth.

They spent the second day tag-teaming the kid again. If Dean went for food, Sam stayed with him and waited until the older Winchester got back before he'd go grab lunch himself. They didn't bring food into the room since Andy couldn't eat any of it, which the Jedi thought was sweet but also kinda silly. That was until his 'lunch' showed up with a nurse in tow and it consisted of mush, mush, and more mush.

Seriously. Was that *baby food*?!

(It was not, in fact, baby food, as the nurse explained given the very readable look he'd pinned her with. It was pureed apple sauce, pureed mashed potatoes, and pureed tomato soup. And he was to eat it *slowly*.)

(Andy did not lessen the look. Who. The Hell. Pureed. Tomato soup. By the very definition of being tomato and soup, it should have *already been pureed as hell*!)

Dean stared at the kid's lunch with equal horror. Sam could see the silent vow to sneak him something in for dinner, and hit his brother on the arm for just thinking it. The younger Winchester rolled his eyes as Dean whined dramatically, then turned to Andy to (as Dean called it) soccer-mom lecture him. The sooner he ate it, the stronger he'd get, and the quicker he'd move on to normal food.

The nurse *beamed* at the younger Winchester. The other two just glared at the suck-up.

'Yes, mom,' Andy mouthed and Sam shook his head while the psychic dug into his pureed puree.

Bon Appetite.

After that it was a tossup. They never left him alone, but the Winchesters were also trying to deal with the fallout of both Rivergrove and Cold Oak. Bobby was trying to find them the components needed to make new hex bags, there was something they weren't telling Andy (multiple somethings, he was pretty sure), and Dean was climbing the walls (and trying the hide the fact that he was climbing the walls) about Cas being upstairs.

Andy hadn't gotten much more out of Sam concerning that situation (he wasn't stupid; he'd waited until Dean was out of the room before bringing itup). Cas was apparently upstairs being healed by an angel Dean was very certain wasn't on their side. Which, yeah, Andy could see how that might drive him literally up a tree, control freak that he was. A worrying control freak.

A worrying control freak with a solid crush on the angel in danger (at least as far as Andy (a tv-trained professional matchmaker) was concerned).

But, as Sam pointed out, there wasn't much they could do.

Honestly…Andy was a little more worried about the fact that Sam didn't seem to realize Dean had a plan. Otherwise the older Winchester wouldn't be itching to get out and do it, whatever it was. Not to mention anytime Sam used that reasoning – that there was nothing they could do to reach her so they needed to wait – Dean would bite his tongue or the inside of his cheek. He'd done it twice in front of Andy already, something the Jedi picked up on with completely reasonable suspicion.

Oh, Dean definitely had a plan, he just wasn't sharing it with Sam.

He bet that conversation was not going to be pretty. Any plan Dean came up with that he didn't want Sam to know was guaranteed to be a *doozy*. Andy knew them well enough to know that. Given how any conversation he had about it with Sam would have to be written – either on a phone or notepad passed back and forth (the tedium of his current capacity for communication was proving more frustrating than anything else about this) – Andy was even less inclined to initiate it. Plus, bringing it up would almost absolutely spark an argument between the two brothers, and Andy wasn't quite ready to be in the middle of that yet.

So, for now, he said nothing. (See what he did there? *Said*. Ha.)

"I was thinking about something," Sam said late in the afternoon when Dean stepped out to take a call from Bobby, probably about Japanese mushrooms or human toes or something. Andy wasn't quite sure (and wasn't quite sure he wanted to know, either. Dean had started muttering under his breath when the phone rang, which was sign enough that Andy shouldn't want to know). "You said you managed to control the demon in the woods with your thoughts."

Andy's bandaged fingers curled ever so slightly into the blanket spread

over his legs. It was the only outward tell of his sudden discomfort, because he knew where this conversation was going. He was surprised one of them had waited this long to bring up that little ability he'd managed. Gently, having finally *learned* over the last two days not to react with rapid movement, Andy shook his head.

Sam scrunched his face up knowingly. "It could help you talk again, Andy."

At least within his immediate circle. Sam, Dean, Cas. Maybe even Bobby, though they'd have to give the older hunter ample heads up that their Jedi was now a telepath.

But Andy was shaking his head again, picking up the pen to jot something onto the notepad next to his thigh. They'd been keeping it on him or within reach at all times. At the moment it just lived next to his leg and had a long list of single comments, often just one or two words. This required a little more.

'More like control people. Like Weber.'

Sam frowned when Andy held the page up. The younger Winchester both had and hadn't thought of that. He knew Andy's powers could be developed further, both from what Dean had told him about the kid's evil twin in his timeline, and from Andy's own story. But he hadn't quite connected the dots on how Andy would feel about learning to do the thing that had gotten his girlfriend killed. Or, if he had, he'd hoped those dots wouldn't be so obvious to the kid.

"It doesn't have to be control," Sam reasoned, shrugging one shoulder, but those big brown eyes were full of understanding. "Just communication."

Andy faltered, lowering the notepad, staring at it without reading any of the scribbles there. Controlling that demon in the woods had both terrified him and been exhilarating enough to terrify him. Andy could see how easy it would be to misuse that. It had been simple enough back when he'd actually had to talk to people to get what he wanted. This…this seemed way too easy to abuse, and Andy didn't trust himself. Not anymore.

"There's something else." Sam smiled gently when Andy looked up. "I don't know for sure, but the demon you described – a little girl? – it sounds like an Acheri."

Andy didn't see the significance, and gave a little shoulder-head-shrug-

shake.

"Acheri's usually take the form of young girls, and bring sickness and death from the hills and forests. They were pretty feared in small towns back in the day." Sam pulled out his phone, bringing up the internet app and handing it over to Andy. The kid skimmed a blog post with scanned pages of an ancient, hand-written book. There was an illustration on the page that was pretty damn similar to the thing that attacked him. Enough so that Andy put the phone down and had to take a deep breath. Sam's sympathetic puppy eyes were on full power mode as he took his phone back. "There's a legend, though, that the only thing that can stop an Acheri demon is a red ribbon tied around your neck."

Sam let the words sink in. Andy started at his curled hands, then blinked and looked up with a frown, staring at Sam until he got it. Fingers crept up towards his neck, and the younger Winchester nodded.

"Like I said, I don't know for sure, Andy. But I can tell you when we found you, your neck was definitely wrapped in red." With melted, sickeningly shiny red flesh, but Sam didn't need to say that part. Let Andy think he meant blood. "It might not have been your powers entirely. It may have been a combination of the Acheri's unique weakness, too."

And if it had been, it was more than possible the injury that had almost killed him twice also saved his life.

Sam's words did exactly what the younger Winchester had intended them to. The idea that maybe it hadn't been his powers alone that allowed him to control a *demon* helped lessen the terror that just acknowledging those abilities brought up. Andy took in a deep breath, thinking about what that meant, wondering if it even mattered in the scheme of everything. He let out a long, slow breath, and then nodded at Sam.

He'd think about it.

The brunet just smiled in return. Then Dean was coming back into the room, flipping his phone closed and asking why the two were smiling like that (then checking the space around him for some sort of prank just waiting to spring up) which made Andy laugh, body language clear as day even if no sound came out.

Sam didn't mention their conversation. It was likely he and Dean had

already talked about it. Even if they hadn't, it was Andy's choice to make. The young Jedi watched the two start up one of their classic back and forth bickers about absolutely nothing important, and turned his thoughts inward to consider the possibility he previously hadn't even let himself think about.

-o-o-o-

Despite the gruesome nature of the three homicides in Cold Oak, the case itself was an exciting turn of events for Agent Henriksen. He'd only been on the Winchester's tail for half a year, and up until the two had been arrested in Baltimore almost a month ago, the case had been nothing more than a paperwork trail of tentatively related killings or crimes, possible sightings, and largely credit card fraud. Victor had done more joint work with the White Collar Crime Unit over this case than any actual bounty hunting. It had been…tedious. But Henriksen was nothing if not patient, and it almost always got him his man in the end.

This case, however, was the most tangible link he had to the Winchesters yet, and it was all in the evidence. They'd gathered more evidence in two days than he'd had on the Winchesters in six months. The brothers and their unique car had been spotted on one of only three roads leading towards the area of Cold Oak, which wasn't enough to tie them directly to the murders.

(Or, as the Rapid City homicide detective liked to remind him, the 'destruction of evidence' when it came to burning the bodies, as they had absolutely no proof that the Winchesters had murdered anyone or even been present for the crime. Detective Gray's money was on the three victims murdering each other. Henriksen thought Detective Gray was an idiot).

The lack of definitive non-circumstantial evidence didn't actually matter to Henriksen, at this point. He had more than a dozen similar cases in the Winchester's file, with nothing more than possibly related crimes, all of which had similar or even more tentative connections to the Winchesters than Cold Oak. It was always the two men being spotted within an area close enough to the crime or speaking to one of the victims. Never anything to prove them guilty or eliminate them as potential suspects. Just annoying, ambiguous grey land in between. But, like he'd said, Henriksen didn't care about that yet. Because eventually, that pile of evidence would become an undeniable mountain, and he'd bury those boys beneath it.

It had taken Henrik months to build those cases together, some going back decades (believed to be the work of their father, though his slowly thickening file and whereabouts were just as ambiguous and tentative as his sons'). It had been worth it though, as it always was. Because what had shown up in that slowly mounting mountain of circumstantial evidence that Henriksen hadn't even seen until now, the pattern hidden beneath the chaos of a senseless crime (the Winchester's calling apparently), was the funeral pyre. More than one of those cold cases involved trace human remains and bones found on burned-out funeral pyres across the nation. Funeral pyres just like the one at Cold Oak.

It was the closest tie-in he had yet. It was no smoking gun, but it sure looked like the beginnings of a solid *modus operandi.*

He had their car, too. Victor wouldn't normally put too much stock in that kind of find. Criminals like the Winchesters were smart, usually too smart to stick with one car for long, which was how the FBI had been assuming they operated. Up until now. Because Henriksen knew everything there was to know about Sam and Dean Winchester on paper. That included everything about their family, like the purchase of a '67 Chevy Impala by one John Winchester thirty-three years ago. There was no record of John Winchester giving it to either of his sons. There was barely any record of John Winchester after 1983, the year Mary Winchester died in a house fire and the remaining Winchester family fell off the map. Henriksen hadn't thought anything of it; the man had ditched the car at some point, as any smart criminal would have.

But the photo from Ranger Danson's dash car meant something spectacular. Something monumental to the case. Something, Victor was sure, was going to blow it wide open in the end. The Winchesters were *sentimental*. There was no other reason to keep that flashy and memorable of a vehicle while on the run from a life of crime. They'd kept the car for thirty years. A smoking gun all their own, that was going to keep right on smoking, and the Winchesters were too sentimental to toss it in the nearest river.

Henriksen was gonna make sure it was that sentimentality that he hung them with.

The plates on the muscle car were bogus, of course, leading to an elderly Hispanic man living in Arizona who had no clue what a '67 Chevy Impala even looked like, let alone that he had one registered in his name. Although tracking them through the car was a longshot,

there was a chance the Winchesters might not think to change the plates. If they committed murders and destroyed evidence as often as the FBI was beginning to think and hadn't had a close call until Baltimore, they were probably used to getting away with minimal forensic countermeasures. Again, it boded well for Henriksen.

Not that he expected to catch the Winchesters this time. Oh, no, this was the long game and Henriksen was digging in. If the brothers stuck true to the pattern Victor had so far been able to put together on them, they were long gone from Custer County and Black Hills National Forest. If they were smart, which he knew they were, the Winchesters were no longer in South Dakota.

Still, just because Victor liked his i's dotted and t's crossed, the Rapid City PD had put a state-wide BOLO out on a '67 Chevy Impala with Kansas plates, and the FBI would be extending that to a nation-wide alert.

-o-o-o-

Andy did consider Sam's words carefully. He spent the afternoon thinking it over as the Winchesters bickered, brought him into the bickering, played cards with him, played cards with themselves while he napped or stared out the window in thought, and took turns stretching their legs and getting fresh air (guilty looks on their faces every time, which Andy just waved off). At one point, Dr. Richards came back on shift, and Sam took the opportunity to speak with him about an estimated length of stay, stepping into the hall with him for what was sure to be a lengthy conversation.

Dean was currently conked out in the chair beside Andy, one foot up on his bed, boot having been removed after a nurse glared so chidingly at the man that Andy had leaned forward and started untying the shoe for him just so she wouldn't wake him up. It didn't hurt that he'd gotten a sympathetic mother smile from the woman, who assisted him with the task, and all but patted him on the head like a good boy before heading back out. Dean had remained oblivious to the almost imminent threat on his life, which was testament to just how tired he was.

Which was fair, Andy thought. Rivergrove had been four days ago now, and he doubted either Winchester had gotten much sleep over that time. Andy had the luck (if you wanted to call it that) of a demon-infused refresher before waking up in Cold Oak, along with almost a full day of drug-induced rest since. And he was still

exhausted.

(Granted, both the doctors and the Winchesters assured him that was to be expected after such physical trauma, but that wasn't the point, here.)

Andy paused in his coloring as a thought occurred to him, crayon hovering above his partially filled-in cartoon hotrod car as it sped around a race track (shut up, yes he was making use of the coloring book and crayons, so what? He was bored and the childhood activity was actually quite soothing in its mindlessness, even if his bandaged fingers made it a far more challenging task than he'd first anticipated.) He'd spent the last two hours doing nothing but going in moral and philosophical circles about his newfound ability. It was all about what was right versus what he wanted versus what he could have.

His powers scared him, in ways they'd never scared him before. In fact, the realization that fear brought on now (that he'd never been truly scared of what he could do before) scared him even more. What kind of person was he that he controlled others so readily, and didn't worry about any of the consequences? It had been different when all he'd wanted in life was a coffee or a pizza or some free weed. He hadn't felt like he'd been hurting anyone. Now, though…knowing what Azazel wanted him to do, what he expected him to do to survive (and knowing the yellow-eyed demon never expected him to survive in the first place…), well, it changed things.

In a life or death situation, what did he want? The answer should be obvious, but Andy was a philosophy junky. It was sort of his jam when he wasn't busy smoking the biggest bong load he could feasibly get (and often times pushing the boundaries of that feasibility). And while moral philosophy wasn't the field he'd had the most interest in (after all, no one liked moral philosophers), he'd still read enough about it to know this was a conundrum if there ever was one. Take that famous Trolley problem and add to it that you were also psychic and knew the future and had super powers.

Really, he should write a book. (Not that anyone would read it, and those who did would immediately assume he had a few screws loose due to the whole, you know, super powers bit.)

So Andy was caught in a dilemma. He didn't want to control people with his thoughts. That much was a known. The heart monitor attached to his finger would start beeping faster anytime he thought about the possibility. Probably a touch of PTSD, which Sam would tell

him he could work through in order to access his powers if he wanted to. The thing was, it was incredibly obvious to Andy (probably the only clear thing going on in his muddled mind right now) that he didn't want to.

He didn't want to control people anymore. Not with this mind. Not through a means that had almost no limitations.

Yeah, his Jedi abilities had helped the Winchesters out of a couple of pickles over the last three months, but in the year he'd had these powers, they'd hurt far more than they helped. Tracy was dead because of them. Amanda and Scott were dead in part because of them. Others had more than likely been hurt by them, too. Even if the offenses seemed minor at the time, Andy couldn't actually know if he'd done any real damage to the people he commanded about, because he'd never thought to look.

That was a terrible thing, and he was a terrible person for it. He didn't want to be that person anymore.

So, controlling people with his mind was out. If doing it with his voice had left him without consequence or guilt, the unlimited control he could possess with his mind was a definite rabbit hole that would probably lead him straight to Hell. But, and this was what he'd spent the last two hours going in circles about, what if he could still use his powers for communication, but only communication?

Which he knew the answer to, even if he wished he didn't.

When he'd first gotten his voice thing, he'd had a terrible time at the start. It would have been scary if he hadn't been so busy being amazed at what he could do. There'd been more than once when he'd turned a simple turn-of-phrase into a command without ever meaning too. Looking back at it, he'd been so lucky that none of those times had been anything worse than a friend jumping off a bridge all of two feet off a dry creek bed or another friend wiping an entire table's contents onto the ground after Andy told him to 'knock it off.' But those things had clued him into his utter lack of control, and at least the most basic of consequences. Which had ultimately made him work harder at control.

Those slipups were still going to happen, though. He hadn't been trying to command people when he'd first gotten his powers, but he'd still done it. Even if he said he wasn't going to command people with his brain, there was always the possibility it would happen anyway.

He knew from experience how much time and practice it took to have complete control, and re-learning his powers using just his mind was going to be like starting from scratch. He could tell from the headache he'd gotten talking to the demon in the woods. So he was going to mess up, and that was where he currently was in his cycle of should-I-shouldn't-I's.

How much did intent matter when factored into something morally indefensible? And what if all his slip-ups were just small and harmless, like last time? Did that make them excusable?

Somehow, it didn't feel like it, and Andy didn't really know when that had changed.

Over the last forty-five minutes of listening to Dean's snores while coloring his little anthropomorphic racecar (from a kid's movie most imaginatively named *Cars*), Andy had been leaning towards dismissing the idea entirely. It wasn't worth it. Everything about his powers so far had led him to this. Sitting in a hospital bed, using crayons to color in a cartoon car, unable to speak because he'd gotten his throat slashed by a psycho. Andy knew it was probably PTSD and survivor's guilt talking, but he didn't feel like he had any right to just get over the fallout because he had super powers. Like there were, once more, no consequences for him. He couldn't do that when he knew it would cost other people their autonomy at least a couple of times as he figured it out. More so, Andy would be able to take that autonomy away completely, at anytime, to anyone, once he did figure it out.

Even if he promised himself he wouldn't, that was too much power for him to wield. At least when his powers had been verbal, there was *some* limitation, some sense of physical boundaries. He'd had to be within earshot of someone, for starters. With straight-up thinking something to someone's brain? Andy didn't even think there'd *be* limitations, and *that* was the real thing scaring him. He'd never been good with self-control or temptation. His life in Guthrie, low-key as his crimes had been before Weber had changed everything, was still proof.

And now, with the Winchesters in his life, the life they led, and Azazel's plans… the stakes were a lot higher than some free pizza and pot.

So telepathic communication was out so long as it came with even the most remote possibility of controlling others.

Which meant, telepathic communication was out.

Now, though, as he stared down at the half colored picture on the little table stand over his legs, Andy had a new thought. A new possibility niggling at the edges of his drugged brain.

His problem was that he didn't want to control people. Words, whether formed aloud or sent straight to the brain, would end up doing just that, one way or another. But maybe…*pictures* wouldn't. Andy blinked at the car, the thought suddenly exciting. If he could…if he could just beam images straight into someone's mind, it *wouldn't* be a command. It would be up to their brain to interpret what the image meant, which would remove his intent entirely!

He'd still be able to communicate. Sure, it might not be the cleanest or straight forward way, but he was okay with that. It would be faster than writing everything out. Bonus: his survivor's guilt and PTSD and all that were totally satisfied with the compromise. Partial penance, partial solution. Good enough for him!

If he could even do it, of course. He'd never tried before, but if he could send thoughts to someone, he didn't see why he couldn't send images instead. Of course, he'd need to practice, which meant someone to practice on….

Andy's gaze slid oh-so-slowly over to the sleeping Winchester, a wicked grin spreading across his face. He hadn't minded before when Dean fell asleep on keep-Andy-entertained duty, but now he was ecstatic about it.

Okay, okay. How to begin?

The psychic closed his eyes, deciding to start easy. He pictured Sam, as clear as he could, with his gigantor frame and his plaid over-shirts and floppy brown hair. Andy opened his eyes, image firmly in mind, and turned to Dean. Squinting at him with as much concentration as he could summon, Andy pictured himself physically pushing the image of Sam, like it was a Polaroid floating in a black void, towards the slumbering Winchester.

He had to try several times over several very long minutes – taking a break half way through to actually *pant* like he'd been physically exerting himself – but he knew something was happening when he started to get a headache. It was a familiar pain, front-forward in his brain, stabbing at the temples but feeling like a million pounds on top of his brow in the front. He'd gotten to know that pain pretty well

over the last year.

"Sam…" Dean muttered, foot twitching on the bed as the hunter's head rolled to the side. There was a frown forming between his eyes. Andy stared with bated breath. The hunter kicked out again. "Five more minutes."

The older hunter tried to roll over in the chair, failing miserably but luckily not falling out or waking himself up. Andy, ecstatic with success to the point of silent giggling, clapped his hands together (quietly).

Oh, god, it *worked!*

Andy giggled again, practically jumping up and down in the bed, but stopping when Dean twitched, moving his leg and almost knocking it off the edge of the mattress. The psychic settled down. He still needed a test subject, so Dean needed to keep sleeping on.

Okay. That was a good first attempt, but it wasn't actual proof. It was possible Dean was just dreaming about Sam. Any scientist worth their salt (not that Andy was a scientist, but shush, he was enjoying this) would test their theory further.

Alright. Time for Stage Two then.

Closing his eyes once more, Andy pictured Castiel. He didn't have nearly as many memories to pull from for her, but he'd spent a couple of days total in her presence and was fairly confident of his mental picture. Once more, he slapped that beauty on the mental manifestation of a Polaroid picture and sent it floating Dean's way.

This time the sound Dean made was deeper, more upset, as he muttered Cas's name and pinched his brow.

'*Yeah, she's fine my ass,'* Andy thought as he took in Dean's clear distress between bouts of congratulations and patting himself on the back.

A wicked, truly inappropriate thought followed, and Andy had to bite his lip, looking away from the sleeping Winchester. Getting Dean to say Cas's name in a completely *different* way was an absolutely hilariousidea given their obvious unresolved sexual tension. And Andy was pretty sure he could make it happen. But, also, it was maybe just a *little* not okay while the angel was currently MIA, possibly in danger, and Dean was legitimately worried about her.

And, oh yeah, also, she was an *angel*. Making Dean picture *those* sorts of things about an angel was probably blasphemous six ways from Sunday. Not to mention sending Dean images of making out with Cas would require Andy had to picture it first, which was definitely not cool. Cas was his friend (he sort of assumed, at least) and Dean was definitely his friend. There was surely some bro-code somewhere that said picturing your friends getting it on was probably not-the-best.

But… Andy realized something as an equally wicked idea formed in his brain. What he really considered Dean as, more than a friend, was a big brother. A big brother who pranked him, bickered with him, pushed all his buttons. It was totally okay to mess with a big brother like that. Especially since the psychic had another, far safer idea than sending him images of Cas. It even stuck to the bro-code.

Well, mostly. Like eighty percent.

Okay, sixty five, but that was still good enough.

Andy gathered every bit of his extensive pornographic knowledge to him and re-set his sights on the sleeping Winchester.

-o-o-o-

Dean jolted awake, sweat pooling down his back and panic gripping his lungs.

What the hell.

What. The. *Hell.*

He had just…he'd just been…had he… Had he just dreamt about *gay porn?!*

There was…there was no way. No. Way. But, he'd…uh…he had been. There'd been flashes. Clips. Like he'd been in one of those old-time theatres with the projectors that were shit and often flashed between scene changes or skipped the reel.

A reel of *gay porn.*

What. The. Mother. Effing. Hell.

Dean hadn't even- he'd *never*- okay, there had been that *one* time, but it had been curiosity and nothing more. And, yeah, it hadn't been as bad as he'd been expecting, but it really hadn't done anything for him

either. Enough so that he hadn't even finished the vid!

That had been *years* ago. What the hell was he doing thinking – *dreaming* – about something like *that*, right *now*?!

The man from the future was still having an straight-up mid-life existential crisis, hands white-knuckled around the edges of the chair he was rigidly perched on, when he heard an aborted, muffled choking sound. The hunter flinched first, realizing he wasn't alone after having woken up from a wet dream about *mother effing gay porn!* But as he turned to the source of the noise, remembering where he was when he saw Andy in the hospital bed, he immediately realized the kid was trying and failing with everything he was not to burst out laughing.

He was also holding his head like he had the world's most massive headache, and blood was dribbling down his face from one nostril. But he was grinning like an idiot.

Torn between immediately going on the defense, thinking Andy somehow *knew* what he'd been dreaming out, and calling for a nurse because the kid was *bleeding*, Dean sat straight up, foot falling off the bed with a thud. He was ready to do both, holler for help in case Andy had an aneurism or something, and spew whatever vitriol it took to make the kid forget anything he'd seen or heard. But Dean pulled up short, halfway out of his chair, when something else occurred to him.

Honestly, if you asked later, he might not be able to tell you how he knew. Maybe it was the knowledge that Andy's brother had developed his powers into something far more mental than physical. Maybe it was a vague memory of images flashing across his mind once before, of an old bell with an oak tree that Bobby recognized and had led them to Cold Oak. Maybe it was the way the kid's nose bled like Sam when he pushed his powers. Maybe it was knowing Andy had controlled a demon with his brain less than forty-eight hours ago. Whatever it was that clued him in, suddenly Dean knew exactly where that dream had come from.

Dean launched fully out of his chair, face reddening. "That was *you*?!"

Andy couldn't help it. Couldn't hold it back any longer. He burst into mostly silent laughter, huffs of air more than actual sound, almost crying with amusement. Dean wasn't much of a lip reader, but he could see the *'I can't believe it worked!'* pretty clear as day across the kid's bloody lips.

Sam walked in less than twenty seconds later to Dean trying to strangle the shit out of the kid without actually making physical contact with his throat while Andy mouthed, *'Not the throat!'* over and over again, still laughing hard enough he had tears running down his cheeks.

-o-o-o-

Dean was rubbing his chest as they left the hospital that night, Andy in better spirits than they'd seen since he'd woken up, and Dean still grumbling about the whole thing. Sam, who hadn't approached *that* fiasco with a forty foot pole, now glanced at his brother as they climbed into the Impala. His own carefully hidden amusement over Andy's weird antics (not that carefully, given the glares Dean was still sending his way), finally faded as he took in the older Winchester.

Dean had handled the little prank about as well as Sam could expect; he'd only tried to murder the kid, like, three times through the evening and night. Which was one less than Sam would have guessed, so that was good, even. But he was rubbing at his chest. He'd been doing that a lot since Rivergrove, but now Dean had been at his sternum since they'd left Andy's room: four floors, one elevator, and a walk to the car ago.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked, possibly the most direct question he'd aimed Dean's way since Cas had gotten them out of Oregon. The younger Winchester hadn't been there for the trap that had so gravely injured the angel, but Dean gave him the cliff-notes version afterward. Sam had seen Cas slap a hand to his brother's chest for the second time apparently, eyes flaring a terrifying and gorgeous blue-white, before all three of them had shown up at Bobby's.

He'd been avoiding asking just what that light had meant for the sliver of grace in Dean's chest, but Sam couldn't imagine it was anything good.

Dean noticed his hand, dropping it from his chest as soon as Sam's question registered. He settled his arm on the windowsill of the Impala, fingers tapping an impatient beat as they drove towards the motel. "I'm fine."

Sam let the silence hang for just the right amount of time. "And Cas? The, uh, one in your chest? Is he still…"

In there?

His older brother fidgeted, dropping his hand from the windowsill only to put it back up a second later, clearly uncomfortable. He chewed on his tongue, then on his lip, then twitched his mouth back and forth before finally admitting in a low, frustrated tone, "I don't know."

Sam let that sink in, looking out to the black night and the road passing beneath them. He hadn't really expected more than that. He'd hoped, maybe, that Dean knew what Cas had done to him, to that sliver of the other Castiel. But he hadn't held out a lot of hope for it, he supposed, given the way Dean kept rubbing at his chest.

"Does it hurt?" Sam cast a side glance his brother's way, but he wasn't pushing.

Dean gave up and starting rubbing those knuckled circles across his sternum again. "No. Yes. Not really." The older hunter shook his head, frustration clear on his face and in the way he huffed out his next breath of air. "It hurt when Cas did it. Like…a vacuum straight to my insides. But now… Look, I don't know, alright? I don't know what he-she did. If she just soul-searched me for a bit of extra juice, or if she took whatever was left of Cas. I don't know."

"Isn't a soul-search more, er, invasive?" Sam's brow was pinched, his gaze back on his brother, though mind far away. He remembered Dean giving him some brief details about an angel's ability to search a soul for a contract or for an energy boost, but Dean hadn't described it as anything pleasant. Not that what Cas had done to his brother was anything close to pleasant but… Sam shook his thoughts away. He just figured touching someone's soul took more than a palm to the chest.

"Hell yeah," Dean answered, but the comment was bitter at best, sarcastic at most. "They hurt like a bitch, and usually involve some elbow-deep action. But with a sliver of Cas's grace all tangled up in my soul, I figure, maybe he- *she*'s got a direct line."

At least, that's what he hoped. Dean didn't know for sure what Cas had taken from him that night for a power boost, but he sure as hell hoped it had been a bit of his own soul. Some left-over juice. Even a full chunk if she needed it. Ridiculous, really, to hope that an angel had taken a piece of his *soul* instead of absorb what was left of his- her- (no, his?) own grace.

But, childish and utterly ridiculous as it was…Dean didn't want to lose that last bit of the Cas he knew. He didn't want to lose the last of his

friend. And the feeling in his chest….

"All I know," Dean repeated, throat swelling with emotion he refused to acknowledge, "is that I used to have a supernova in my chest, and now I don't."

Which was a masterpiece in the art of understatement, but Sam didn't need to know about the hole that supernova had left behind. An endless pit, a scar from Hell that had never filled, an emptiness inside him that not even Famine had been able to contend with. A hollow nothingness that had been there for years and years, except for this last year. This last year, Dean had almost forgotten all about that hole. Had thought maybe it didn't exist anymore, not in this body that hadn't made a deal, hadn't gone to Hell. But that didn't make sense, did it? It was his soul that had been to the pit, and it was his soul Cas had sent through time. Of course it came with all its scars.

It's just that for the last year, Cas's grace had been filling that hole. Now it was gone and Dean was left more wrecked then when he'd first climbed out of his own grave with a chest that didn't feel like his. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be so damn empty inside.

Of course, Sam didn't need to know any of that.

His younger brother was silent for a long time. Long enough that Dean almost thought they'd leave this conversation in the dust as they pulled into the motel parking lot. But Sam, god love him, wasn't quite done.

"It doesn't mean he's gone," the beanstalk said softly, treading what he knew was a live-wire.

"No, it doesn't," Dean agreed, though his tone was hardly a positive thing. He turned off the engine and climbed out of the Impala. Sam followed as the older Winchester turned towards him, elbows on the top of the car, keys jingling in hand. "We're not gonna know what it means. Not until we get our Cas back."

The words were final. Firm and bitter and hard. But Dean didn't push it any more than that. Just headed for the door to their room, Sam trailing behind. The younger Winchester knew his brother wanted to be out there, looking for a way to get Cas back. He was glad, in some ways, that Dean hadn't just up and left yet. He knew that time was fast approaching. All the younger Winchester could do, though, was hope Dean gave him the time to get Andy safe and settled, so Sam could at least join his brother for whatever monumentally stupid plan he had

rattling up there in his skull.

-o-o-o-

Henriksen entered the Custer Police station at a bright and early six am. He'd never been one to sleep in when there was work to do (in other words, he'd never been one to sleep in). Now that both Custer and Rapid City PD had cleared the crime scene, the Forest Service didn't have much more to offer than to keep an eye on Cold Oak to make sure no one suspicious returned. Not that Victor thought they would. That wasn't the Winchester's style. The investigation had moved to the Custer Police Station, but Henriksen planned to drive up to Rapid in the afternoon and check in with the team there. Sometimes a little FBI presence went a long way in getting those tedious reports back just that much faster.

Other officers were just getting off the graveyard shift when Henriksen settled at the temporary desk he'd been given. The morning crew was trickling in around him with bleary faces and not-yet-devoured coffee in their hands. Victor set his own morning brew down, pausing at a new folder in the little 'in' filing box on the corner of his desk. It was red, with a sticky-note attached in a handwriting he hadn't yet seen while in South Dakota.

The note just said, '*Blood Report, RPD*'

Henriksen flipped the file open, surprised that it had come back sometime in the middle of the night or *very* early morning. One of the things he'd expected to put a little pressure on when he visited Rapid City later that day was the last of the evidence processing from Cold Oak. He wasn't expecting much from it, but he couldn't dot those i's or cross those t's until it was all back.

For reasons just like this one.

Victor stared in momentary shock at the freshly printed report, crisp black words on bright white paper. He reread it, heartbeat picking up, excitement following in its wake. The blood evidence, labeled number four, which Henriksen recalled was the puddle in the middle of one of Cold Oak's two intersections, did not match any of their victims.

There was a fourth victim. They had a missing body.

Victor dug through his files, scattering them in a mess across the surface of the desk, but that was of little consequence. He pulled the photo from Ranger Danson's dash cam, now famed in his mind as the

first solid trail in the Winchester case, and stared at it for the thousandth time. But this time, he was looking at Sam Winchester's turned head, profile features lit by Danson's headlights, in a completely new light.

The younger Winchester was turned towards the darkened, obscured back row of the Impala, partially leaning over his own seat. Just like you would if you were checking on someone in the backseat, possibly injured or even lying down.

Henriksen turned to the nearest person, a young officer who was immediately startled by being addressed directly by their visiting FBI agent. "I need a map of the area and all of the hospitals within a hundred miles of Cold Oak."

Chapter End Notes

Acheri Demon: So I had that entire chapter between Andy and the Acheri already written out, with Andy controlling the demon, when I went to double check the description of the little girl and stumbled onto that fact about the red ribbon. And I just…blinked. Stared at the computer. Giggled. Maybe a little maniacally. I love when things happen to line up perfectly all on their own XD

Andy's secondary power: The ability to send images to other people (particularly gay porn) was taken from the show, and originally something I never liked the inclusion of. It always seemed like such poor writing that Andy showed up, just happened to have developed a power that could reach Dean, who-knows-how-far-away, to perfectly tell him how to find Sam. Seemed like a cheap way to solve the problem of getting Dean to Cold Oak. But, with his slit throat, that power development actually makes sense! And I am all for sticking to canon while also fixing things!

It also meant Andy could send Dean clips of gay porn. Cuz this is still Andy we're talking about here XD

Acronyms: For those not familiar with North American acronyms, LEO is a Law Enforcement Officer. Most shows I've seen that deal with other agencies, like the FBI or CIA, refer to the cops at the crime scene as local LEOs. No idea if they do this in real life, but it has a nice ring to it ;) MIA is Missing In Action, a military term for someone who's whereabouts are currently unknown, usually last seen in the field.

Chapter 86: Season 2: Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I know, I know, a Monday posting is just weeeeeird these days, but I took a trip this weekend and did not make it to the airport early enough either time to edit and post the chapter. So it's a teensy bit late ;) Or, really, it's a week early, if you think about it! Considering it's almost the length of two chapters, I did give more than a half-second thought to just waiting and posting next weekend instead XD

(We all know I'm too impatient and excited to actually do that, though...)

Chapter Warnings: Andy's playing Pictionary with other people's heads, Dean's fessing up that he does have a plan to get Cas back, and Henriksen is closing in, by both sheer luck and damn good detecting. Lucky for the Winchesters, they've got someone on their side. A certain someone who can't manage to hand over a bunker key without plans going horribly awry, but who can pull off a little harmless distraction with a modicum more success.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 53

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

By noon on Andy's third day in the hospital, his improvement was physically visible. He was no longer on a heart monitor, he'd convinced the nurses to let him get up and move around (primarily with the argument that he was capable of making it to the bathroom, so they could take the damn catheter out), and while he was still on a diet of mush, mush, and more mush, he was IV free and Dean was using his flirtatious nature with the nurses to sneak him extra chocolate puddings with all meals (he'd even gotten Lotte (nurse Ratchet) to bring Andy one as a midnight snack once). Despite Andy's complaints (delivered in the form of very expressive looks), all the mush felt good on his throat, and it was nice to actually eat something that wasn't in the form of an IV or nutrient-enhanced water. More that

that, it was a relief each time just to know that he was still capable of eating (a serious concern when he'd first woken up to a liquid diet and a very swollen throat) and that he would get to eat real, solid food again in the future.

As an extra bonus, Sam talked again with the doctor on duty when they'd shown up that morning. The man seemed under the impression they could release Andy on an out-patient program within a day or two. Dean was very confident they could get that shortened, much to Sam's disapproval but ultimate agreeance.

All things considered, life was pretty wonderful.

Which was why, when lunchtime came and it was clear Dean was both bored of the same four walls and antsy for food of his own, Andy shooed them out with flapping hands. The Winchesters blinked at the motion, clearly meant for both of them.

"You sure?" Sam asked, glancing around like Andy might be shooing two other brothers out of his hospital room.

Andy nodded, then narrowed his eyes in intense concentration.

Sam grabbed at his head with a hiss and Dean practically reeled, both Winchesters assaulted by images, one after the other, a couple flashing too fast to process in the moment.

"Slow down!" Dean groused, straightening up with a wince as his head pinged in the after-rush that Andy's new abilities always caused. It never lasted longer than a second or two – like standing up too quickly from a bent over position – but Dean wasn't a fan, regardless. Of course, it could just be he wasn't a fan of anyone poking around in his head to start with. Even if Andy insisted there was poking, yes, but around, no.

"Ow," Sam muttered, rubbing at his temple. Andy's new form of communication didn't come across as clearly or as easily for the younger Winchester, probably because of their matched demon blood acting as a natural deterrent for Sam. To be honest, Andy hadn't even been sure it would work on him at all. They had both been surprised when the kid gave it a try the night before, only for Sam to wince, rubbing at his temple but confirming he'd received a flash of the Impala sitting in a motel parking lot. He'd also gotten a relatively minor headache, lasting longer than the brief head-spinning sensation Dean reported. The younger Winchester certainly had questions of his own about it, though they were formed more from a place of

unhealthy curiosity rather than any real concern.

Nerd, Dean called him, only barely managing to hide his very real concern behind the insult.

Now Sam blinked a couple of times, trying to put the images together into something that made any sort of sense. Andy hadn't really mastered that part of this new power yet. His choice of pictures could be somewhat questionable, the images weren't always in a sensible order – often with multiple pictures coming through for the same concept, sometimes unintentionally – and the occasional visual word interspersed in between when Andy failed to form a picture for certain concepts. Those images were usually of other visual aids, like commercials from TV, billboards and others ads. Or, that one time, Sesame Street.

That time, Dean had insisted for three straight minutes that the kid wanted chicken for dinner. You know. Big bird. Roasting on an open fire. Which was not remotely close to what the kid had actually sent them. Andy threw a pillow at his head and tried again, the pictures coming through with a distinctly vicious tint at their edges the second time.

Right now, though, the older Winchester was staring at the kid with a bewildered frown. Like his brother, he was trying his best to piece together a cheap black wig on a creepy-ass, blank-faced manikin, a flash of a Star Wars lunchbox, a clip of Yosemite Sam getting kicked out a door to land on his butt, some random image of a person with a very bad hair day (or maybe a dude recently electrocuted? That sorta fit with Andy right now…), a cheeseburger and fries on a classic fifties diner placemat and tray, and last, but not least, a quick flash of that obnoxious kid from Finding Nemo freaking out and slapping at a fish flopping around on her head.

"Uh…You want us to stick your finger in an electric socket and then… go fishing for lunch?"

Andy wiped at the blood running from his nose – less and less each time he used his newfound ability – and gave them that look he always gave the Winchesters when he thought they were purposefully misunderstanding him. Which was only actually about fifteen percent of the time. Well, thirty when it came to Dean.

The brothers winced again at the next round of images, purposefully slower and with a sarcastic amount of delay between each one that

carried palpable condescension.

"Enough, kid," Dean grumbled, rubbing at his head like he could physically brush off the continued intrusion. It was like knowing someone was staring at you, only, like, inside your brain. The three of them had had an adult conversation about it the night before when Andy formally asked for permission to test this new form of communication (and sort of apologized for the test he'd tried out on Dean). The man from the future hadn't been thrilled, but he also understood the kid's reasoning for pushing these powers. More than that, Dean had seen Andy's excitement, the first real smile spreading across his face. Not drug-induced, not forced because it was either that or start crying. The first real smile they'd gotten out of him since he'd gone missing, and the older Winchester wasn't about to destroy that for any reason, including his own autonomy. "We get it. We'll get out of your hair for a couple hours. I could use a real meal anyhow."

A real meal, in this case, meaning a greasy diner burger, fries, and pie, just like Andy'd pictured. Sam shook his head but said nothing. For his brother, that *was* a real meal.

"We'll go grab lunch," Sam agreed, knowing they could give the kid a couple hours of peace. He was doing well enough to be on his own, and while Sam knew he still had a long road to recovery and probably some serious PTSD to manage, he also knew Andy could use a break from the mothering presence of two older brothers. The Winchesters could probably use one themselves, actually. "When we get back, we should practice slowing the images down and getting them in order."

Andy made a face at that, like a chastised school kid, but didn't argue. He wasn't the one going through flashes of epilepsy-inducing motion sickness or lingering headaches every time he wanted to say something.

"Yeah, it'd be great if talking to you didn't end with us nauseous. Not that that's much of a change from before." Dean snickered with a wink in the kid's direction. He grabbed his coat off the chair beside Andy's bed and threw it on. "And no practicing on the nurses while we're gone. Don't need them keeping you here any longer cuz of blood loss."

Or, you know, freaking out at random images popping into their brains. Like gay fucking porn.

This time, Andy stuck his tongue out as them as they left, and they both winced as they got the mental image equivalent once they'd

turned their backs. Dean flipped him off on the way out the door, and they all got to learn, together, just how far Andy's range of mental projection went.

The answer? Well past the end of the parking lot, where Sam finally had to text him to stop because Dean needed to be able to see straight to drive.

-o-o-o-

Dean stared at the diner menu for the third time, but nothing really looked good. Which was absurd. It was his usual fair, all of it, all the things he normally loved. But he just…wasn't hungry. Also ridiculous. Ever since that stupid black hole in his chest had sprung back up, it was like all of Dean's torso and internal organs were busy being sucked into the damn thing. A constant reminder of what wasn't there anymore.

The hunter made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and tossed the menu back down. Its laminated surface slid a half foot across the table, and Sam stopped it with his hand before it could go any further. Dean rubbed absently at his chest and looked around the diner, glaring at the hand-written and barely legible specials in chalk above the counter.

Sam waited until the waitress came to their table to take their orders, Dean settling on a plain old burger and looking mildly unhappy about it, before bringing up what he knew was bothering Dean. What he also knew Dean wouldn't want brought up.

"We should talk about Cas," Sam started. When the older Winchester gave him a furled brow and a *'let's not'* look, Sam's gaze dropped to his brother's chest. Dean's arm fell from his chest, face more annoyed than defensive. "I know you want to get her back-"

"You said it yourself, Sammy: no way we can do that. Just gotta wait." Dean's words where clipped, bitten out and bitter. Sam knew his brother too well for that.

"Andy thinks you have a plan."

Dean pulled his head back at that, brow all sorts of furled. He scoffed, then flexed his fingers – an abbreviated gesture of the way he'd often throw his arms out when defensive or frustrated – then scoffed again. He folded his arms over his chest like a pouting child.

"So the kid can read minds now, can he?"

Sam smiled, but it wasn't because the situation was in any way laughable. "God, I hope not. But he knows you pretty well, and you've got tells."

Dean narrowed his eyes at that, trying to suss out if Sam actually knew what he was talking about or if he was just talking out his ass. "He hasn't been around long enough for that."

This time Sam snorted, and the smile was a little more real. "Oh, I don't know. He picks things up pretty quickly. And you're not that subtle."

The older Winchester rolled his eyes at that, but Sam knew by the slight slump to his shoulders, the way he stopped holding his arms across his chest and let them slid apart to settle on the table, that his heart wasn't really in the fight. Which meant Sam just had to wait.

Dean stared out across the diner, working his jaw as he observed the rest of the patrons. The waitress was pouring coffee for a trucker and the cook slid two plates onto the window, ringing a clerk's bell as he did. The sound made Dean think laughably of Cas, that same noise ringing through the Impala before she'd disappeared a couple months ago. Right after they'd picked up Andy, actually.

'Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings!'

Dean snorted at the memory of the old black and white film. Hadn't Meg called Cas 'Clarence' just because of that line in *It's a Wonderful Life*? Yeah, that was Dean's angel. An angel he apparently couldn't go ten minutes without thinking about. Obstinately, the hunter looked away from that bell, something pulling tight down deep in that aching chasm of his chest. Dean pulled at his t-shirt and rolled his shoulders to avoid rubbing that feeling away. Not that it ever really worked.

"It's not a plan," he finally said, keeping his gaze away from that stupid bell, but not looking at Sam, either. The younger Winchester shifted in his seat, not necessarily trying to recapture his attention, but succeeding at it regardless. Dean finally met Sam's gaze, a grumpy look taking over his face. "It's a friggin' cry for help, is what it is."

The younger Winchester frowned, not only because those words weren't really something his brother had ever said before, but also because he couldn't picture what a cry for help in this situation could even mean.

"There are other angels," Dean explained with a slight shoulder shrug, picking out a sugar packet from the square container on the table. He fiddled with it between his fingers. "A couple of 'em sided with Cas over the years, or at least seemed to care about him. It's possible they might answer a prayer if it's about him being in danger."

When Sam didn't answer right away, brow furled in that typical way he had anytime he was concerned and thinking through the logistics of an idea, Dean fidgeted. He didn't need to explain himself or his ideas to his brother. Really, he didn't. It was just…he didn't like silence. Or judgement. Or, okay, fine, he probably needed to explain this to his brother before he just up and did it with nor warning and no backup.

"They could at least check on him," Dean added as the silence lengthened, kinda proving a point he hadn't needed to prove because nobody was asking and damnit he didn't have to talk about this, he was just being…nice. Whatever. The twitchy hunter glanced down at the sugar packet, tossing it uselessly onto the table in front of him when he realized just how much he was fidgeting. Speaking of tells. "Maybe they could find Cas in Heaven, make sure he's okay, and deliver a message, or something."

'*Get the hell away from Uriel before he kills your ass, you idiot. Oh, and I told you so.*'

Dean would have to paraphrase, of course. Any angel that did answer his prayer was just as likely to write him off the minute he started accusing one of their brothers of treason. Plus, they wouldn't get the point of telling someone you'd told them so. Probably call it redundant or obvious or some shit like that.

Sam's frown didn't grow or lessen as Dean continued to talk, unprompted. He just kept logic-ing his way through the pros and cons while still watching his brother carefully. The thing was, Dean already knew the logic: there wasn't any. He knew the pros and cons too. It was an insane and truly stupid idea (monumentally) with almost zero chance of success. Which is why he hadn't told Sam, hadn't done it yet, and definitely wouldn't be bringing his kid brother along when he did do it.

Hell, the only dick brother of Cas's he even *remotely* trusted with this might not answer him at all, making the whole thing moot.

"Okay, well…" Sam trailed off, clearly still thinking through all the

ways this idea could go horribly, horribly wrong. (There were many. Dean had counted, gotten past three, given up counting, and accepted he was probably just gonna wing it anyway). In the end, Sam just shrugged. "If you think it's worth a shot, we might as well try."

Dean blinked. Then blinked again. He'd been expecting his baby brother to come back with all the reasons they should absolutely not do this. Because there were *plenty* and they should *absolutely* not do this. They shouldn't even considering doing this. Not that it was going to stop Dean from going and doing it, of course, but he'd at least expected to *hear* all the reasons his brother had.

Which meant now…Dean hesitated, going back to chewing on the inside of his cheek. Well, shit. "Uh…*we* can't, Sammy."

Sam frowned at his brother's particular choice of emphasis in that sentence. The frown was quickly replaced by that smoothed-forehead-of-danger he always got when he got pissed, which usually came after understanding where his brother was going with some train of thought. Sam worked his jaw, brown eyes hard as he stared Dean down.

"You're not doing it alone."

"It's not what you think," Dean muttered, looking away. He knew Sam had immediately fallen back into age-old worries, thinking the older Winchester wasn't trusting him with this. "I'd rather have you with me, Sammy, trust me, but we *can't*. If this guy answers, and that's a big if, he's a total dick. He was good enough to Cas, but he never was a big fan of humans to start with…"

Dean, in particular.

Sam ground his teeth, then looked away, running his tongue over his molars to keep from spitting out what he wanted to say. Because he knew what Dean was getting at. He just didn't *like* it. Sam slid his hands into his lap, left hand going for his still-injured right palm, rubbing at the stitches wrapped beneath gauze. The pain helped ground him, enough to speak with a level tone.

"I can't go because I'm the 'boy with the demon blood,'" the young hunter finally said, only just keeping himself from putting any sort of connotation on those last words. Across from him, Dean's shoulders slumped more, his jawline tense with unrestrained words of assuagement that Sam didn't need to hear.

"I don't know how any of them will react to *me*, Sammy. Claiming to be the Righteous Man, if I gotta go that far." Dean hoped he wouldn't have to. He hoped he'd be able to just tell the damn angel he was a friend of Cas's, the guy was in trouble, could you please find him and tell him to get his ass back down to Earth and away from dick traitors. Easy as that. "I don't wanna risk them freaking out on you or blowing any of this out of proportion because they've got some holy stick up their ass."

Sam was still looking away, vein in his jaw twitching, and Dean sighed. He rubbed at his short hair, then leaned forward, leveling a single finger his brother's way.

"Don't let an ass-backwards opinion of a bunch of winged dicks make you feel like crap, Sammy. That isn't you, you're not the 'boy with the demon blood'. You're Sam Friggin' Winchester, and none of this is your fault."

Sam took in a deep breath and released it. It took a moment – another deep breath – before he was able to let go of his wounded hand and put his arms back on the table, fingers lightly clasped. Looking into Dean's determined, angry eyes, Sam felt calmer, in spite of the anger still buzzing just beneath the surface.

"But I still shouldn't go." Despite the speech he'd just made, Dean looked guilty. Sam sighed. "At least promise me you'll give me a heads up, Dean. Don't just disappear, alright?"

The older hunter grinned. Though, again, there wasn't much laughable about any of this. "Yeah, I can do that."

The bell rung over by the kitchen window and Sam leaned back in the booth as their waitress brought over their orders. She set them on the table and both Winchesters mustered up appreciative, if not tired, smiles before she walked away. Sam picked up his fork, moving bits of his salad around on the plate without really digging in. Dean just stared at his meal, and the younger Winchester tried not to let that worry him as much as it did.

"I still think you should wait it out," Sam finally said, though the resignation in his voice made it clear he knew Dean would do no such thing. "She's going to be fine, Dean. Cas can handle herself until she makes it back down here. It's the safer plan."

And the one that didn't leave him behind.

"I know." Dean picked up his burger and bit into it, trying to ignore the way it taste more like ash than grease and meat. He chewed through it, swallowing heavily to get it down. "And I'm trying. Just can't make any promises I'll last that long."

Sam nodded, a rare sort of understanding between the two of them, coming from a level of open communication they'd never really had before. The younger Winchester stabbed a forkful of salad, diving into his own meal, and tried to feel good about that fact. He was only moderately successful.

-o-o-o-

They stayed away from the hospital for nearly three hours, keeping in not-quite-constant contact with Andy via texts, making sure he was still good on his own. The kid didn't seem to mind the extended break away from the Winchesters. He probably needed it, what with how both Sam and Dean tended to Mother Hen in their own ways. And so the boys took the opportunity to restock some of the supplies they'd lost in Rivergrove, taking the time to hunt down anything on Cas's ingredient list for hex bags that they might find in Sturgis, South Dakota. Which was not a lot, but they hadn't expected much to start with.

Sam insisted they stop at a pharmacy and get some more medical supplies, not just to replace what they'd spared for Andy, but also because the kid was going to have some longer term needs for at least the next month. They couldn't just buy morphine, unfortunately, but the brothers agreed to find a new supply, either purchased illegally or stolen from a place that could afford to replace it. When they got back to Sioux Falls, they'd talk to Bobby about it. He might know a guy. The old hunter usually did.

As the Winchesters pulled back into the hospital, Dean balked at the almost completely full parking lot that greeted them. He stopped Baby, idling at the first cross-section of aisles, the entire lot filled with cars, shining in the afternoon sun.

"What the hell?" He glared at the surrounding vehicles, then at his brother. "Is there some hospital convention in town we missed?"

Sam shrugged, seeming nonplussed about the whole thing as he glanced around the lot. "It is Saturday. It makes sense that more people would come visit on the weekend."

Dean grumbled. "It wasn't like this this morning."

It had been wide open that morning. In fact, the entire time they'd been in Sturgis, there'd never been more than thirty cars in the parking lot. It wasn't a big town or a big hospital, and Staff parked in the back to start with.

"Just go park over there," Sam offered with the exasperation of a younger brother constantly having to play the older. He gestured to the side of the large building, where the parking lot wrapped around to the back of the hospital.

Grumbling, Dean turned Baby's wheel regardless. Thought he muttered and moaned about the loss of his front row parking the whole, slow drive. They parked in the side lot, then walked back around the Hospital to the front entrance, Dean still complaining under his breath about mini vans and screaming children and house wives visiting husbands with broken legs, not priority cases like electrocution and slashed throats that should get front row parking.

It was an ongoing diatribe that made little sense, but Sam just left him to it.

Just as they got to the front doors, glass panels sliding apart automatically with a burst of heated air to contrast the frigid winter weather outside, Dean's phone rang. He pulled it out of his jacket pocket, caught Bobby's name, and waved Sam on ahead while he answered.

"Hey, Bobby, any more luck with that list?" Dean stuck his free hand in his pocket for the sake of warmth and wandered away from the front doors, back down the wide walkway leading back to the parking lot. A couple feet away, another bystander lit a cigarette, taking a deep drag.

"Do you even know how hard half of this shit is to get?" Bobby immediately grumbled, voice extra gruff. No dice, then, Dean knew, just from the tone.

"If it was easy, I wouldn't have had to call you," the older Winchester tried with a cocky smile, hoping flattery might get him somewhere. He could practically hear Bobby's glare, though, and sighed. Yeah, he did know. It had taken a full-fledged angel almost a full half day flying all over the damn planet to get it all. That's why he'd called Bobby in the first place. "Let me guess. The human toe mushrooms are the problem?"

Bobby snorted, and Dean could practically see him rubbing his

forehead, bumping his cap back on his head. "Yeah, well, you could say that. They only grow on one mountain in Japan, and they have to be picked fresh, at a certain hour of the day, to work for the spell."

Of course they did.

"So unless you got a fortune stashed away somewhere I don't know about…" Bobby huffed down the line, and Dean could all but see him sliding off his cap and resettling the old thing on his head. "Don't suppose you know the winning lottery tickets for this month?"

Dean joined him in that huff. Like they were that lucky. The only thing his future knowledge ever seemed good for was getting them into even more trouble. The man from the future ran a hand down his faced, dragging his fingers over his chin. Damnit, Cas. She couldn't have left them any less of a complicated spell list? The hunter sighed, officially giving it up. "Alright, we're gonna need another way to stay under the radar. Any ideas?"

A tickle in his nose caused the older Winchester to suddenly cough, the smell of cigarette smoke suddenly choking him, strong and obnoxious. Dean glanced at the man only a couple feet away, puffing away, and frowned. Smoke didn't usually bother the hunter. Hell, they stayed in enough cheap ass motels soaked in the stench that he was used to it. But as the guy blew out another cloud, Dean found himself coughing again, harder than before.

With frowny face in full swing, the hunter moved to the other side of the walkway, putting a good ten feet between him and the smoker. Must be a certain brand or something, he thought, waving his hand through the air to dispel what was left of the lingering smoke. Probably European.

"You alright?" Bobby was asking, only a tad sarcastically, as Dean refocused on the conversation.

"Yeah, fine." Dean put the whole irritation out of his mind, hand now on his hip, facing the parking lot with his back turned to the other guy, who didn't seem to care in the slightest, or even notice, Dean's annoyance. "You got any thoughts on warding us?"

"Couple," Bobby answered, shrug practically visible through the phone. "Nothing we can do at the moment, but when you guys get back here…"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. *'Come home.'*" Dean managed the words without

choking up just at the thought of them. What Bobby hadn't said in so many words, but meant regardless (several times, with increasing doggedness each time over the last several days). "We'll take the hint, Bobby, soon as we can."

Something bright flashed in Dean's eyes, and the hunter found himself squinting, turning his head away from whatever was trying to blind him. Some woman who'd just climbed out of her car was busy putting on makeup, little compact mirror in hand and perfectly reflecting the sun overhead right into Dean's eyes.

"What the hell, lady," he grumbled, irritated for a second time in less than a minute, and turned to face the other direction, away from the parking lot, and from the smoking guy, and from the damn building. He was practically standing in the friggin' planters that lined either side of the entrance.

"I-…-out…and seven-…"

Dean frowned, eyes narrow as the connection went to shit and Bobby crackled in and out. He pressed the phone harder to his ear, trying to make out the older hunter's suddenly static-stricken voice. Ducking his head forward, Dean turned even further into the planters, trying to hear through the terrible connection.

"Bobby? You hear me?"

The line continued to static for another moment, Bobby's voice coming in and out in a mess of crackles and cut outs. Dean pulled the phone from his ear to look at it, completely failing to notice the man walk behind him, dressed in a sharp suit and tie, FBI badge already in hand. A man on a mission, who was equally oblivious to the stranger turned away from him, hunched over by the planters frustrated by a bad connection.

"Bobby?"

"Yeah, I hear you, boy. You still there?"

Dean let out an irritated huff as the phone line cleared completely, hospital doors sliding shut with a soft snick to his left. He glanced over at them, a figure he couldn't really see through the reflective glass disappearing further into the hospital. The dude with the cigarette was busy putting it out beneath his heel and the freshly done-up woman snapped her compact mirror closed, slipped it into her purse, and started for the hospital entrance. Dean put the phone

back to his ear, wondering what the hell just happened.

"Yeah, I'm here. What were you saying about wards?"

-o-o-o-

Chuck rubbed at his face, stressed the hell out. He released a large breath of air, cheeks puffing up with the sigh. Man. Was that all too contrived? Too many coincidences in a row so that Agent Henriksen wouldn't spot Dean outside the hospital and ruin all the tension before it had time to really build?

The writer chewed on his lower lip, staring at the words on the bright screen.

Aw, well. It's not like his writing had ever been Pulitzer level to start with. Worst case, he could just say some cosmic deity was looking out for the Winchester.

Chuck snorted, putting his hands back on the keys. Like any of his readers would actually buy that.

-o-o-o-

Henriksen walked through the busy hospital lobby, his fifth and final for the day. It was weirdly full for a Saturday afternoon in a relatively small town. Thirty minutes away, Rapid City had a far larger population, along with a much bigger hospital and two smaller ones. Not one of those three had been as happening as Sturgis Hospital was today. The tired FBI agent had to wait several long, annoying minutes for an Administrator at the main station to have time for him.

"FBI," he began as way as introduction, not even bothering with his name. He likely wouldn't be here long enough for it to matter. The other four hospitals had all been a bust, and Victor wasn't holding out much hope of finding his missing fourth victim in this one. As the town furthest from Cold Oak but still bordering the National Park, it made little sense for the Winchesters to head this way. But he needed those i's and t's, and so here Henriksen was. "I'm looking for a potential victim from the Cold Oak case. He'd have an injury resulting in significant blood loss."

The woman just looked at him like every other Administrator he'd talked to that morning. The *'Honey, this is a hospital. That's half our patient list'* look. The second woman he'd talked to hadn't bothered with the look, just launched right into the verbal version, which was

why Victor knew what that look said verbatim.

"Anything strange or out of the ordinary," Victor added, his returning deadpan look a clear indicator that he knew he was barking up a useless tree. The three bodies found at the old mining town in the middle of the National Park might have made the news, but he'd found over most of his career that Hospital staff didn't matter if your case was widely known or utterly confidential. Victims were victims to them. To the woman in front of him now, his missing victim might just be a number on a page. Victor tried for a little humor, instead. "You won't be wasting my time; the government is paying me to be here, ma'am."

The look certainly didn't improve, but the nurse did start typing away on her computer with an amused harrumph.

"I'll see what we've got," she said, and Henriksen leaned against the edge of the counter, prepared for another lengthy and ultimately fruitless wait. Nurses, the occasional doctor, and relatives of the sick and injured moved around him in the din of the hospital, fighting for space and attention at the counter, or milling about, waiting for news.

-o-o-o-

Dean hung up with Bobby only a handful of minutes later. There wasn't much to talk about, really. He updated the older hunter on Andy's condition, which the Winchesters had done periodically enough over the last three days that there wasn't much left to share. They spent a few minutes bouncing warding ideas around, talking briefly about the pros and cons, not to mention feasibility, of a couple.

The man from the future headed back into the hospital as soon as the call ended. Dean was walking past the main lobby, unpleasantly filled with too many people for his taste (what the hell was up with this small town hospital today?), and heading for the bank of elevators left of the Admin desk, when he overheard a voice that stopped him cold. It was a voice he hadn't heard in years. One that, by all rights, he probably shouldn't remember in the first place but absolutely hadn't forgotten.

"Anything strange or out of the ordinary."

Dean's body moved more on instinct – an instinct remembered from fear and adrenaline and the case almost a near decade ago – and the hunter ducked around the corner of the nearest wall. He immediately pressed himself flat against it and fully out of sight. His heart was

racing, and Dean took several deep breaths to calm it down before chancing a glance around the wall, wondering if he'd just imagined it.

Nope.

That was Victor Henriksen. Agent. Victor. Friggin'. Henriksen. Standing at the administrator's desk in a hospital in Sturgis, South Dakota, chatting with one of the women as she typed away on her computer.

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*.

How the *hell* had the FBI found them?

Shit, shit, and had he mentioned, *shit!*

This was bad. This was so bad. Dean didn't know what to do. This hadn't happened the first time. They should still have… wait, what month was it? When had Henriksen caught up with them the first time? Had it been in Baltimore? No…after that… Dean couldn't remember, and it really didn't matter now.

The man from the future stowed that part away – the future wasn't going to be any help to him now – and started thinking like the hunter that he was in the present. He needed to get upstairs to Andy and Sam, without Agent Henriksen spotting him. Even if the nurse didn't come back with the fact that they were housing an injured 'FBI agent' and his two partners, which she absolutely would flag as soon as she saw it in the system, Dean couldn't risk Victor spotting any of them. They couldn't afford to get cornered in a building that only had three exits, two of which weren't easy to access outside of an emergency or being hospital staff.

It looked like Andy was getting out of here a little sooner than even Dean had promised.

With a deep breath and forced calm, the hunter pushed off the wall and headed for the staircase in the southwest corner of the building. No way would he risk the elevators, only twenty feet away from the waiting FBI agent who would no doubt recognize him on the spot.

Shit, he'd been lucky Henriksen hadn't spotted him outside. They must have just missed each other. Dean shook his head, stowing that useless bit of luck too, and bolted for the stairs as fast as he could without calling attention to himself.

-o-o-o-

Sam and Andy were sitting in the room, staring at each other with a level of concentration in total silence that would have been utterly creepy (or at least sure as shit easy to make fun of if he didn't have other priorities) when Dean burst into the room. It meant Sam was helping Andy practice his new powers again, another thing they didn't have time for (although the kid was progressing terrifyingly fast, given the lack of blood on his upper lip). Dean could tell from the way his baby brother was holding one eye a little more closed than the other that he was pushing through the headache from it, too.

The frantic hunter closed the door as gently as he could in the haste that he was in, flipping the lock on it and pressing his back to it once he was safely inside. Sam blinked at him, already half-raised out of his chair in concern, and Andy sat upright, a pillow toppling over behind his back.

"What is it?" Sam asked before Dean, who was out of breath from his run-don't-run-alright-run-again-wait-for-that-nurse-to-walk-by-okay-back-to-running, could get anything out.

"We gotta go," he said, words rushed. His heart was still racing, brain managing some level of panicked calm that was required in his pick of careers. But he knew the consequences of the FBI finding them here. Consequences they could not afford right now. "We gotta go *now*."

-o-o-o-

They moved like a well-oiled machine. Sam immediately said he'd find the doctor and fill in the last blanks they had about home treatment while Dean got Andy out.

"Don't make it obvious we're leaving," Dean instructed unnecessarily, since that was a given and Sam wasn't stupid. Any hunter who'd ever been injured enough to go to a hospital knew not to mention the words 'checking out' or 'AMA'. Legally, the hospital staff couldn't stop you, but boy did those people know how to work the system to slow you the fuck down while they tried to talk you out of it.

But Sam, ever the referee, just nodded, grabbing his coat off the back of the door. The warding symbol he'd carved into it three days ago was still there, but neither hunter was worried about hiding the damage right now. Sam twisted the knob, slipping out into the hallway and closing the door behind him as quickly and quietly as possible. He immediately caught the attention of one of the nurses and

asked her to page Dr. Richards.

Meanwhile, Dean turned to Andy, who had already slid to the side of the bed, bare feet flat across the cold floor. The older hunter reached beneath the bed for the duffle they'd stashed there days ago, knowing something like this would be inevitable. Of course, Dean hadn't expected it to be under such stressful time constraints. The older Winchester threw the bag onto the bed, Andy digging into it as soon as it hit the sheets. He pulled out a pair of boxers and jeans while the older Winchester started tossing in the kid's phone, charger, *coloring book* (Dean wanted to roll his eyes, but he'd save it for when they weren't running from federal incarceration) and crayons.

Luckily, aside from some pretty thick bandages around his hands and wrists that covered a multitude of stiches to make even Edward Scissorhands jealous, Andy wasn't too badly injured anywhere but his neck, and was able to do most the dressing himself. Casting embarrassment aside in favor of not going to prison, Dean helped him button and zip his jeans and got his sneakers on and laced up. Andy threw a hoodie over his long sleeves and t-shirt while Dean slipped out of the room. While he was gone, Andy dug under the hospital pillows for Sam's sleep coin and the hex bag tucked beneath the mattress, not wanting to lose either of those things. By the time he'd gotten both objects tucked into the duffle bag's outer pocket, Dean was back with a wheelchair that he'd gotten who-knows-where.

Andy wanted to insist he didn't need it, but he could tell from Dean's expression that they didn't have time for that argument. He might not be severely injured anywhere but his neck, but he hadn't gotten his full strength yet, either. The psychic still tired pretty easily, and remained a little shaky at the best of times. So he chucked himself into the chair with a flair of acceptance and waved his hand in the air for his servant to push him forth hence.

Dean made it clear from his snort and the fact they didn't go anywhere for a solid three seconds (as much time as Dean could afford under current circumstances) what he thought about *that* roleplay.

The hunter wheeled the kid out into the hallway, eyeing the elevators on the other side of the nurse's station. Agent Henriksen would be coming up those any minute now. He turned Andy the other direction. There was another bank at the other end of the building. There'd be no reason for the FBI agent to use those elevators. It could buy them a couple extra minutes, even if it would take a couple extra minutes to get to.

Andy kept a completely casual expression on his face as he was rolled past the nurses, who didn't take much notice. The kid had been up and walking around that morning, so, in theory, they shouldn't flag anything weird about him being up for an afternoon stroll. Better yet, they couldn't even bitch about it taxing him, since Dean was doing all the hard work.

As he pushed Andy towards the far hallway, Dean spotted Sam by the nurse's station, chatting with the doctor. The younger Winchester caught his eye and subtly shifted a foot to the left, bringing the doc's gaze with him and further away from the escaping jailbirds. Dean gave his little brother a nod before pushing Andy quickly down the hall towards the back elevators, knowing Sam would meet them in the parking lot as soon as he had what they needed.

-o-o-o-

"Alright, here we go," the administrator – Sharron Bardur according to her ID badge – said as she tapped one manicured nail, extensions long and painted a vibrant pink, on her keyboard. Agent Henriksen tried not to look as impatient as he felt. "The only weird one we've gotten all week is the guy with the slit throat. But you already know about that."

Victor blinked, head doing a little shake that might as well have been a double take. He dropped his hand to the counter, a little extra bump in his heartbeat spiking with the very beginnings of an adrenaline rush. "Excuse me?"

Mrs. Bardur gave him a raised eyebrow, and he knew the sass of a woman who thought a man ought to know something. He'd been married before. More than once. "The patient, he's one of yours." When he still just stared at her, that eyebrow lowered into more of a frown. "FBI? Three of 'em came in, one with a certifiable crazy throat injury."

That little trickle of adrenaline became a torrent. Could it really be that easy? There was no way it could be that easy.

"They're upstairs now," Mrs. Bardur continued, a little more uncertain as it became obvious this FBI agent was not aware of his colleagues in the building. She was getting an uneasy feeling about that, too.

Agent Henriksen reached for the gun on his hip, but didn't draw it. He'd never expected to find the Winchesters still in the hospital. What he'd expected was another victim, dropped off at the hospital by a pair

of serial killers that, according to the somewhat dubious connections to past crimes, occasionally had a conscience.

"Call security, have them meet me at that room."

-o-o-o-

"I don't see why we need to discuss this right now," Dr. Richards said, a little harried by the busy day. There'd been a pile up on I-90, just north of the city, which involved a truly spectacular number of cars and almost no serious injuries. Head bumps and broken limbs, which was honestly quite weird for a major, multi-vehicular accident at high speeds. That had been followed up, almost at the same time, with a stream of parents coming in with their kids, all of who had a rash not unlike poison ivy. All of them. All at once. The hospital was suddenly slammed with cases. Dr. Richards hadn't quite seen anything like it, even on a busy day in Sturgis. He felt like he was living a day in the life of *Jumanji* or something.

"I know you're busy, I just wanted to get things prepared," the FBI agent answered, a weak smile in place.

Dr. Richards liked Agent Frehley. He seemed like a kind and caring young man who had a good head on his shoulders and a much more reasonable disposition than his older partner. However, this really wasn't a great time, and as their injured agent would be in the hospital for another two or three days at a minimum, Hank really didn't see why they needed to discuss it right that moment. Mrs. Dunn had three children all exhibiting the same rash in places children should not be getting poison ivy, even if they *tried*. And Mrs. Dunn was famous in Sturgis, particularly at the Hospital, for her overbearing, mama bear temperament. Hank really needed to get back to her before she started throwing things again.

The man sighed and tried to remind himself that the agent in front of him had concerns of his own about his friend. It had sounded like Agent Criss didn't have much family outside of the two senior agents, so it would likely be on Agent Frehley to make sure he got the care he needed. As a doctor, Hank couldn't be annoyed at someone actually wanting to ask questions, learn, and do it right.

So, with another sigh, Dr. Richards motioned for one of the nurses at the station, walking towards the counter with the FBI agent in tow. "Amy, can you get a copy of the aftercare for Agent Criss printed up for me?" As the nurse nodded, already pulling the documents up on

her computer, Hank turned back to Sam. "We can discuss it closer to discharging your agent, but those documents will have all the basics you'll need. Keeping the wound clean and staying on the anti-biotics for a full term will be the biggest things."

Dr. Richards pulled a pad out of his white coat, sliding a pen out of his breast pocket and scribbling something down on the prescription form. He tore it off and handed it to the FBI agent, who took it with a careful eye, reading through the scribbled writing.

"You won't need it until after he's been discharged, but those are the antibiotics." Thinking of the pain medication his patient would also need, Hank went ahead and wrote up a second prescription, handing that one over. "Don't fill them until he's been discharged, the insurance companies can be fickle about that."

Amy called for Dr. Richards, who turned back around and grabbed the stack of about fifteen freshly printed pages from her. He thanked her again, as did Agent Frehley, as he handed them over to the towering man.

"The rest will be about getting good sleep, no major movement or exercise in that area-" Hank gestures to his neck and lower jaw- "and making sure the wound stays clean and dry for at least two weeks."

Agent Frehley smiled, and Dr. Richards didn't regret spending the time to talk to him, despite his many other obligations at the moment. "Thanks, Doctor. I really appreciate it. I'll read over this and come back to you with any questions I have."

"Yes, well, as I said," Hank started again, unable to keep the exasperation out of his voice, even if it was no longer annoyance, "we'll have plenty of time to discuss it."

Agent Frehley's attention was elsewhere, though. Brown eyes focused on something behind Dr. Richards, and the man's shoulders drew back suddenly, spine straightening to his full height. Before Hank could turn to see what had drawn the agent's attention, the brown-haired man was shaking his hand again.

"Thanks so much, again, Doctor. I'll let you get back to your other patients."

"Yes, I..."

But the agent was already leaving, back turned on the doctor as he

headed down the hall away from his friend's room, rounding the corner at a speed that seemed a little hurried. Hank glanced over his shoulder at Nurse Amy to comment on it, but she was already on the other side of the station, greeting a very serious looking, dark-skinned gentleman who'd just come off the elevator.

-o-o-o-

Security had not yet arrived when Victor got to the fourth floor. He wasn't that concerned about it. If the Winchesters were here (and they were here; a group of three FBI agents in the same part of South Dakota as himself, with no word of an injured colleague passing through headquarters that Henriksen had heard of? Oh, the Winchesters were definitely here, and they'd stepped up their game to impersonating law enforcement and committing felonies) then Victor would be catching them by surprise. Still, they should be considered dangerous in any situation, and he didn't want innocents caught in any crossfire, should the brothers resist.

The real FBI agent crossed over to the nurses' station, hand still on his gun, eyeing the room across the station from him that housed the injured, possibly wanted men. "Ma'am, I need you to clear this floor. Get everyone back in their rooms and away from 411. Quietly."

He held up his badge as he spoke, and the young woman at the desk, a nametag pinned to her scrubs indicating her name was Amy, blinked in surprise and slowly forming alarm. To her credit, she didn't think twice as four security officers arrived from the stairwell located beside the elevators. Though she eyed them worriedly, Amy grabbed the other nurse manning the station with her and between the two of them, they started herding people back into their rooms or further down the hall. With a gesture from the FBI agent, two of those four guards went to assist the nurses.

"What's this?" A doctor – the white lab coat gave it away – came around the desk, a professional frown on his face. "What's going on?"

"I believe you may have fugitives in this hospital, posing as FBI agents," Victor explained, drawing his gun now that the majority of people were cleared from the main part of the fourth floor. He moved towards room 411, the doctor and security in tow.

"Agent Frehley? I was just speaking to him about Agent Criss," Dr. Richards balked in disbelief, though it did look like the gears were starting to turn. The man was probably going back through each

interaction with them, spotting the things that hadn't made sense then, little flags that might have been yellow at best, and were turning red in his mind now.

Victor, meanwhile, paused, hand reaching out for the knob, to turn and look at the man behind him. Frehley and Criss. Seriously? Two of the members of *Kiss*? He could only guess the third agent went by Simmons. Henriksen shook his head in disbelief. How the hell had the Winchesters gotten away with so much so far? It was like they weren't even trying. Victor let the thought go, turning his attention and all his focus back on the room. He wrapped his hand around the knob as quietly as he could, gun up and ready.

The two security guards flanking Henriksen pushed the doctor behind them, and the man shuffled awkwardly out to the side as he finally realized the very possible severity of the situation. Victor counted to three, listening sharply for any potential hints of what they might encounter inside. Then, he turned the knob and threw open the door hard enough to swing into the wall with a light bang. No one behind it. He cleared the rest of the room in three quick sweeps of both eyes and gun.

Empty.

"Wh- but- they were just in here!" Dr. Richards exclaimed, sticking his head into the room between the three armed men. His expression was truly baffled as he stared at the empty room, hospital bed partially made, no patient to be seen. "Agent Criss has a traumatic injury- he was *not* ready to be discharged!"

Victor resisted rolling his eyes at the doctor's misplaced outrage and pushed past him. "He's not an agent, he's a wanted criminal. You said you were just talking to one of them?"

Hank blinked, realizing that was what he'd said, and he had just been speaking to, well, apparently a dangerous fugitive. He swallowed thickly, but nodded at the intimidating man in front of him who was now in a *hurry*. "Just a moment ago, right over there."

That was all Agent Henriksen needed to here, not even looking to where Dr. Richards pointed. He took off at a run for the stairwell beside the elevators, all four security officers now following him. The Winchesters didn't have much of a head start and were carrying injured weight; Victor might still catch them yet.

-o-o-o-

Sam exited through the automatic glass doors of the Hospital at just under a run, his long legs carrying him a good four feet with each stride. He broke into a full run the second he saw the Impala, screeching into the drop off circle, tires smoking at the friction of the turn and the sudden stop. Dean leaned over, throwing open the passenger door.

"Sam!" With the way his brother called his name, the younger Winchester knew what he would see behind him if he turned. The doors of the hospital slid open with a distant, soft whoosh and the sound of pounding footsteps was far louder. Sam didn't turn.

"FBI! Freeze!"

There were several screams from inside the hospital. As Sam dove into the front seat, grabbing the door and slamming it shut all in one smooth motion, he turned to look back towards the building. There was a man in a suit, struggling to get through the large crowds in the lobby, frightened people now panicking at the apparent gun chase happening. A handful of security guards flanked him, equally struggling as they tried to clear a path.

Dean gunned it. Sam told Andy to get down and the kid slid sideways, trying not to jostle his neck too much. There was a crazy, fearful, excited grin on his face. Through the rear window, Sam saw the agent burst through the doors finally, gun in hand, leveling it their direction.

After a tense moment in which Sam expected to hear bullets hit the car and possibly the rear windshield shattering, the agent lowered the gun. They were too far away for a decent shot and Henriksen wasn't the type to shoot wildly. Then Dean was rounding the corner out of the parking lot onto the street, Baby drifting several feet on the rapid turn, tires smoking as rubber burned. The hospital and the FBI agent disappeared from sight.

Sam let out a breath that might as well have been the North Winds itself, the way it took all the remaining energy out of his body. He sagged against the front seat, finally releasing a death grip he hadn't realized he'd had along the top of the leather.

"Holy crap," he breathed, looking over at his brother. Dean fidgeted in the front seat, hands tight on the steering wheel, looking far too uncomfortable with the close call. Green eyes kept darting to the rear view mirror. "Who was that, Dean?"

"Henrisken. Victor Henriksen, FBI agent, all around pain in the ass and…somewhat decent guy when he's not trying to drag us to federal prison."

Andy popped up in the backseat, eyes wide and that almost crazy grin on his face. Images flashed behind both their eyelids, Dean flinching and the car swerving before he could correct for the sudden loss of vision. Andy's images didn't overtake his brain's ability to process the signals from his eyes, but it was *hard* to concentrate on one over the other, particularly when Andy's were so persistent.

There was a clock, and an FBI badge, and the kid from *Back to the Future*, and Dean got what the kid was asking, but he was also trying not to kill them all as they fled a federal offense. Several, actually. "If I crash, we're all going to jail, kid, so enough."

Folding himself into the backseat, Andy looked sheepish in the rearview mirror. A last image flashed in Dean's mind, less pushy then the others, of a board game box: *Sorry*.

"It's cool, just…go easy with the images," Dean conceded, feeling a bit guilty himself for barking at the kid. Andy was going through a lot, and Dean couldn't really blame him for utilizing the only good thing to come out of the last five days. The older Winchester glanced at Sam, who was unfolding a packet of papers. Dean only got a glimpse, but the information looked medical. "You get what we need?"

"Cliff notes version," Sam huffed, but there was the beginnings of a winning smile on his face, "but it'll do."

They'd just escaped the clutches of the FBI by the skin of their teeth, but it was a win. Dean let a grin of his own stretch across his lips. The FBI was on their heels – hot on their heels – way sooner than they should be, or at least in a completely new way, and Dean knew that was a whole new barrel of very ugly monkeys. But they'd made it out this time, and the tail of the adrenaline rush had him chuckling in the front seat.

Two more images flashed through their brains, both having an edge of hesitancy and infantile restraint. The opening title sequence of the movie *The Great Escape*, and the lead character, Hilts.

"Yeah, sure thing, kid," Dean said with a laugh.

Another series of pictures followed, with a little more confidence but no more pushiness. Baby, a flash of Dean, another of Baby and a

couple other cars Dean could only describe as sexy, then Hilts again. The hunter pieced together the clues and grinned, revving the engine a bit as they merged onto the highway to get the hell out of dodge.

"Damn straight, I am," Dean said, a touch of pride in his voice that had Sam shaking his head.

"Let Dean drive," the younger Winchester scolded Andy, though there was barely any heat. "His head's big enough as is without you filling it."

Andy laughed silently in the back seat, air huffing out in little chuffs, and Dean spared his brother a glare, revving the engine again just out of revenge. Sam looked utterly unimpressed. But all was right in the world, with the trio safely heading for Sioux Falls.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I am so interested to hear how many of you are thinking something along the lines of, "Huh…that…was way too easy and painless for our usually-no-good-dirty-rotten author…" and how many are of the opinion of, "Finally! The boys needed a friggin' win-slash-break without you breaking their hearts or bodies, Silence!" XD Either way, I think you're right XD The boys have won this round, but Henriksen's not out of the game yet!

Acronyms: AMA is Against Medical Advice. It's what they list on your paperwork when you check yourself out of the hospital despite the doctors telling you not to (pretty much so you can't sue them when something goes horribly wrong because you left before you were healthy). Note: I have no idea if this is how it works in other countries. This may be a super obvious one to my international readers, who could be rolling their eyes right now ;) Another potentially obvious one I've missed a couple of times is PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I've kind of been figuring everyone knows that one, but I actually don't know what it's called in other countries, if it's called something different at all :)

Up Next: We have one last chapter of down-time before your no-good-dirty-rotten author gets back at it. The boys flee East with a puzzle of their own to solve: how the hell did Henriksen find them? Our favorite FBI agent is still on the hunt (and pestering his favorite tech analyst that many of you are very sure is a demon [insert evil grin here]) In the meantime, Tom and Azazel

are back in the game! (or, well, they're trying to get back in the game…)

Chapter 87: Season 2: Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Chapter Reference – the Baltimore Case: Before Croatoan, the boys were on a case with a dirty cop (Peter Sheridan) who murdered a lawyer and his wife, pinning it on Dean when he was found at the crime scene. Sam was also arrested, but Andy managed to pose as their lawyer and get Sam out using his Jedi powers (which was seen on the security cameras). Agent Henriksen showed up at the end to interrogate the partner, Diana Ballard, who helped the Winchesters escape. See **Chapters 69-73** for a refresher!

Chapter Reference – the Shapeshifter in St. Louis: In this story's version of events, Sam and Dean were able to track down the shapeshifter in the sewers before he managed to impersonate Dean. See **Chapter 12** in the main story and **Chapter 3** of the Deleted Scenes for refreshers on how that case went down.

Chapter Reference – Cold Oak Kids: Just a quick reminder since it has been several chapters (and that equals several weeks in Real Life), the kids at cold oak with Andy were Scott Carey (emo-looking kid who had an electrifying touch), Amanda (Berkley University Softball player and reader of minds), and Jonathon Bailey (teleporter and all around asshole). See **Chapters 79-82** for a refresher!

Chapter Reference – Meeting Andy: In this timeline, the boys met Andy while driving towards Guthrie, Oklahoma. Andy was fleeing the crime scene (Tracy's coffee shop) where Weber had killed Tracy and Andy had killed Weber. He swerved to avoid hitting the Impala, and crashed his awesome van into a tree on the side of the road. See **Chapter 63** for a refresher!

Chapter Reference - God's Talk with Dean: At the end of Chuck's talk with Dean when the hunter showed up on his doorstep demanding he fix things, God told him that he *was* helping, as much as he could, even if Dean didn't believe him. Then he wiped Dean's memory of most of that conversation, leaving the hunter with the notion he had gone to chat with God, but couldn't really remember what they discussed or what God even looked like. See **Chapter 38** for a refresher of their conversation.

Chapter Reference – Meg and Tom: Very quick reminder, not even a chapter reference really, that Tom and Meg are considered siblings under Azazel's tutelage, and Meg is dead in this timeline (killed by Dean via the Colt).

A/Ns: Man. Phew. I think I like action chapters more, there's way less I have to go through and mark than these chapters where we talk and puzzle and solve and recall all the things!

Chapter Warnings: We are talking and puzzling and solving and recalling all the things! The boys try and figure out how Henriksen got on their case early when he should have even less to go on this time around. Andy enjoys things worth living for, and Tom graduates to the big boy table.

Oh, and the boys stop at Starbucks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 54

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

While his phone played annoyingly typical elevator music in his ear, Victor stared at the set of photographs, printed by the hospital for him. They would be included in the final report the staff at Sturgis Hospital sent to the FBI's – the *real* FBI's – but for now Henriksen insisted they give him hard copies. They couldn't afford any more mess-ups where the Winchesters were concerned.

Henriksen set the pictures onto the conference table. He was in a private administrative room that the hospital hastily offered up upon his request. (Really, it had been nothing short of a demand; Victor wasn't shy about that fact). The room would also serve as a base of operations for the Sturgis Police, when they got there. They had been called in to handle the paperwork shit-show this was about to become. Victor would be lucky to get out of there by nightfall, and that was with him passing off as much responsibility as he could to just about anyone else.

Glancing down to the top photograph, fingers spread across its glossy surface, the face of Andy Gallagher stared up at the FBI agent. The

lawyer. Henriksen shook his head. Their missing body from Cold Oak was the lawyer from Baltimore that had so mysteriously aided in Sam Winchester's escape from custody. Victor had almost laughed when the hospital staff handed the photos to him.

The man's injuries, however, were anything but laughable. Mr. Gallagher – the FBI had run facial recognition on the CTV images from the Baltimore precinct and gotten a hit for an open warrant out of Oklahoma – was now a mute, according to the doctor who had dealt with the injuries that night he'd come in. The same night Ranger Danson found three bodies burning on a funeral pyre in Cold Oak.

An interesting turn of events, the significance of which was not overlooked by Agent Henriksen. The guy that Detective Diana Ballard and several other BPD officers testified could hypnotize people into doing just about anything, had been attacked and permanently silenced. Some coincidence.

"Yes, I'm still here," Victor growled into the phone as David Attingwood, his go-to data analyst, came back on the line. He was way too chipper for Agent Henriksen's current mood. He was always way too chipper for Victor's mood. "Did the blood match?"

"Patience is a virtue," Agent Attingwood said down the line, voice a little sing-songy. Victor snorted, rubbing at his forehead and pinching the bridge of his nose. David was a damn good analysis, Henriksen reminded himself, and he would not be as good if he had to work through a broken nose and two black eyes.

Victor took a deep breath in, then let it out way too fast to be calming in any way. "How long?"

He'd requested the unidentified blood they'd found at Cold Oak be sent to Guthrie, Oklahoma. There, the police could compare it to the unidentified blood found at the scene of a double murder. It remained an open case in Guthrie, with Andy Gallagher as the lead suspect. Given Mr. Gallagher's connection to both victims – the owner of the café and an employee – along with a witness claiming he'd delivered a message for Andy to head to that same coffee shop earlier that night, the young man had become an immediate suspect, wanted for questioning. The Guthrie Police never found him, but they did find his van, also covered in the same unknown blood, and the blood of both victims. No one could say for sure until they found Andy Gallagher, but general consensus and common sense suggested the man was a killer.

Victor had no doubts, considering the company Mr. Gallagher was currently keeping.

"Probably tomorrow at the earliest, Boss."

The FBI agent sighed. Ah well. Matching the blood to the open murder in Guthrie wasn't that crucial a piece of evidence in this. Confirming it was Andy Gallagher that had been injured in Cold Oak was not his primary concern. Finding him was.

"Alright, fine. While we wait for that, then, I want the records of every phone call and text made in this area for the last three days. Any number that pinged off the four nearest towers. If direction becomes a choice on those, go towards Cold Oak."

"Uh…" David sounded the most hesitant Henriksen had ever heard him. The kid lived to please, and Victor had definitely taken advantage of that more than once in his career. David cleared his throat. "That's going to be a *lot* of numbers."

"I don't care," the agent growled again. "I'll cross-reference them myself if I have to. I'll put money on the Winchesters chatting with each other, and with the kid. The nurses confirmed Gallagher had a phone on him and that the Winchesters respected visiting hours. That means they likely texted back and forth outside of those times, so look for three numbers chatting with each other and no one else in the area."

If they could get those numbers, they could get a warrant to track them.

David sighed down the line. "Alright, I'm on it. But you're signing my overtime checks this month."

Victor rolled his eyes and reminded himself, again, that his annoying little analyst was the fastest, and he would no longer be the fastest if he had to work with broken fingers. Henriksen slid the photo and medical report into a blue folder, tucking it under his arm and and heading for the door. Time to review the hospital security tapes. Maybe he'd get lucky and catch one of the Winchesters on their phones. Then he'd have a time stamp to cross-reference with the call logs.

-o-o-o-

It took almost half an hour of flipping through stations on the radio,

driving away from Sturgis as fast as they reckoned was safe without calling attention from any highway patrols, before the Winchesters found what had tipped Henriksen off.

"There are no new developments as of yet on the three bodies found at the old mining town of Cold Oak, located in Black Hills National Forest," the female newscaster announced, calm and detached, through Baby's speakers. Dean glanced at Sam, the two sharing an identical look. In the backseat, Andy blanched, body going rigid. His hand crept up towards his neck. "The victims remain unidentified, but we are told police are working on sketches that they plan to release to the public. Anyone with any information is urged to come forward regarding the blaze or any suspicious activity in the area."

When the woman switched to the next news story, Dean turned the radio off and a heavy silence pervaded the car. Clearing his throat, the older Winchester glanced at Andy in the rear view mirror, but the kid wasn't looking back. He was definitely too pale, and Dean fretted internally about taking the kid from the hospital too soon. Not that they'd had any other options, of course.

"We should have stayed," he muttered, more under his breath than out loud, but Sam heard it all the same, and knew he was talking about Cold Oak. Probably because he was busy thinking it himself.

"We needed to get back," Sam added, just as softly spoken, like Andy somehow might not here them, sitting two feet away. Might not realize he was the reason they needed to get back. Not a decision either Winchester regretted for a second. "We didn't have an option, Dean."

Which the older Winchester knew. He hadn't even wanted to leave Andy in the first place. Part of him, even now, wanted to bitch about how it had been the wrong decision. The newscaster mentioned a blaze. The only reason those bodies had been found at all was because the Winchesters started that fire. If they'd just left the bodies where they lie or, better yet, not gone in the first place, Andy would still be recovering in a hospital where he belonged and Henriksen would be none the wiser.

Of course, then three bodies would have been left to rot without so much as a proper burial – a regrettable fate for two of the three – and left alone, the situation was more than perfect for churning out vengeful spirits. Plus, Andy never would have known the fate of Scott or Amanda, something Dean was very sure would haunt the kid.

It wasn't the wrong decision and, for the most part, it had worked out in the end. Except for the whole, FBI being hot on their heels, now.

"How'd he know it was us?" Dean asked aloud, realizing that three bodies on a funeral pyre in a ghost town should, in no way, lead the FBI to the Winchesters. Not yet, anyway. They shouldn't even be *known* by most of the agency. Not four at least another year. Dean glanced at Sam, who had one eyebrow up in silent question, and explained, "Henriksen. How did he show up at that hospital?"

The younger Winchester shrugged. "There was a lot of blood at Cold Oak." Sam winced even as the words left his mouth, glancing over his shoulder, but Andy still wasn't looking at them. It hadn't even been Amanda or Scotts. It had mostly been *his.* "They probably found at least some of it that didn't match any of the victims, and started searching hospitals for a fourth body."

"Right, but Henriksen was on *our* case specifically."

Sam frowned as Dean glanced between him and the road several times. He tried to go back through the brief interaction at the hospital, but didn't come up with anything that would give his brother that idea. He hadn't realized Henriksen was there looking for them, specifically, so much as he was on the Cold Oak case, looking for a missing victim, and happened to find them. "Last time, you mean?"

"Yeah, Sam. He'd been following us for months before he caught up. Since…" Dean frowned, going silent as he often did when trying to recall events from his other life. It was getting more difficult. He had two sets of memories for more than a year's worth of time, and every year forward was one more year between him and those original memories. Shit was slipping through the cracks every day.

Dean tapped his thumb on the steering wheel as he finally came up with the right memory. "Since St. Louis."

"St. Louis?" Sam's brow furled. He couldn't recall anything that would have the FBI on their tail. The only case they'd even worked in that town this year had been minor, at best. "What happened in St. Louis?"

Dean swore softly. This was definitely one of those double memories. "That shapeshifter. The one in the sewers."

Andy shifted in the backseat, attention drawn back to them ever so slightly. He always had enjoyed hearing about the cases the Winchesters worked before they'd run into him and become his life.

Sam, though, still wasn't following. He remembered the shapeshifter. Remembered Dean going a little overkill on the takedown, actually.

"Did…something happen differently last time?"

Dean blew out a breath that said yes, absolutely yes. "He might have gotten a sample of my DNA before we managed to take him down."

Well before, but Dean didn't really want to go into details.

Sam's eyes widened, eyebrows climbing into his hair, and Dean refused to look at him. It hadn't been his proudest moment, alright, getting kidnapped and tied up, stuck in the filth and smell of a sewer with that damn tarp draped over him while some psychopath went and murdered women with his face.

"Cops took him down, but he was wearing my face. I took all the blame. Five women murdered, and one dead Winchester to show for it."

"Holy shit," Sam said. At the same time, an image of a cow wearing a halo and angel wings flashed purposefully through both their brains. Dean sent Andy a raised eyebrow through the backseat, but the kid still wasn't quite making eye contact yet.

"So…you were dead?" Sam hazarded, ignoring Andy's well-timed and similar reaction.

"I mean, on paper, yeah." Dean shrugged a shoulder shrug, going for nonchalant and not quite making it. "Pretty sure me showing up in a Baltimore Police Department months later on another murder charge kinda drew the attention of the FBI at that point."

"Wow." Sam turned back to the windshield, a little shell-shocked to learn his brother had fake-died in another universe. Fake-died after being framed for the murder and rape of five women. Including the sister-in-law-to-be of one of Sam's closest college friends. Holy Cow indeed. "That sucks."

"Yeah," Dean huffed out, voice more amused than bitter, but bitter all the same. He was pretty damn glad they'd avoided that incident this time around, too. Although, it still begged the same question they didn't have an answer to. "But St. Louis didn't go down that way this time. So what tipped Henriksen off?"

"Well…we still got arrested in Baltimore." Sam's tone stayed even, but

Dean was pretty sure he heard the *'no thanks to you*' comment in there.

It did not help the case when Andy sent several images, the first of Dean, the second of a kid wearing a dunce cap, and the third, probably what he'd been trying to send all along, was a composite image of the two; Dean sat on a stool, dunce cap on head, frowny face on full. But the image was fuzzy at the edges with an overall blurry quality, not nearly as clear as what had all previously been things he'd seen firsthand.

Still, the message behind it was clear enough.

"Shaddup," Dean grumbled in Andy's direction, the kid looking inordinately pleased with himself. Like he'd told his 'lawyer' that day in the interrogation room: he didn't *remember* getting arrested on that case. At least, not till later, when it was entirely too late and unhelpful. "That doesn't answer my question. I still wanna know how Henriksen got from there to here. We didn't exactly take the time to be careful in Cold Oak, but what could possibly have tied it to us-"

Andy sat upright in the backseat, startling realization wide in his eyes and open mouth. Then they were bombarded by too many images to understand. Dean was glad he didn't get anything more than a mild head rush from the kid's powers. Poor Sam, on the other hand. The images themselves were enough for Dean, and he didn't get a real clear read on any one of them, except they all had a unifying theme: *blood*. Blood, blood, and more blood. Enough blood to be seriously concerning on where Andy's head was at.

"Andy, slow down, we don't understand," Sam managed to say through a clenched jaw, automatically rubbing at his temple and the headache that spiked there.

Andy leaned forward, hands curling around the top of the front seat, knuckles going white, as he tried again. He started slow, attempting desperately to get the message across well enough to interpret. What came next to both the Winchester wasn't an image so much as a feeling. A memory, really. Less of one seen and more something physically felt.

Sam didn't move, he knew he didn't move, but he had the distinct impression he was tapping his hand against his chest.

Then the feeling cut out abruptly, replaced by an image of Wiley Coyote, a blinking arrow pointing to him in only the blatant way of Looney Tunes comedy. That didn't make much sense, but then it was

replaced with a different cartoon character, one Sam didn't recognize, holding up a sign that read *'That's me!'* and finally, an image of Andy himself. Then the Wiley repeat, red arrow blinking on and off.

'It's me.'

The distinct feeling of patting his chest came back, and Sam realized it wasn't just a memory or a thought. Andy, remembering that he was half a foot away from the two of them, that the brothers had eyes and he had more than just his powers as a method of communication, started animatedly tapping his chest. He was mouthing the words.

'It was me.'

"Okay," Dean said slowly, getting better at seeing both Andy's persistent images and the road at the same time without swerving or drifting into the other lane. Well, mostly. "How?"

Another flash of blood, too much blood, followed before Andy was able to wrangle control back from his brain. They'd discovered over the last two days that he often thought faster than his control could handle.

It was the first set of images he'd tried to send, only slower this time. Dean wished he hadn't asked. It wasn't a set of images, it was a memory. Like a video, only Dean had no control over the play and pause buttons.

He was on his hands and knees on hard-packed dirt. Only it wasn't *his* hands beneath him. He didn't necessarily recognize it as Andy's hand, but Dean had a pretty damn good idea what he was seeing. His other hand – *not his hand* – was out of sight, but the hunter knew where that was, too. Clutching a throat that wasn't his, recently split open. Blood poured to the ground below in a god damn waterfall of death and Dean knew what he was witnessing, like he had lived it, firsthand.

The older Winchester's hands tightened dangerously on the steering wheel, Baby's leather creaking under the undeserved punishment.

Then the image was gone, thank god, and Dean heard Sam let out a slow, measured breath beside him. Practiced calm in the face of a situation – a god damn *memory* – that was anything but. Four images followed before either Winchester was ready to see any more. It was a clip from a show Dean didn't recognize, but the CSI-style lab was obvious enough, with a person in a white coat running something

through a spectrometer. A small kitchen soaked in blood was next – red splattered on the walls, pooling on the floor, dripping off a knife – with a very obviously dead woman lay in the middle of that kitchen. The same girl, alive and smiling, turned towards them in the next clip, her face lit up with a smile that practically made her glow. Sam wouldn't recognize that girl, but Dean knew who she was. Tracy. Andy's girl. The one who Weber had tried to make jump off a dam in another lifetime. He'd done a lot worse in this one. The last image was another memory, like the one of Tracy smiling. It was the inside of a car, a steering wheel covered in blood and the sensation of shakily raising a hand to an injured head. Steam rose from a crunched in hood, visible through the cracked windshield. Dean had never been inside Andy's van, but he'd seen the end result of that accident enough to piece together the clues.

"Blood," Sam said aloud, connecting at least that much, though that much was the easy part. "You think they were able to identify the blood at Cold Oak as yours?"

Andy shrugged. Hadn't some of the evidence against him in Tracy's murder been blood at the scene? Blood the cops would have later found in his van? He'd left one hell of a puddle of that same blood back in Cold Oak. If the cops tried running it, looking for a match, they'd eventually get his name from the open murder case in Oklahoma. And since all three of them had been caught on camera in Baltimore, his name would lead the FBI right to the Winchesters.

"They'd have had your face from Baltimore. From the cameras," Dean worked through the same equation out loud, glancing in the rear view mirror as Andy nodded along. "I'm sure the FBI got called in to deal with the whole scandal. They would have run facial recognition on all of us."

"Which would have led them Guthrie, Oklahoma," Sam added. "A search on Andy's face would have gotten them to his warrant."

"Okay, that's all back in Baltimore, though. It *still* doesn't explain how the hell Henriksen figured out we were here. Any other cop or even FBI checking hospitals for an injured vic from Cold Oak, I'd buy." Dean rapped his knuckles against the steering wheel. "But Henriksen himself? Doesn't running blood take, like, time or something? It hasn't even been three full days!"

Dean huffed in frustration, thoughts circling back through that night and everything they'd done. They hadn't been careful while torching

those bodies, but what could they have possibly left behind that screamed *Winchesters* loud enough that somebody thought to call the FBI. He got how Henriksen might have been on their case in Baltimore due to security tapes and the fact those cops had their names, but it wasn't like there was CCTV in Cold Oak.

His brain came to a stuttering halt.

That car. They'd passed only one car on the way into and out of that stupid town. Dean hadn't paid it any attention, far more concerned with their ailing third member, shaking in the backseat as the next round of morphine started to kick in and the car just started to warm up. But if it hadn't been some random passerby to spot that blaze in Cold Oak, if it had specifically been a ranger… Then a LEO had gotten a visual on the type of car they drove and probably a loose description of the two men in the front seat.

"Shit," Dean muttered. Sam eyed him for more to go on. "That car we passed, you think it could have been a Ranger? One that got our license plate or managed a police sketch?"

Even that, though, was a leap to landing in Henriksen's lap. Sure, the Impala had been included in Baltimore PD's report the last go around, but this time… Dean didn't think the cops had ever caught sight of it. Baby hadn't ended up in impound, and had stayed relatively safe and out of the way with Andy. But, really, Time was a bitch who liked to screw with them, so what did Dean actually know anymore, anyway?

In the end, the how didn't matter so much. If the plates were what tied them back to Baltimore and ultimately the feds, they'd have to change them ASAP.

"Some Forest Service vehicles are equipped with dash cams," Sam reasoned even further, though the subject wasn't something he knew a lot about. He hadn't even noticed another car passing them in Black Hills; he'd been busy taking care of their passenger struggling not to pass out in their backseat. However, Sam had seen a documentary once on illegal logging, poaching, and vandalism in State Parks. It had been four in the morning, several years ago when he was still a freshman at Stanford struggling with keeping a non-hunter's sleep schedule in a room not nearly warded to his father's standards, listening to an unfamiliar snoring in the bed across from him. Sam had watched a lot of mindless documentaries those first few months. "If they got an image of us…"

"Facial recognition takes a lot less time to run then blood." And a lot less guess work than a police sketch. Dean shook his head, realizing that possibility was even more likely than the license plate. Even if it wasn't, they should still change them out at the next stop. Henriksen likely *did* get a look at those plates as they tore away from the hospital. "Damnit. We should have just left the bodies there."

Andy retreated away from the front seat slowly, like he was hoping maybe they wouldn't notice as he sunk into the back and tried to disappear into the seat. Of course, he had no such luck among these brothers, who noticed immediately. Dean swore softly under his breath, glancing in the rear view again. Andy wasn't as pale as he'd been the last few days, but he still looked quietly stricken, realizing Dean was talking about Scott and Amanda.

"I'm sorry, kid." The apology was sincere, and brown eyes flickered to Dean's in the mirror. Andy shrugged and raised a hand, three fingers spread out, pointer and thumb forming a circle.

'It's okay.'

"We need more information," Dean switched topics, or at least circled back to the original one with the kind of conviction that screamed guilt and avoidance. The other occupants in the car didn't call him on it, though, or the way he had to clear his throat to get the words out.

In the passenger seat, Sam shrugged. "Find me a place with wifi decent enough for a hack and we'll see what the police reports say."

It took them almost another twenty minutes to find a place with free wifi. God, Dean missed the days where friggin' McDonalds had free wifi, and it didn't matter anyway because Sam could have just done all of it on his phone to start with. Those were the good days; the past sucked.

-o-o-o-

They ended up in the parking lot of a Starbucks. Dean went in to get the wifi password (had he mentioned he also missed the days where places no longer cared if you were a paying customer?) and was about to grumble out the most basic order he could think of in the frou frou coffee shop, when Andy bounced into the store behind him. He beamed at the lady on the other side of the counter, then tugged on Dean's elbow like a five year old getting their dad's attention. The hunter was, unsurprisingly, accosted by *seven* different images.

"Pick an easier order," he growled beneath his breath, but Andy shook his head, smiling that innocent little piece-of-shit smile of his. He repeated each image, slightly slower this time, and Dean tilted his head back, praying for patience from a God he knew wasn't listening but oh, he hoped He was if only to have Him share in Dean's annoyance firsthand. The older Winchester lowered his head back down, meeting the understanding but also amused eyes of the barista. "Large decaf white chocolate peppermint mocha, extra whip cream."

Deadpan green eyes slid to the beaming idiot beside him in a pure glare of deep-seated, big brother loathing. But Andy was holding his hands out in a *the-fish-was-this-big* gesture Dean didn't understand.

"I said large," he grumbled defensively, since Andy was clearly indicating size.

"It's called 'grande,'" the young woman behind the counter piped up. She smiled widely at Andy's enthusiastic thumbs up. Now Dean wanted to murder two people instead of one. Yay, him.

"Grande," he repeated, the monotone a flat, palpable thing in the coffee shop. The barista caught his look at her smile dropped, tinged with embarrassment. She ducked her head, ringing up the order and moving them along as quickly as she could. Andy gave her another thumbs up, which got him a shyer version of that conspiratorial smile, then the kid was pushing at Dean to move to the pickup spot at the end of the counter.

"I can't believe I just dropped five dollars on a drink that's more whip cream than coffee," Dean grumbled as they headed out of the café. "Is there even coffee in that thing *at all*?"

Andy turned to him, whip cream mustache game going strong, and raised his forefinger and thumb in the tiniest of pinched positions. Dean snorted and rolled his eyes, opening the driver side door and sliding into the car.

"Espresso one two three. No caps, no spaces," Dean said as he plopped onto the seat. Sam already had his laptop out, looking over expectantly. Before he could start typing, however, Andy climbed into the back, slurping loudly at his whip cream. Sam cast a judgmental eyebrow his way.

"Are you even supposed to have caffeine right now? Or…that much sugar? Or hot things?" Mother Samantha was rearing her head, apparently. Which, hey, they did just bust the kid out of a hospital a

couple days earlier than was medically recommended and after the worst injury either hunter had ever seen. So…touché, Mother Samantha. But when the younger Winchester turned that scolding look on Dean, like it was somehow his fault, the older of the two raised his hands like he had nothing to do with it. Andy slurped a little louder, smacking his lips happily at the first thing worth living for that he'd gotten to enjoy since his (multiple) near death.

This was what life was all about. Whip cream and peppermint chunks.

Sam rolled his eyes at another loud mouthful but eventually let the argument – if you could even call it that – go. Andy was a grown-ass adult, if drinking that hurt his throat, he wouldn't do it. Well, probably anyway. Instead, the younger Winchester got to work looking up any information the local news channels had concerning the Cold Oak case. There wasn't a great deal readily available, which was unsurprising, given the FBI were involved.

"It looks like it was a ranger that spotted us – two men in a classic car, black or dark blue, heading away from the scene. They are wanted for questioning." Sam cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the police – the *FBI* – having even that much on them. "None of these articles have much more than the radio report did. Three bodies were found in a deliberate fire at Cold Oak by a Ranger who spotted the smoke." Sam looked up from his screen, casting a far-too-casual look towards Andy, who had gone quiet, though he was still sipping his drink. Sam's voice was slightly more hesitant as he continued, "They're as-of-yet unidentified. Custer and Rapid counties are looking into missing person reports."

Andy swallowed his miniscule sip of peppermint mocha a little too hard, wincing at the pain. He was still on a small dosage of morphine, as the Winchesters did not have much of a supply to start with, at least until they had time to fill the prescriptions Sam got off the doctor. The morphine did help take the edge off, but Andy felt too-quick movements a lot more thoroughly now that he wasn't at the hospital on steady doses of painkiller. Dean promised they would get those pain meds as soon as they were far away from Sturgis to make that kind of stop safely.

Andy concentrated on an image in his mind, picturing it as clearly as he could before sending it to the Winchesters. Composites – images that weren't just memory but bits and pieces put together to create a new image – were a lot harder to maintain. Sam had reported on each attempt so far that what got through was always fuzzy, lacking details

and solidity.

Luckily, this one was not so complicated.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Sam hedged cautiously as the image of an ad for an anonymous tip hotline – the number too unclear to make out, but the rest easy enough to read – faded from his mind's eye. He turned in his seat so he could look at Andy fully. He wanted the sincerity of his hesitation to come across as more than just concern for their safety. Sam understood this was about Amanda and Scott too, not just the Winchesters and Andy. "With the FBI after us now, we may need to lay really low."

"We can look into it," Dean added, meeting Andy's eyes in the rearview mirror, despite the fact that they were still parked.

Although it sounded like nothing more than meaningless conciliation, Andy nodded, believing the older Winchester. Dean was usually pretty good about his promises, and even better when guilt-tripped into them. It was something Andy had seen Sam do more than once in their three months together, and Andy had used the trick once or twice himself.

Tracy always said he was a fast learner.

Andy understood Sam's concern, really, he did, but he didn't want Amanda and Scott's families to live the rest of their lives wondering what happened to them. He didn't know Amanda's last name – she'd never told him it – but he had her first, her college, and the fact that she played on the softball team. That would be enough to find a missing persons report from the Berkeley area, so long as the police or FBI went nation-wide.

Andy dropped his gaze, head hung as he stared into his whipped cream mocha, fighting back the fresh flood of guilt. The hospital had tried to get him to talk to their stationed psychiatrist, but they hadn't gotten far. And only partially because Andy couldn't actually talk.

"Hey." Dean's voice, soft in volume but confident and in control as always, called Andy's attention back to his green eyes. Dean could always look so damn certain when it came to everyone else's problems. Andy had always liked that about him. "It wasn't your fault, kid. We'll do what we can to let their families know, alright?"

They could get a friend of a friend of a hunter's other friend to make an anonymous call, need be. Something that could never be tracked

back to the Winchesters or any of their known associates. Between their Roadhouse contacts and Bobby's, that shouldn't be too difficult.

Sam, though, was thinking about something else entirely. "A black, classic car," he murmured, currently considering hacking into the Rapid City police data base to see if they had anything more specific than that. If all they had was the Ranger's eye witness report, they were probably fine.

"We should change Baby's plates," Dean said in response. They always carried spares in the trunk, able to change them out quickly should the Impala ever be spotted fleeing a crime scene. It was a necessity not only as a hunter, but especially as a hunter with such a memorable car. Of course, there was no way the Winchesters were ever walking into a fight without Baby. She was one of the team, after all.

"Yeah," Sam agreed, though his thoughts were clearly elsewhere, tone absentminded. He shifted in his seat again, a small frown pulling furrowing his brow as he looked back over at his brother. "It was a good thing the parking lot at the hospital was so full this morning. An FBI agent would have spotted the Impala before he ever made it through the doors."

"Huh." Dean made a face at that, having been annoyed earlier at the inconvenience that seemed out of nowhere. In fact…something distant and far away, like a word stuck on the tip of your tongue but going no further, swam lazily through the fog of Dean's memory. The hunter frowned. What was that? Something…something about someone helping them as much as they could…but still not enough?

The older Winchester shook his head. That made no sense. This was an overfull parking lot they were talking about, not a favor from some hunting buddy. It was a lucky break for once, which they rarely got, or a hell of a coincidence, which was much more likely.

Dean cleared his throat and the thought drifted away. He glanced back over at Sam. "You wanna see if they know more, or we good?"

The younger Winchester gave the thought of hacking the police website another half second before shaking his head. He closed his laptop and slid it back into his bag. "Wifi's too spotty for that. We can do it when we're back at Bobby's."

Until then, it didn't sound like the local cops had enough to go on for the Winchesters to truly worry. They pulled into an alley behind a grocery store in the same lot as the Starbucks. There was a large blind

spot in security cameras that Dean took full advantage of. The older Winchester swapped out Baby's Kansas plates for an Ohio pair in the same amount of time it took Andy to finish off his peppermint mocha cappuccino whip cream whatever.

The whole stop took less than half an hour in total before the boys were back on the road. In the backseat, Andy licked the last remains of whip cream from the inside of his empty cup and Dean threatened him with a death more painful than the last five days combined if he even thought of tossing that thing onto Baby's floor.

-o-o-o-

Tom stared at the chalice of blood, thick and silent, with a great deal of distaste. His new meatsuit itched, this apartment wasn't nearly as nice as his last borrowed-slash-I-murdered-your-previous-owners-so-your-mine-now place, and, as Azazel's sole surviving protégée on earth, it was now his duty to contact the Prince of Hell. Who was currently trapped in hell.

It was times like this that Tom would have been quite happy to have his sister back alive.

The demon cleared his throat self-consciously, prepared himself for his father's ire, and reminded the two rotting human corpses in the corner of his vision that *he* wasn't the one who'd gotten himself exorcised. He was still on Earth, and it was Azazel who needed *his* help. Tom didn't need the reminder, of course. But those two measly humans hadn't even known who it was who'd killed them. Tom was merely reminding them of the honor they should feel, and not bolstering himself up in the slightest in preparation of talking with this father.

He put his hands on either side of the chalice and began to chant.

"Find me a door."

Those were the first, furious words that bubbled out of the blood in a language that wilted the fresh flowers sitting on the quaint kitchen counter. A guilt-laden purchase by the male owner of this apartment for his female partner, who had no idea he'd spent the previous night with a hooker rather than 'working late at the office'. Culpability made humans do the stupidest of things. Tom did not miss the days when he'd been one himself.

Well, the flowers were as dead as their cheating owner now, so, that ought to teach the adulterer not to waste money on such an

impermanent and ultimately futile gift.

"That will take time," Tom reminded his father. While it would be easier to locate and open a small door to the underworld – nothing more than a hole the size of a button – from Earth's side than it would be from Hell, it was still a tedious endeavor. One that would take Tom away from the Winchester's trail, away from the trials his father had begun on his special children, and no longer able to check in on Persephone.

Not that Tom thought the last even counted as a real reason. He was no babysitter and everything he'd seen from the woman so far only convinced him his father's plan for her was a waste of time. But it had been Azazel who told him, very strictly, not to leave her unattended for long, not to unleash her unless in the presence of the prophet, and absolutely, under no circumstances, to trust her.

Like he was foolish enough to do such a stupid thing. That didn't mean he saw a point in watching the creature like a hawk when she was clearly a glorified nanny and nothing more. A long distance nanny, at that, given her only contact with Sam Winchester was through the prophet's writing. For all the good she did them, Tom could keep a better eye on the hunter than that bitch.

"We don't have time!" Azazel hissed, the blood bubbling viciously, drops spattering onto the table with his annoyance. Tom winced, grateful this conversation was not in person for his father to see such a reaction. "Open the cemetery Hellgate."

Tom stared at the blood, wondering for only a moment if he'd misheard the command, or if his father had truly lost his edge. They had the Colt, so they could theoretically unlock that door, but they didn't have a human under their control yet to get to it. In fact, his father had just wasted their best bet; a human he had chosen to send to Cold Oak right before springing their trap on the angel in Oregon.

Jonathon Bailey had been their first and best option to cross Samuel Colt's iron rail lines to open that gate. He was eager to prove himself, enjoyed gorging on his newfound abilities, had a blood-thirsty streak that guaranteed the boy a first class ticket to Hell, and was easily manipulated with a simple promise of glory and power. He'd been a shoe-in! But Azazel wasted him in round one, and now their best shot at Fossil Butte Cemetery was dead.

Not only did they not have a human to work for them at the moment

– and getting one last minute would mean involving Crowley, something his father had avoided from the beginning for obvious reasons (the man was a snake, even by demonic standards) – but they weren't ready to open the gate. Their contingent of demons so far amassed on earth, increasing every day with each demon slipping, one by one, through the holes and doorways they could find out of Hell, were not gathered in one place. They'd have no defense against the forces of Heaven that would surely be sent out to investigate the Hellgate opening. Even if that force remained nothing more than the current earth-bound unit they'd had on the planet for centuries, a dozen angels would still be enough to thwart much of their plans.

Every one of those demons that escaped the Hellgate would be needed in the coming battle They couldn't afford to lose any to a skirmish with Heaven so early on. More importantly, their primary purpose in opening the gate to begin with was freeing Lilith. Tom might not know the end goal of his father's plans, but that much had been crystal clear. Hell was going to war with Heaven, and they didn't stand a chance without Lilith topside.

"Father, unless you want to deal with Crowley's people, we don't have someone to cross the lines. Jonathon Bailey is dead. All the children from Cold Oak are dead except the Winchester's pet, who escaped," he explained, voice tight to keep the majority of condescension from his voice. Azazel should know better than this. Both messes were from his short-sidedness and, frankly, Tom was unimpressed with the temper tantrum his father was putting on through the blood. A Prince of Hell should handle a little set back better.

Oh well. It was only an opportunity for Tom to shine.

"I suppose we could send the Princess over the lines-"

"No." The word was *fierce*. Spoken with the kind of spitting disgust Azazel had been born from. "I don't want the Colt within a dozen feet of Persephone. Under no circumstances are you to give her that gun."

Tom rolled his eyes, knowing his father couldn't see him. Yet again, on with the woman like she was a real threat. They had all the leverage they needed to keep her in line. Granted, the Colt could kill a demon, so Tome wouldn't exactly want to be in the same space as their borrowed captive when he gave the weapon to her.

"Then we don't have a guinea pig and I can't get you out of Hell without abandoning everything else." Tom let the words sink into the

blood, the bubbles settling with general aversion. Then, fighting back the urge to smirk, he added, "You are the one that said we didn't have time to pull anyone out of Hell if they got themselves exorcised-"

The chalice rattled with the inhuman growl, blood spilling over the silver rim and sliding down its ornately curved sides. More blood spattered the desk, the viscous liquid boiling with Azazel's rage. But Tom knew there was nothing his father could do about it. Sure, he might suffer his father's wrath if he ever did make it back to the surface – and he would, eventually – but by then Tom would prove himself. He'd finish Azazel's plans all on his own.

As silence descended in the small room, smelling heavily of iron and rot, the blood eventually stilled. With a ripple, Azazel's voice came through, calmer, though still spoken through gritted teeth. "Very well, *son*. Continue the plan for opening the Hellgate. And gather the next round of children. Tonight."

"Cold Oak is compromised," Tom replied, almost lazily. The first thing he'd done upon getting himself a new meatsuit was get back to his appropriated-by-murder apartment and look at Ruby's map. The little fire that was Sam Winchester's demon-tainted soul had been burning small and bright on I-90, trucking right on towards the haunted mining town. "It's the first place the Winchesters headed."

"How did they know to go there?" Azazel's voice was like ash and fire, spitting from the rim of a volcano. Tom was glad he wasn't around to feel the burn. "One angel alone is not enough to explain all of this…"

The demon waited for his father's conclusion, looking more bored than anything else. Tom didn't have a clue how Dean Winchester seemed to have all the answers. A halo in his chest was bad enough. Now, however, it really was starting to look like he might have all of Heaven on his side. That, or Hell had a mole. Tom dismissed the thought. A demon turning on one of his own was like a human breathing air, but a demon working with a hunter, especially one with an angel all up in his soul? Hell was closer to freezing over.

"It doesn't matter. We move on as planned. Find somewhere else."

Easily done. Tom grinned. He already had the perfect place in mind. It was simply too bad it wasn't the right year to make the experience a truly interesting one. Still, even outside of an intercalary year, the place was plenty haunted to provide Azazel's special children with all the weaponry they'd need.

"I'll get the kids there by the end of the week. Anything else?"

The blood gurgled with hesitation and Tom straightened, interest finally flickering across his features. Azazel never hesitated, so whatever this was about had to be good. Tom leaned unconsciously towards the cup.

"Father?"

The Prince of Hell growled down the line, the blood bubbling with it.

"There's more to this plan that you don't know." Azazel sounded terse and impatient. He had kept most details of this grand scheme of his and Lilith's to himself, and Tom was all the more eager to hear it now. "Was Sam Winchester immune to the Croatoan virus?"

Tom shrugged a shoulder. "He hasn't turned, so I'd say it's safe to say he is."

"Good. Now…for our plan to work, he needs to be the last child brought to Cold Oak – or whatever new location," Azazel corrected himself with another low growl.

Meanwhile, Tom's eyes narrowed slightly on the chalice. He had already known the Winchester boy was to be in the last group tested, so what exactly could it be that his father hadn't told him? He edged forward in his seat, gaze locked on the bubbling blood.

"And he needs to lose."

Tom blinked. What? But…that made no sense. Sam Winchester had always been his father's favored special child. The one to beat. The rumored General to lead Hell in the upcoming battle, as preposterous as that may sound to any demon.

"I don't understand. He's been your favorite since the beginning-"

Azazel's voice was quite clear as it came through, thick and demanding. "It's very simple, boy. Either Sam Winchester loses or you make sure he doesn't leave that place alive."

Tom – son of Azazel, turned by the yellow-eyed Prince of Hell himself – stared at the blood. That…made even less sense. Unless…unless their end goal was something entirely different than he'd been led to believe. The smile was slow to form, but wicked once it got its start. Tom leaned his elbows onto the table, eyeing the chalice of blood with

newfound interest.

"Father…what exactly *is* this plan?"

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: OMG you guys. I had to start *another* word document for this story. Season 2 point 1 was over 350 pages, 190,000 words, and took more than two minutes to save every time - . - Now I'm onto Season 2 point 2. Good. Mother. Effing. Grief.

It's been at least three chapters since I said it, so I'm just gonna say it. Verbose. As. Fuck.

Up Next: The boys finally get back home, Bobby is Bobby (aka pure awesomeness), Andy's got all the feels, and Dean decides he really just can't do it anymore. Time to activate Operation Monumentally Stupid!

Chapter 88: Season 2: Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all you beautiful readers! (extra presents and joy to my wonderful, amazing, encouraging reviewers/commenters :D) I am once more in an airport. It's kind of ridiculous how many of these chapters go up in airports around the continent….

Chapter Reference – Persephone and the Impala Hex Bag: Quick reminder that Persephone broke into the Impala back in Sturgis, the first night Andy was in the hospital. She dismantled the hex bag, leaving it spread out on the hood of the car for the boys to find as a warning to be more careful with it. See **Chapter 84** for a refresher.

Editing Warning: This chapter feels off to me, but I think it's just the compacted/bounce-around way I recapped time passing at Bobby's. (I also wrote this chapter three separate times and kept having to edit the different versions together. I think it shows…) Anyway, not 100% on it but am out of time to edit further, so feel free to share your thoughts.

Chapter Warnings: The boys enjoy (well, sort of) their last bit of downtime before the hectic life of a Winchester picks back up with a big bang. Well, a vision of a big bang. Well, okay, someone else's vision of a big bang.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 55

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Andy gave Bobby a big hug the moment they walked in. If the gruff old hunter was trying to hide the way it warmed his cheeks or brought an embarrassed, awkward smile to his face, he failed miserably. Coming into the house behind the kid, Dean snorted, covering it up with an awkward cough when he got one hell of a glare for it. Behind him, Sam was caught somewhere between a smile and a smirk at the

scene. Dean would have called it sweet enough to rot teeth, which was only half of Sam's amusement. Then the kid was pulling back and Bobby found himself accosted by images too fast to register, let alone interpret.

"Ack," the older hunter grunted with a wince, hand raising to rub at his temple and the fading spike of not-quite-pain that had jolted through it. Realizing what he was doing, Bobby covered the move by grabbing at his cap and re-adjusting it on his head. Both Sam and Dean shared a sympathetic look, having warned him well ahead of time.

"Yeah. He does that now," Dean griped, though there was a half smirk on his face as he came to stand next to Andy, tossing his go-bag on the couch.

"You kind of get used to it," Sam reasoned as well, offering a one shoulder shrug while Andy gave each of them a mock glare in turn.

"Yeah, well, that might work for us, kid, but it won't fly with the rest of the world." Bobby reached behind him to his desk, snagging a book off the surface and tossing it to Andy. The psychic caught it – a touch clumsily with his bandaged hands – and stared down at the cover with a curious expression.

Sign language. Andy blinked down at the book on the silent language. He…hadn't even really thought about communicating with the rest of the world. Hell, he didn't really interact with anyone except the Winchesters and Bobby. Except, well, maybe on cases. But…he hadn't really thought he'd be hunting anymore. At least, not for a while. Maybe not ever, if he was being painfully honest with himself (which he'd only been once since waking up in the hospital. While the time was coming to revisit that thought, Andy didn't really feel up to it right this second). He supposed it was only practical to assume there would be times he'd talk to *other* people again. At least, it would be good to maybe have the option?

He glanced between the brothers and Bobby. Sam, ever the bookworm, held his hand out and Andy passed the book over. The sasquatch started flipping through it.

"There's videos on the web," Bobby continued, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the edge of the desk. "Pro'lly easier to learn that way. Always been more of a book guy myself.

Which was an understatement, given the shelves and shelves of books

that lined this room alone, not to mention the stacks of books in the corners throughout the house and half the basement. Bobby wasn't just awesome, he was a force unto himself. Andy thought he was intimidating as hell when he wasn't busy being a kind of awesome surrogate uncle.

"I'll learn with ya." The older hunter nodded with his head towards the book, still in Sam's arms. "That way you got someone to practice with."

Andy wasn't quite sure what to say to that. It made his chest all warm and gooey to think the old hunter cared enough. Although it was definitely in the stern, disciplinary manner of a vice principle who took his job too seriously. Andy didn't really like that prospect of this apparent deal, but still… The kid smiled widely, and sent an image of a thank you card he'd once seen in Tracy's shop and always liked. Never had the opportunity to buy it or give it to someone, though.

Bobby winced again, but at least he didn't raise his hand to his head this time. Instead, he raised it to his chin, palm flat and fingertips touching skin. Then he lowered it straight in front of him, meeting his other palm.

Andy blinked.

"It means thank you," Sam offered helpfully, glancing between the book in his hands and Bobby. He wouldn't be surprised if the older hunter had already made it entirely through the lessons and was already semi-literate.

The psychic scooted over to the younger Winchester, looking over his arm at the page covering basic interactions and manners. He read it for a second, then looked up at Bobby and made the gesture for *'you're welcome'* the best he could with his wrapped hands.

Bobby snorted, and Dean used the wide grin spreading across his face to hide the fact that he was struggling with way too many emotions, bordering on the frightfully feely. He clapped a hand to Bobby's back, making the old hunter grunt and shift against the desk.

"You're the best, Bobby."

The hunter just rolled his eyes, pushing off the sturdy surface and grabbing the book out of Sam's arms. He tossed it back onto the desk. If he was gonna have a house full of kids being, well, kids, then he was at least gonna put them to work, and it was well past dinner time.

-o-o-o-

Dean brought the burgers in off the grill, kicking the back door closed behind him. He set the cutting board full of patties down on the counter beside Sam, who was making up buns with all the condiments. Next to him, Andy was in charge of toppings. Which was a terrible idea, it turned out. In order to know what each of them wanted, the three hunters got accosted with pictures of lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, and, the one that got everyone to stop what they were doing and look at the kid, potato chips.

'What?' Andy mouthed at all of them when he realized they were staring. He shrugged his shoulders defensively. *'It's good!'*

A couple feet away, Bobby made the signs for both those things with a pointed look. Andy managed to look both sheepish and put out at the same time. But he did repeat them, a bit unsurely and to the best of his ability given his four main fingers on each hand functioned more like one big penguin flipper while bandaged, and one of those flippers was waving around a butter knife. Bobby seemed to deem it acceptable on a basis of effort over success.

They ate dinner in relative silence between the four of them, the exhaustion of the last week catching up like dead weight. Dean made it through his entire burger (potato chips and all, which he did have to begrudgingly give to the kid; it was a good addition) before he called it, body reminding him just what it had survived over five days. Sam only got halfway through his meal, bun still sitting on the kitchen counter in favor of two large pieces of iceberg lettuce (the *weirdo,* Dean had said, Andy had pictured, and Bobby had translated into sign), but he did manage not to nod off at the table until Dean stood up first. The younger Winchester pulled a *'this is his idea, I'm just going along with it'* move and followed along like he wasn't just as exhausted as his brother. Andy nodded to both of them when they seemed hesitant to leave him alone. Not like Bobby was gonna bite (okay, he might bark, but Andy could handle it…probably). The two of them had been protective enough around him to last the only child a lifetime; he sure as hell could survive the rest of the evening alone with one gruff, old hunter.

The Winchesters dumped their plates in the kitchen, Sam promising to clean up in the morning and Dean knowing Bobby would do it long before they ever got to it, then headed upstairs. The ceiling above Bobby and Andy creaked about for all of five minutes before everything went dead silent.

Andy glanced at his new roomie. The two stared at each other in the silence, one an actual mute and the other an elected mute. Andy offered a wide, overly-faked smile and Bobby just snorted, getting up to clear his plate.

-o-o-o-

Dean checked on Angela on his way to his and Sam's room. The sasquatch gave a cursory glance to the woman and the room, checking the machines from afar, though he was confident Bobby knew what he was doing. Sam wrapped a fraternal hand around Dean's shoulder, squeezing quickly, before he continued on his way down the hall.

The older Winchester stood in the doorway, as if entering the room might break some silent spell, and stared at the sleeping woman. Bobby had said there'd been no change but, with a braindead patient in a coma, that was a good thing. Not a telling thing, of course. They had no way of knowing if her soul was still attached to her body. Not without some spellwork of their own.

"Come back to us, Cas," he whispered to the silent room once he was sure Sam was out of earshot. Then, with a sigh, he pushed off the doorframe and headed to his own bed to get some much needed sleep.

-o-o-o-

Sam slept for fourteen hours. Dean kept it to a much more reasonable nine (which was already absurd for him), but the truth was, neither of them had really processed everything that had happened in the last week. Rivergrove felt like months ago, even if it was what had kicked all of this off. It made Dean's growing itch to get out there and find Cas all the more present. It had only been a week, but it felt like a lifetime. A lifetime where anything could be happening to the angel.

Cas could already be dead, and they'd never even know.

The Winchesters didn't talk about it. Not about their wayward angel, not about the three hundred and seventy people they'd lost in Oregon. Not about what Andy had gone through in Cold Oak or even the fact that the FBI was on their tail. Not more than was needed to fill in the blanks for Bobby. The old hunter had been keeping an eye on the news channels and tabloids ever since the zombie town. It took two and a half days, but eventually, something did turn up. It started in the tabloids. A town nuked by a secret government military test. Whole town wiped from existence. Three hundred dead or missing, and no one willing to talk about it or claim responsibility.

It was four days before an actual story emerged from a more reputable source. Rivergrove, Oregon had been the site of a tragic gas explosion. The entire town gone up with no survivors. Just one of those natural, terrible disasters that history would remembered and pretty much no one else. The story remained ridiculously hush hush despite the terrible nature of the accident and the number of lives lost. Only a few newspapers covered it nationally, a couple more in the State itself. Bobby kept it to himself until the boys arrived to hear it in person. No need to trouble them while they were in the hospital with the kid.

Hearing about it now, Dean had no doubt in his mind that Heaven was responsible, for both the disaster and the lack of attention or outrage it received. He'd heard firsthand what Heaven liked to do to towns that needed eradication. The hunter's fists clenched at his sides at the reminder of Uriel, of Cas and that damn Halloween town the two angels had almost wiped off the face of the earth.

He'd had to leave the room, eight little crescent marks dug into his palm and welling up red. The older Winchester went back upstairs to sit in Angela's room and stare at an unmoving vessel.

That same day, once Sam had woken from his 'beauty sleep' as Dean called it, the younger Winchester talked to Bobby about getting someone unassociated with them to call in a tip on Amanda Figuerro and Scott Carey's whereabouts. While the Winchesters slept, Andy did some digging through the University of Berkley's website, specifically their women's softball team, until he'd found her. Staring at Amanda's picture, the young woman smiling in a uniform, bat raised up on her shoulder, and realizing he'd been involved in depriving the world of that smile, had resulted in a meltdown that he'd tried to hide from Bobby. Tried being the key word, as the older man had come running at the first sounds of choking. He'd been so relieved the kid wasn't dying of some throat-related thing that he didn't care if he got covered in slobber and snot as the boy fell to pieces against his chest.

They hadn't spoken to the brothers about it. Some things stayed between men.

Bobby agreed to find a hunting buddy with no traceable relationship to the Winchesters who could call the Custer Police with names. Hunters knew how to leave anonymous tips, so he needn't worry about it getting traced at all, let alone back to them. Andy thought he would do better knowing their families wouldn't be left wondering what had happened to them. The truth might be terrible, but he personally thought not knowing, left hoping and wondering and

imagining, for *years*, would be so much worse.

He wished he could apologize to the families in person, but he knew that wasn't an option. Knew from enough reading on philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, and trauma (some of his favorite subjects in a previous life), along with the assurances of the Winchesters and Bobby, that it was guilt urging him forward. What had happened wasn't his fault, and laying himself at the feet of Amanda's parents wasn't going to do anybody anything good.

Especially since the FBI probably thought he was the one who killed them. Him and the Winchesters. Yeah, that part wasn't helping with the whole guilt thing, either.

Bobby placed the call and Andy tried to let it go. He knew it wasn't going to be that easy, and on the second night when the older hunter stumbled in on another panic attack, he offered the kid a post it note with the number for a therapist who knew the life. He told him they'd figure out the talking thing, but if Andy needed someone who actually knew their shit enough to help him…they'd get it for him. Andy had taken it with shaking hands and a weepy nod.

That night, a floor above and a dream away, Sam woke to Dean yelling out Cas's name. The adrenaline in that cry had him on his feet, knife in hand, before he realized it was only his brother and there was no danger. Well, no immediate danger. Dean was sitting up on the bed, heaving for breath, hand clutching at his chest like he was having a heart attack.

"Dean?"

It took the older Winchester two more calls and a jerky head turn before he responded. "I'm fine."

They both knew it wasn't true, but Sam didn't push. Dean just bit down on his tongue and clammed up anytime Sam had asked the past few days. Eventually, the younger hunter laid back down, feigning sleep. Dean waited more than half an hour, Sam purposefully slowing his breath, before the older Winchester climbed out of bed and went and sat in Angela's room.

Lying on his side, back to the door, Sam stared at the moon out the window and listened. His whole body was tense, despite him trying to let the tension go. He was waiting to hear his brother's footsteps on the stairs, the front or back door open, the rumble of the Impala as Dean left him behind. But the older Winchester stayed in Angela's

room until dawn, then went downstairs, put on a pot of coffee, and started cooking breakfast.

The younger brother knew the number of nights left before Dean did take off were dwindling fast. He closed his eyes and prayed to Cas again, hoping she would return before that clock ran out.

Sam woke up the next morning, only a handful of hours later, with a fever. It was nothing he deemed worth worrying about or mentioning. It took till evening for the tremors to set in, and by then Sam couldn't tell if it was the low-grave fever of a common flu, withdrawal, or the panic attack he'd just barely kept at bay for the last twelve hours at the thought of going into withdrawal again.

Dean noticed that night, but didn't say anything until the two were up in their room, readying for bed. Sam didn't have answers for him, so he was being honest when he told his brother he didn't know. It didn't feel like last time, but the amount of blood from last time to this time was vastly different. So was the time. It had taken a month at least after the whole jar. This might just be a cold.

Dean chewed on the inside of his cheek and Sam laid down. His dreams were as fitful as his brother's, and neither Winchester got much sleep that night.

Day three showed no improvement on the fever or the shakes, but Sam didn't get worse. Bobby pumped the kid full of vitamin C, Andy played nursemaid to the point where Sam told him to back off, it was only a cold. Their resident Jedi just grinned that shit-eating grin in response to the youngest Winchester's crankiness. The kid reminded him via multiple headache-inducing images, just how much of a pain in the ass the Winchesters had been for those four days he'd spent in the hospital. Sam conceded that point, but still insisted he was fine. Withdrawal or cold, it didn't seem to be getting worse.

His fever broke by dinner that night, and the entire Singer-Winchester-Gallagher household breathed out a relieved breath.

It was on their fourth morning there, the four of them sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast like some sort of warped concept of a normal family, that Bobby brought out a dark blue folder and both Winchesters straightened. The older hunter tossed it on the table between them. Sam glanced at Dean before he picked up the case, flipping through it.

"It's not much," Bobby mentioned, tone purposefully casual. "Hunter

buddy of mine called it in. Said he caught wind of it but ain't close enough to go himself."

The way the two boys glanced at each other now, Bobby was glad he'd opted not to bring it up until he'd seen both boys start to fidget. He figured three days was plenty of time for a hunter to sleep, rest up, and then become restless. Even with Sam's 'cold'. Dean spent too many hours checking in on Angela, sitting in a chair by her bed or standing in the doorway, muttering under his breath all the while. Sam rubbed the back of his neck, right where Dean said he'd taken a syringe full of demon blood and Croatoan virus. The kid complained about it like an ache from a good flu, but Bobby was pretty sure it was something else entirely. He'd also spotted Sam's new habit of pressing on that mostly healed wound on his palm, too. Bobby had found him, more than once, standing in the middle of a room, looking lost, rubbing at that freshly pink and white line. That one, though, the kid was aware of. Sam would often stop if someone else was around; it was the first and most blatant sign of any tell. A worrying one, at that.

Bobby had been keeping a careful eye on both of 'em and knew it was time for them to move on. Before Dean did something stupid (in his house) trying to get that angel of his back, or Sam got too caught up in his big brain and small sense of self-worth.

Sam passed the folder to his brother, already knowing they'd take it. But Dean glanced up at Andy. The kid was just frowning curiously, trying to read the file from across the table and failing. He might not be capable of hunting right now – hell, he might not even want to hunt ever again – but he couldn't seem to kick the curiosity bug.

Kid would make a fine research assistant, Bobby reasoned.

"Looks like a possible werewolf," Sam filled in the rest of the table, considering Dean still hadn't looked through the research Bobby had done. "In Lafayette, Indiana."

Dean shrugged, finally glancing at the thing before handing it back to his brother without seeing a word of it. That description alone wasn't enough for the timey senses to go on, but they'd been through that town a time or two. He glanced at Andy again, and this time the kid caught the look. He returned it with expectantly raised eyebrows. When Dean didn't react, Andy added a shooing motion with his hand. The older Winchester chuffed, going back to his egg sandwich.

"We'll look into it. No promises, though," he said through a mouth full

of food, making Andy grin and Sam roll his eyes. Across the table, Bobby just shrugged. He had other hunters he could call if the boys decided they weren't ready to leave Andy yet. Bobby was pretty sure he knew what their answer would be, though.

-o-o-o-

"You sure about this, kid?" Dean asked, voice low, as he stood in the den that afternoon with Andy, go bag re-packed and flung over his shoulder. The kid just raised that same eyebrow his way and Dean could hearthe little brother sarcasm in the silent room. "Bobby's got other hunters. We don't have to go."

Andy rolled his eyes and made the shooing gesture again. The first few nights had gone better than he'd thought they would. On their way to Bobby's, the Winchesters had stopped halfway between Sturgis and Sioux Falls to fill Andy's prescriptions, Dean purposefully driving an hour north of the shortest route in case the FBI could track that shit (which Sam said they probably could). Andy had expected a downgrade in painkillers, but Dr. Richards had not slacked off. Nope, he'd been in high heaven for six solid hours that first night. Sure, he had to sleep propped up as per Sam's home-care and out-patient packet, but with how fuzzy his mind and body had been once the meds kicked in, Andy hadn't even been all that bothered. It wasn't much of a change from the hospital, after all.

Four days later and he'd progressed to a thirty degree angle instead of a seventy degree angle. Life was going great!

The kid raised a hand, thumb sticking straight up, as he smiled at Dean. He shoved his smartass default to the side temporarily, letting his sincerity behind his shooing them out come through. He'd be fine, and the Winchesters should be out doing what they did best. They were wasted milling about Bobby's house all day, waiting for him to break like glass while they crammed their own issues as far down into their respective psyches as they could.

Dean glanced over at Bobby as the older man came into the room, arms crossed. Sam, who'd been packing his stuff in the car, followed just behind. Bobby gave a reassuring nod, no words needed. He'd take care of the kid. The older Winchester smiled, though it didn't feel quite right on his face. He put a hand on Andy's shoulder and squeezed.

"We'll be back in a couple of days."

"If that," Sam added, the folder with Bobby's research in hand. It really didn't look like much of a case, if it even was one. They might be able to knock it out in a day and spend most of their time driving.

Andy nodded before his eyes narrowed in concentration, and all three got a clip of an old black and white film. The images never came with sound, something Andy said he was going to work on (Bobby had looked grumpy as hell at that idea, though he did reluctantly agree to help the kid with it), but Dean knew the film well, with or without the soundtrack.

'Stay out of trouble, kid.'

Dean rolled his head, but squeezed Andy's shoulder again. Message received. He dug into his coat pocket, pulling out the same hex bag they'd kept on Andy when he'd been in the hospital. He tossed it to the kid, watching him catch it clumsily with bandaged hands.

"You keep that on you at all times," he ordered. A 'stay out of trouble, yourself', in not so many words. Andy looked down at the hex bag, hefting the minor weight of it in his palm. The kid nodded at him, tucking it into the pocket of his hoodie. Then, with a wink and absolutely no emotion that was not manly as all hell, Dean headed out of the den past Sam, bumping into him fraternally on the way.

Andy caught Sam's eye when he was done shaking his head at his older brother's definitely younger antics. With his free hand, Andy raised two fingers to his own eyes, then pointed to Dean's retreating figure.

'Keep an eye on him.'

The younger Winchester nodded, coming forward to give Andy a hug farewell himself. The kid pressed his head into Sam's chest, a good foot shorter than the beanstalk of a man. Sam rested his chin on Andy's head for the briefest of moments. The kid gave good hugs, and Sam only felt a little guilty taking advantage of it, coming from a family of back-slapping and almost-died man-hugs only. "I'll watch out for him. You take care of yourself, Andy. We'll be alright."

Their resident Jedi patted his back in answer. As Sam pulled away, he held out his own parting gift for the kid. Andy blinked at the Persian sleep coin, held between Sam's pointer and middle fingers. He shook his head, pushing Sams' hand back.

"Take it," the younger Winchester insisted, grabbing Andy's hand and

placing the coin in his palm. "With Azazel in Hell, you might not even need it."

And maybe Sam wouldn't need it either.

The look the Jedi skewered him with said he knew just as much and had half the faith about it that Sam did. But the younger Winchester only smiled, closing Andy's fist around the coin. He knew how much the boy struggled with dreams, whether or not a yellow-eyed demon featured in them.

"Keep it safe for me."

Then Sam headed out to join his brother in the Impala and the Winchesters left for the next hunt.

-o-o-o-

Andy and Bobby watched the boys head out from the front door. The coin was hot in Andy's fist, pressed into the depths of his hoodie's front pocket. His other hand gripped the hex bag just as tightly, and he tried not to think of the items like farewell gifts. Just…precautions, was all. Until the Winchesters got back.

As the Impala turned onto the main road and the trail of dust from Bobby's dirt drive finally settled, the kid turned to his roommate-slash-landlord. He gave the man a thumbs up and that same wide, purposefully weak smile from the first night, this time waggling his eyebrows.

Bobby rolled his eyes, signed something Andy only got half of, and headed back into his house. The kid had to chase after him to learn what he'd said (and then spent another five minutes as the older man corrected his hand positions and drilled them into his head until he'd never forget. Bobby was a *slave driver* when it came to learning, man.)

-o-o-o-

Lafayette turned out to be a total bust.

"Dude," Dean groused as they got back to the Impala, parked on a rain-soaked street on the west side of town.

"I know," Sam griped right back, trying to head his brother off before Dean got into one of those rants where it was all the smart one's fault (that's how Sam liked to see it, at least, since usually it was just Dean

blaming anyone but Dean, and since Sam was the only target around that meant Sam, and if Sam was always going to get the blame for everything that didn't go Dean's way, he was at least going to set the terms of why he was blamed for everything).

"There's no werewolf here," Dean continued, tone still one of condescending petulance. Sam knew it well. The hunter wrapped his hand around the driver's side door, opening her up with a beloved groan of metal hinges. It improved his mood just the tiniest of smidges.

Sam gave Dean a smile over the roof that was absolutely not a smile and opened his own door. "I'm aware, Dean."

A guy had been stabbed in a parking lot two days ago. No big deal, Right? Except that for a week before the guy's death, there'd been animal attacks reported every night, bouncing between two different parks that not only neighbored where the guy lived, but also where he died. Like clockwork, the attacks stopped the night the guy got himself murdered. Couple that info together with the autopsy report of a silver-dipped blade being the murder weapon – the coroner had found the broken tip of the knife lodged in one of the guy's vertebrae – and ipso presto, you got yourself a werewolf case. A finished werewolf case, you'd think, with no regrets but the sloppy work of a hunter who didn't know how to clean up at the end of the job.

(The boys hadn't realized the possible werewolf was already dead until they'd gone to the coroner and learned about the knife).

Only, nope, not a case at all. Turns out, there dead werewolf wasn't a werewolf to start with. Just a dude stabbed in a parking lot and some really aggressive local wildlife.

"Actual animal attacks." Dean was back to grousing. "In a full-fledged city. In Indiana."

They'd checked. *Twice*. Sam had even gotten chased by the damn-near rabid raccoon responsible for the first attack. Dean wished he'd gotten it on video. They could be millionaires by the end of the week with that shit.

"I know," Sam repeated, climbing into the car. He hadn't found the animal attacks nearly as ironic or hilarious as Dean. Then again, Dean hadn't been chased by the damn scariest raccoon Sam had ever seen. Seriously. It had definitely gotten into *something*. The city did have a drug scene and, somewhere, Sam was very certain a tweaker was

missing his stash.

"Go figure," the younger Winchester added as Dean slid into the Impala beside him, closing the driver's side door.

"Okay, but, what I don't get is someone stabbing the guy in the parking lot with a silver tipped knife." Dean shook his head, sliding the key into the ignition but not turning her on just yet. "Like…did some hunter fuck up and kill a nobody?"

Sam shrugged, but he hoped that wasn't the case. Most hunters made damn sure they had the right guy before doing something as permanent as killing them. At least, Sam hoped the majority out there did. "Maybe it was just silver coated. Ornamental, you know?"

Or maybe the coroner had been mistaken, or the lab guy who ran the blade.

The older Winchester shook his head, reaching forward to turn the ignition. "What normal person kills another normal person with an ornamental blade? Normal people, Sammy. I'm telling you, they're the real scary ones."

Sam shrugged in lieu of shaking his head, but there was a crooked smile in the corner of his mouth. "Maybe it was some crazy guy hyped up on the occult. Watched too much *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or something."

There was something about the way he said it. Just a little lilt in the words that Dean picked up on it in an instant. He glanced his brother's way, eyes narrowed but brows all sorts of judging.

"You watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?" The older hunter accused before breaking into absolutely-judgmental laughter, sliding Baby into gear. "All the crap you gave over the years about the family business, and you spent your down time at Stanford watching *Buffy*, the *Vampire Slayer*?"

"Shut up," Sam grumbled, already regretting having said anything. "It was Jess's favorite show for, like, all the years we were dating."

She'd had the entire DVD set, so he hadn't even escaped it once the show went off air. Not that he'd ever stood a chance. Jess had looped him right into *'Angel'* next. It had been…pretty okay. Okay, fine, better than he'd have admitted, given the subject matter. Actually, if he were being honest, the characters had been interesting enough, the writing

pretty funny, and-

Sam sniffed defensively. "Besides. Like you didn't watch it."

"Yeah, of course I did; the lead chick was hot. But I didn't watch it on *purpose*." Dean gave his brother a pointed look as they pulled away from the curb. "That's the sorta thing you get into cuz you fell asleep watching something *good* – like Dr. Sexy – and woke up to Buffy. You don't turn the hot blondes off, Sammy. That's the kinda thing a real man follows through on."

Sam might have rolled his eyes, shook his head, even groaned, but he was too busy making a face. "Who's Doctor Sexy?"

Dean's jaw flat out dropped, and he turned to slowly to his kid brother – so slowly that Sam immediately regretted whatever life decision had led him to that moment – with eyes comically wide and face a live rendition of the Scream mask.

"Uh…Dean?"

Then the older Winchester's expression shifted, a slow motion light up of a kid's face on Christmas morning. Sam was regretting asking even harder now.

"What year is it?"

Sam blinked at the unexpected question. Though, given his brother was a time traveling hunter from ten years in the future, it wasn't an unheard of question these days.

"Uh…"

But his brother was already six steps past his own words. "Oh, man, I think it should be out, right? It's two thousand and six. The first season should be on air!"

The brunet was slowly leaning further and further away from the older Winchester, until he found himself pressed into the corner of the car, regret a hardcore part of his younger brother life right now.

"Oh, you're in for a treat, Sammy." Dean's foot turned to lead on the gas pedal. Forget the bust of a hunt or being stuck in Lafayette for a night because they'd already paid for a motel. They had a new life purpose! "I am going to introduce you to Dr. Sexy, M.D., the sexiest damn doctor the city of Seattle has ever seen or ever will see again."

Sam looked like he'd rather be hunting down a killer werewolf or facing the crackhead raccoon again.

Dean ignored him, turning bright eyes shining with excitement back on the road. "Shaddup, it's based on a book, or something. That makes it good. You'll love it."

-o-o-o-

Sam feigned sleep somewhere during the second episode, snores so loud and obnoxious they were obviously fake. Dean had managed to find a channel showing back-to-back episodes of the first season. His excitement had flat out caused the younger Winchester to leave the room under the guise of 'getting ice', despite the room having no ice bucket and the motel no ice machine.

The hunter actually did fall asleep, for real, by the time the second episode ended, leaving Dean alone with the next doctor show the channel switched over to. It wasn't as good as Dr. Sexy, but Dean found himself mindlessly watching it all the same. Emphasis on mindless.

It figured, this whole case being a bust. Dean could have used a good hunt. Could have used a good distraction.

Now he was sitting in a cheap motel room that wasn't home, wondering if Andy was alright back at Bobby's, wondering if Angela was alright and knowing she was because comatose patients didn't change, and ultimately staring at the flickering screen of a TV he hadn't bothered to turn off despite the fact he really wasn't paying it any attention. Sam slept on beside him. Dean didn't want to sleep. Didn't want to have the same damn dream he'd been having since Rivergrove. Hell. The screams of the damned, his own included. Fire licking at his skin, hooks dug deep in his flesh. Then, always Cas in the library without his coat, those damn sleeves rolled up like they never had been before. Sam's breathless realization that that wasn't their Cas. Those blue eyes consumed by vicious, deadly red.

Some nights Dean saw the blade slip into Not-Cas's hand. Some nights he felt that sword slide between his ribs, looking for a heart that wasn't there because the black hole behind his sternum had devoured it. Some nights he watched Cas kill Sam first. Those were the nights he usually woke up screaming.

The older Winchester raised his arm, remote in hand and switched off the TV. Dean rubbed at his chest in the semi-darkness, sick of the

damn empty that lingered there. It was a constant reminder of what wasn't there. If he had lost Cas – *his* Cas, that sliver of grace, that shadow of his best friend that had been with him through this all – if that Cas was gone…if Dean had lost him, again…

He dropped his hand from his chest and glanced over at Sam, softly snoring away. If Cas was gone, *his* Cas, then he refused to lose the other one, too. He couldn't lose them both. Wouldn't. Sam knew that. Sam understood that. Staring at his younger brother, off in dreamland for real this time, Dean chewed on his inner cheek as he contemplated the stupidity he promised his brother he would try not to do. Even if it might work. Even if it could get them Cas back.

Fuck it. Stupid-but-it-worked-out-in-the-end was kind of his thing. Coming to a decision with a flurry of silent motion, the hunter climbed off the bed, grabbing his shoes and pulling them on.

Dean might have promised he would tell his brother before he did anything stupid, but Sam hadn't been getting much more sleep than him. He needed the rest. Plus, Dean was still pretty sure Sam was going to insist on going with him. Follow him, at a minimum. And this was a stupid, *stupid* plan. Summoning Cas levels of stupid, with all the same risks but an added bonus challenge of it not being friggin' Cas they were summoning.

One Winchester had to survive it. Sam couldn't come with him. Not this time.

Still, he'd promised… Dean stood from the bed, walking over to the desk and opening the only drawer it had. There was a notepad, standard motel fair, and pen inside. He slapped them onto the desk, wincing at the noise and glancing at his brother. Sam slept on. Like Dean had thought, he needed the rest.

The hunter put the pen to paper, then hesitated. What the hell to write. He frowned at the ache in his chest, which felt a lot like guilt. But he knew it wasn't guilt. There wasn't anything in his chest right now; that was the whole problem. Pushing aside the little voice in his head that said this was an awful lot like a secret, he scribbled a quick note for his brother.

It wasn't a secret. It was just a delayed heads up, was all.

He left the pad and the pen on the nightstand. Should be the first thing Sammy saw when he woke up, right next to the hex bag they now kept with them at night, rather than leave it in the Impala. Dean

might not like the warning they received at the motel in Sturgis, but he also had to give it some validation. Whoever had left it – be it Ruby or their mystery Pagan – they'd had somewhat of a point.

Much to the hunter's absolute loathing to admit.

Dean stared at the pad of paper, his scribbled handwriting not even readable in the dark. It wasn't a secret, he insisted, unsure exactly who he was trying to convince. He'd told Sam exactly what he planned to do. Besides, it might not even work. No point dragging both of them into it. And he *was* telling Sam. That's what the note was for.

Right.

Dean grabbed his coat, Baby's keys jingling softly in one of the pockets, and slipped out the door. He was gonna get a message to Cas. That was all. If it didn't work…well, that would be it. One and done. One try, Dean told himself as he closed the door as quietly as possible, hunching his shoulders against the frigid Indiana night. One try, and if it didn't work then he'd come right back, maybe with Sam none the wiser.

-o-o-o-

Sam woke to the sound of the motel door snicking closed. He sat up, more out of instinct then actual wakefulness, but as he took in the dark room, his brother's empty bed, and the notepad sitting on the nightstand between the two beds, he realized what had woken him up.

"Damnit, Dean," he muttered, swinging he legs off the bed, feet planted firmly on the ugly carpet below. He reached over, snagging the note. It didn't say much, and Sam sighed, running a hand over tired, sleep-puffy eyes. He glanced at the motel door, knowing he could still probably catch his brother if he left now…

Technically, he'd given Dean his blessing to go be an idiot and the idiot had, sort of, told him he was doing it, like requested. In the most cowardly, cheap-ass way possible, of course.

Sam tossed the notepad back onto the table, something between vexation and frustration making that buzz beneath his skin stir with interest (a confirmation that the damn cold back at Bobby's *had* been the flu), but not enough to make him follow after his brother. He'd told Dean he would stay behind for this one. Even if the older Winchester had made off like a sneak, Sam hadn't exactly been

blindsided by it. He'd been expecting it to happen every night since the Sturgis Hospital staff had told them Andy would live.

The buzzing in his veins and in his ears was, unfortunately, enough to wake him up. Sam stood from the bed, rubbing at his sleep-mussed hair and trying to shake loose that vibration just beneath his skin. It was a sensation he was really, really, starting to hate.

A knock on the door caused the tall hunter to pause, looking over at the object in question with nothing short of surprise. Then the shock disappeared, shifting almost instantly into exasperation. Sam moved around the mattress, crossing the room with bitchface locked and loaded (when he saw it, Dean would probably label it a number five, or whatever stupid numbered list he kept in that brain of his). Sam pulled open the door with a little more force than was strictly necessary.

"You seriously ditch me in the middle of the night and forget your room key?"

But it wasn't his older brother on the other side. It was a woman: Caucasian, young, maybe his age at most, with big doe eyes and shoulder-length brown hair. Sam didn't recognize her, but by the way those pale eyes widened, pouty lips parting in a surprised intake of air, and the mix of awe and fear across her round face, she certainly seemed to know him.

"Oh my god," Ava Wilson whispered, staring up at the spitting image of the man she'd seen die in her dreams last night. "It's you. It's really you…. You're in danger!"

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Okay, shit ton of notes today. Please read through at least the **FULL CAPS** ones, guys!

Ava Wilson: But…But…Gordon's supposed to go after Dean! Why is Ava having visions of Sam still, you could have written her out of the story, damnit, Silence! [insert no-good-dirty-rotten grin here] For those of you not a huge fan of this character, and it seems like quite a few of you, I do feel ya. I liked her introduction more than her end result, so I'm gonna try to nudge her storyline a little back towards that first personality without going outside of what canon defined as her character. :)

Andy at Bobby's - 'Kid would make a fine research

assistant': Okay, **ChangelingRin**, that line was JUST FOR YOU and all your pushing. Are you happy now? YOU'RE WELCOME. XD

(Also, thanks for all the pushing, friend ;))

Up Next: Who's been missing Cas? Yeah? Yeah? Well, too bad for you! No, I'm joking, even I'm not that cruel (usually). Cas and Heaven and Uriel are UP NEXT!

(*cough* finally *cough*)

ARC WARNING: We are now in a new arc: the I-can't-tell-you-its-label-yet-because-we're-not-actually-far-enough-in-to-do-so-without-spoilers arc! This arc is going to be a turbulent, high speed, roller-coaster type ride that spans **chapters 56-64**. We will be jumping back and forth between what's happening to Dean and what's happening to Sam, and there is a looooot happening with very little down-time for chapter cuts. Which means we're also looking at cliffhangers of various degrees for a while, too.

If you are the kind of person who does not enjoy waiting a week in between high-speed, turbulent, roller-coaster type cliffies, I recommend stowing this story for the next two months and coming back to read all at once!

(**Note:** It would be very nice of those people to leave a comment this chapter, though, so I don't feel the drop in readership and get discouraged by it, as I am being oh-so-nice in warning you ;) **hint hint**)

For everyone else, this has been your warning, you are now warned!

MILESTONE APPROACHING: Damnit, guys, this chapter had enough notes already! XD We are THREE freaking kudos away from 1,000 likes on A03. Holy shit, guys! I was totally ready to tell you all that back when we were ten away, figuring I had at least another week before we crossed the threshold. But then this week you all were like "TO HELL WITH YOUR PLANS, SILENCE, LIKE LIKE LIKE LIKE LIKE. WE'LL SHOW YOU HOLIDAY SPIRIT, WOMAN."

Hahah, not that I'm complaining! ;) However, we all know what Milestones get us: back-to-back chapters! Not gonna lie, I was totally not prepared for that to happen *over Christmas*. I have

no idea if I'm going to have time to edit two chapters by next week. I wasn't even sure I was going to post over Christmas at all . But I might be able to swing it (mostly I just don't know how much down time I'll have with family. Could be tons!)

So here's the deal: you guys get those last three kudos in and I will do my *absolute best* to get you two chapters next weekend.

(P.S. Good. Damn. Timing guys. The first of Cliffhanger Row starts *majorly* next chapter.)

(P.P.S. Um…just a friendly heads up…Cliffhanger Row does not *end* by next next chapter… I did mention a high speed turbulent roller coaster type ride for, like, eight chapters, yes?)

(P.P.P.S. We are also 109 reviews away from 2,000 reviews on ff.net. Which means we are primed for back-to-back-to-back chapters (where your author dies an exhaustion, editing-related death, but with a big damn smile on her face). Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year indeed? Keep an eye on those numbers, guys, and you may get through this entire eight-chapter cliffhanger ride in, like, half the time XD)

Chapter 89: Season 2: Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Crap crappity crap crap, guys!! It's SUNDAY. Did you know it was Sunday? Apparently some of you did! I was going through my e-mails (while waiting on my parents to leave for a movie) when I got three new ones all at once, from commenters/ reviewers just lightly poking me about that update. I was all...why is everyone poking me? It's like, Wednesday.

It is not, in fact, Wednesday.

You should have seen the mad dash out of the living room and to my bedroom for my computer in hopes I could scramble this thing together and post (even now, my parents are finally ready to go and I'm begging for another few minutes XD)

Anyway, here is the first chapter!! I will post the second when I get back from the movie, guys! Thanks for the reminder from the light pokers, you all ROCK! XD Sorry I got so distracted that I forgot what day it was, haha!

Previously On TRSF... The last time we saw Castiel, his grace had taken serious damage from the demon's trap in Rivergrove. He managed to return to Heaven, where Uriel gave him enough cursory energy to hide his injuries and throw Zachariah of the hunt, with the aid of Malachi. Then the anarchist angel assisted Castiel in entering a healing trance. Malachi was recruited by Uriel, along with several so-far unnamed angels, as a group primed to turn on Heaven and help raise Lucifer. Malachi warned Uriel that Castiel would be his problem to deal with if he caused them any more trouble or brought more attention to their secrets.

Original Timeline Reference - Malachi: I've noticed a lot of readers commenting about Malachi as they catch up on the story, generally about who the heck is he?! Since we're getting back to him this chapter, here's a quick recap :) Malachi was in all of *one* episode in Season 9, but he was introduced like this:

Castiel: "Who leads the other faction?"

Someone: "Malachi."

Castiel: *hardcore stares* "The Anarchist?"

And that's all we got. He was the angel in Season 9 that captured and tortured a human Castiel in his creepy dungeon building thing. And that is *all* we got of Malachi! He left the room, Castiel stole an angel's grace for the first time, and escaped. It was later mentioned Gadreel killed him off screen but…that was it, folks. I was totally unsatisfied that the most interesting thing about this guy – that he was an *angel* who was also an *anarchist* – was neeeever touched on. So I decided to expand upon him in this story, because that sounds like a brilliant badguy!

Chapter Reference - Persephone: Quick reminder that Persephone first met Sam in a bar, where she had on a silver warding necklace. She appears as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Caucasian woman when she wears it. She keeps it on when she's at Chuck's as well, to hide her not-humanness from Raphael. Sam has since figured out, from her Semitic accent, that the woman he met in the bar was very likely the same woman Azazel has been associating with. Respectfully, thosechapters are **61** and **73** if you want a refresher.

Chapter Reference – Gordon: Quick reminder that the boys ran into Gordon in this story the same way they ran into him in the original timeline. They caught a vampire case and found Gordon tailing them. Dean insisted they leave, let Gordon have the hunt to himself, but slipped up by saying a line Gordon had said to him the first time around. This set alarm bells off for Gordon, who later learned at the Roadhouse that Dean's psychic. See **Chapter 60**

Chapter Warnings: If you haven't guessed from all ^ that, we're back in Heaven! And Castiel is not having a good time! (Here's a little hint, in case you all didn't pick up on the nuances of my incredibly subtle writing: no one in this story has a good time.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 56

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Exiting a healing trance was not like entering one. Unlike the peaceful darkness that overtook you like a heavy hood sliding across your consciousness, awakening from a healing session was nothing short of disorienting. For a celestial being that rarely experienced unconsciousness, lapses in time, or the momentary confusion of knowing neither where nor when you were, coming out of a healing session was a truly unpleasant experience.

It took time for Castiel to identify the colors moving around him, blurry at first but slowly solidifying into shapes recognizable as objects. His location was unfamiliar, as were the several humans moving about him, oblivious to his presence in their dwelling. The fabric beneath him was soft, with a large amount of give that could only be described as cushiony. A couch, then. In what appeared to be a fairly standard living room of a family home in, given the décor and spoken language of the occupants, late twentieth century Spain.

It was not a Paradise Castiel was familiar with, and it took more precious time for the angel to recall how he might have come to be in it, coming out of a healing trance no less. Heaven had an infirmary building for the injured, which housed the Host's healers. A human Paradise was hardly the appropriate place for a healing.

Malachi. Malachi had helped him cover his time on Earth from Zachariah, because Uriel was unavailable. Malachi had assisted him into a healing trance. But Castiel could tell from the foreign grace still flowing through him, the grogginess of the trance beginning to fade, that Uriel had been the one to continue the healing. Which meant his trusted brother was likely the one to place him in a human's Paradise.

The unfamiliar surroundings began to make more sense. Uriel must have been the one to hide him away. Doing so in one of the Paradises he frequented – and was known for frequenting – would have been a poor choice. Should anyone go looking for him, but particularly Zachariah, he would have been easily discovered and his injuries revealed. Castiel was glad his brother thought of this. Uriel wasn't known for dallying in the humans' domain, so Castiel was honestly surprised the larger angel had thought to stash him in one.

Castiel struggled to sit up, gripping the back and sides of the couch for additional leverage. He glanced at one of those limbs, taking in the weak saturation of his grace. The healing trance had not been nearly long enough. Castiel could feel it in the ache of his being, in the tightness of his grace – like canvas stretched too tight across rough struts – and the still mending cracks in his grace. He really should not

be awake. However, he had promised Sam and Dean that he would contact them as soon as he could. He did not need to be fully healed to do that much. While Castiel did not know how much time had passed in Heaven, more would have passed on Earth and it was a given that Dean would already be worried about his absence. Particularly due to the manner of his departure.

Dean had been distressed, and Castiel did not like when Dean was distressed. Something was telling him – something he was fairly certain had been absorbed from another version of him – that this human in particular did things when distressed that Castiel would not approve of or appreciate.

The door to the Paradise opened and one of the women moving through the living room – the host of this heaven – smiled at the newcomer.

"Oh, we have guests!" she called to the rest of her family, but Uriel completely ignored her as he moved into the room and past the human. She would forget him soon enough, the call of her memories a much stronger presence.

"Uriel," Castiel greeted, struggling to lever himself further upright. His brother was at his side in an instant, helping him to sit more upright on the human furniture. Behind them, the woman went about her memory as though Uriel had never interrupted it to begin with.

"You should not be awake," the larger angel admonished, one meaty hand tight but supportive on Castiel's shoulder. "I felt you stirring and worried something was wrong with the trance."

Castiel frowned, the colors of his pasty, pastel grace shifting towards confusion. "You were monitoring me?"

Uriel looked uncomfortable, or as uncomfortable as Castiel had ever seen him, and perhaps a bit angry to be found so uncomfortable. "You are injured enough for it, brother, and I am no healer."

Castiel supposed that was very true. He *was* injured enough for it, and had he been in charge of the care of a similarly weakened brother, he very well might have taken such precautions himself. "Thank you, Uriel, for your attentiveness."

The larger angel relaxed fractionally, nodding. His facial swirls shifted into lighter yellows and oranges, and the moment passed.

"We are brothers," Uriel said, the words heavy like boulders. "More than brothers, we are brothers in arms, in the coming war against Heaven."

It was not easy, but Castiel hid his flinch well, his own uneasiness with the mention of war. He didn't want it to come to that, was doing all that he could to keep it from coming to that, though everyone around him seemed certain it would. The Winchester brothers. His own brothers. Uriel must have picked up on his distress, however well-hidden the smaller angel might have made it, because he less than subtly changed the topic.

"You need to stop these visits to earth, Castiel." Unfortunately, the new topic was not much better. "They call too much attention to us, to our work."

Dropping his many eyes to his lap in a frighteningly human reaction, Castiel did not answer right away. He was at a loss as to how to respond. Uriel was not wrong. Castiel had known that his visits to the planet below would not go unnoticed for long. That was before Rivergrove. His own awareness of trouble just around the corner had not taken into account anything nearly as devastating to his continued secrecy as a grievous injury. He was putting more than just himself at risk. He was putting his brothers, their cause, and even Dean and Sam in danger.

But he had promised Dean he would return.

So he told Uriel as much. Told his brother of the haste of his departure and the lack of time he'd had to adequately explain why he had to leave. The humans would surely worry if he did not return as he had promised, and this Righteous Man was…particularly bad about situations outside of his control.

"One more trip," Castiel insisted with a nod. "I will inform them that I am well, and that I will be away for some time to finish healing and limit the attention I am drawing from Heaven."

Even as he said it, Castiel wondered if he could even make the trip in his current state. He was much better off than he had been before entering the trance, but he was far from well. His grace was stiff with the healing fractures, and the thought of flying on his wings, which felt rigid with disuse and a lack of proper grace flow – his body having drawn the majority of his power into his core to speed up the healing process – was an unpleasant notion at best.

But he also knew, through knowledge both his own and that of another Castiel, that Dean was worrying. Speaking of… Castiel should reconnect his awareness to the Ether. 'Angel Radio,' Dean called it often. It should provide him with a catalogue of missed prayers from any humans, as well. Before Dean had forcefully summoned him into his life, Castiel might not have even listened through the pleas. Now, he prepared himself to be thoroughly chastised by a human war-torn between worry and anger, which the angel was already resigned to never fully understand.

The ever shifting eddies of Uriel's grace darkened with displeasure as Castiel reconnected himself to the edges another level of time and space.

"Why do you feel such obligation to them, Castiel?" Uriel spat, voice heavy with disdain and disappointment. "They are mud monkeys, brother. They are not worth your time, let alone your concern."

Castiel tried not to feel the sorrow that welled up within his grace at his brother's words. The sentiment was nothing new, especially for Uriel. The larger angel had never thought much for humanity, despite multiple attempts from Castiel to show him otherwise. It did nothing but sadden the smaller angel, but Uriel was as he was. God built him as such for a reason, or so Castiel had always believed.

At least until he'd met a man named Dean Winchester.

The first of Dean's fevered prayers started to filter through once the muddle of angelic voices, some raised in song, some in conversation, others in whispered thought, started to fade to the background. His prayers were, indeed, angry, but they were also something else.

Something very, very, *else*.

Castiel stilled, unhearing of Uriel's continued complaints against his loyalty to humankind. His grace stilled as well; as slow as it had been previously, shifting and ebbing and surging at a quarter of its usual energy, it was completely unmoving now, pastel swirls frozen in time across his being. What color Castiel had regained since entering the trance disappeared entirely, leaving the angel a translucent, incorporeal mass of shock and disbelief.

"You cannot risk our entire operation just to comfort some human. I will not allow it. The others will not either, Castiel." Uriel was still talking, his words buffeting off of Castiel like water rebounding off a stone wall that did not have ears to hear with anyway. "More than

that, you are not going anywhere until you have healed further. You are going to damage yourself beyond what is repairable, and then we'll really be caught."

Uriel grabbed his arm, and Castiel jolted at the shock of physical contact. He stared at the larger angel's meaty limb wrapped around his own. It seemed so much more possessive now than the comfort he had always thought it was meant to be.

"I will assist with the trance this time," Uriel insisted. Castiel's many eyes raised slowly to meet his own. The larger angel's facial colors were split by a myriad of muddled colors, coming out mostly brown. Like a smile on a human's face that wasn't remotely happy, even if that was the very purpose of such an expression. Castiel felt the first stirrings of apprehension replace his shock. "Lay back down, Castiel. We will discuss this further when you wake back up."

But Castiel did not lay down. He did not answer, either. He and his attention were elsewhere. Uriel's grace deepened, that muddled brown turning dark, dark brown. Like dried blood. Dried human blood, until it was all the smaller angel could see on his once-friend. Slowly, Castiel pulled his arm from Uriel's grip, awareness fully returned to the here and now with the last of Dean's prayers going silent. He had reached the end of a diatribe of horror and betrayal and fear that he did not want to believe.

"Castiel?"

His brother's many eyes, all of them always tinged a bluish silver that Uriel found fascinating in a way an angel probably never should, were wide. Castiel's grace was in a state of distress, his expression as disturbed as Uriel had ever seen it. And he had been in many a horrifying and terrifying battle with this brother.

"Brother?"

Castiel stared at him. Then, his grace began to churn and Uriel got an ugly feeling in his core.

"Uriel," the smaller angel began, voice tight and ringed with something his brother did not easily recognize. "Where do your loyalties lie?"

The larger angel pulled back, eyes narrowing. He regarded his brother cautiously. It was clear by the question – a non-sequitur in their discussion so far – that his brother had tuned back into the Ether. Had

Malachi said something to the smaller angel? Uriel didn't trust the anarchist as far as he could throw him, and turning Castiel against him seemed like something the clever deviant would do.

"That sounds like a loaded question, Castiel," Uriel hedged cautiously, still regarding his brother carefully. Castiel's grip on the edges of the couch were tight, and Uriel had no doubt it was all that was keeping him upright. As he had told the angel, Castiel was not ready to be on his feet.

His words did not have the desired result, which was to gauge how bad the misdirection Malachi had sent was. Castiel's expression hardened into that of the Captain of his Unit. It was a look Uriel knew well. This was angel Uriel respected. An angel did not need his protection or best intentions.

But Castiel was only ever that angel in battle. Which begged the question…was his friend and brother preparing to go into battle? Uriel's limbs curled into fists where they lay against the couch.

"Do you plan to raise Lucifer? To release the devil on the world and start the beginning of the End?" Castiel's words were sharp. Reprimanding. It might have been a question, but his Captain already knew his answer.

Uriel's fists tightened. Damn Malachi! Damn him! It was not the message he expected the anarchist to send his brother. Uriel had expected Malachi to warn Castiel that he was in danger. That Uriel planned to eliminate him; an ironic but predictable lie. But this was no better. Damnit, Uriel needed to bring Castiel to his side *slowly*. His brother was stubborn. Stubbornly *righteous* and getting him to realize the truth of Uriel's stance – to join their cause of his own volition because he realized it was *right* – was always going to take time.

Malachi had taken that time from him. Now Uriel would be fighting Castiel's love for the humans and a Heaven-ingrained hatred of the Morning Star! Misplaced, manufactured hatred, but Castiel would not see it that way. Not now, not without the time Uriel needed to steer his opinion back towards truth.

"Whatever Malachi has told you-"

"We've been friends for a long time, Uriel," Castiel interrupted, colors as intense and sharp as his ailing grace would allow. "Fought by each other's sides, served together away from home, for what seems like forever. We're brothers. Pay me that respect. Tell me the truth."

Uriel stared, dark eyes going cold. The larger angel drew himself up, grace filling out his shoulders and chest, creating quite the intimidating sight. But it was never a sight that had intimidated Castiel before, and it did not now. Uriel's grace shifted, bleeding red. There were trickles of a sour yellow slithering throughout his form, like veins of gold in a ground soaked with blood.

Something in Uriel changed, and Castiel could not help but wonder where he had been hiding it all this time.

"Do you remember him, Castiel? How strong he was? How beautiful?" The larger angel's gaze grew distant. He still remembered the first time he saw the Morning Star. How radiant Lucifer had been. How better he'd been, than any of the rest of them. Uriel lowered his eyes back to his brother. "He didn't bow to humanity. He was punished for defending *us*." Uriel shook his head, a wry expression spread across his grace in bitter blues. "If you want to believe in something, if you're going to bow before someone, bow to *him*, brother. Believe in *him*."

Castiel's expression was dark, grace awash with blue for entirely different reasons than his brother. "Lucifer is not God."

No matter what Dean said God was, He was something Castiel had not yet abandoned, in hope or faith. Not ever, if he had his say.

Uriel merely scoffed, his own sentiments very clearly far and gone from the smaller angel's. "God isn't God anymore, Castiel. He stopped being our father, if he ever was that, the moment he created them. *Humanity*." The angel pulled as much of a face as a being without firm facial features could, wrapped in the ugly dirt greens of envy and hatred. "His favorites. The whining, puking larva."

"Are you trying to convert me?" Castiel spit out, angrier than he'd been in a century, at least. If this was his brother's idea of a pitch, he had sorely misread his intended target. In fact, Castiel was starting to wonder if Uriel had ever known him at all. Or vice versa, as much as it hurt his core to think it. But this wasn't his brother sitting across from him, prepared to end a world Castiel held dear. At least, not any brother he had thought he'd known.

"I want you to join me," Uriel insisted, voice as earnest as it had yet to be. If Castiel had a heart, he was certain it would be aching now, if it hadn't been so damn furious to be betrayed this way. "There are others, Castiel. But with you, we will be strong enough."

"Strong enough?"

"To free our brother. To raise Lucifer! Please, Castiel, don't fight me. Join me." Uriel reached out once more, but Castiel withdrew, and the larger angel's grace grew tumultuous with anger. The smaller angel could see slivers of regret, too, as much as someone like Uriel could regret. That tumultuous grace sharpened, swirling rapids of emotion hardening, turning to stone. Uriel reached forward more forcefully, curling his grace around his brother's arm before Castiel could pull away. He had nowhere else to retreat to and Uriel knew it. "Help us spread the word, brother. Help us bring on the Apocalypse and end this game once and for all."

Castiel wrapped his free hand around the hilt of his sword, hidden away in the Ether. But he knew a losing battle when he saw one. Still, it didn't matter. He closed those eyes that he could afford to, a leftover trait of a vessel he would not likely populate again, and whispered an apology that would never reach his human charges. His grace filled with regrets of his own. When Castiel opened his eyes, he leveled his brother with a dangerous look. One the larger angel had seen many a time, but never directed at him.

"You won't win, Uriel." Castiel drew his blade with his free hand. Even just summoning it made him wince, like pulling at a freshly healed wound. "I serve God."

His brother's grip on his limb tightened painfully. "You haven't even met the man."

"I don't have to."

Castiel struck with his sword, but Uriel was ready for him. The other angel blocked the attack with his own blade, metal ringing against metal in the relative quiet of the human Paradise. Castiel's arm was thrown out to the side, shaking with the effort to battle Uriel's significant strength. His other limb was still trapped in Uriel's own grace, and Castiel knew he needed to throw his brother off if he was to have any hope of escaping this encounter alive.

The larger angel lunged forward with a bellow, tackling Cas into the cushions before he could push off. Uriel knew him, knew his battle strategies, knew the way he thought and reasoned, too well. Their grace entangled in errant limbs and flapping wings as Castiel shoved his brother off of him and they both tumbled off of the couch, Uriel taking the smaller angel to the floor with him. They rolled, crashing into the coffee table and shattering the glass top. Uriel turned his wing, first as a shield from the glass, but then as a slingshot, sending

the sharp projectiles straight into Castiel. Glass could hardly hurt an angel, particularly one without a vessel in a world where the material was nothing more than a memory, but it was a distraction. More than enough of one for an angel that had always been stronger to begin with.

Castiel got in a solid punch to Uriel's rigid jaw before his brother pinned his arms to his side, trapping the smaller angel against the floor with the bulk of his grace. Blade pressed to his brother's cheek, Uriel gave the angel an admonishing, disappointed look that was as painful for Castiel to witness as it was terrifying.

"There is no God, Castiel. No will, no wrath. We are proof of that." Uriel's limbs wrapped around him, encasing him, smothering and choking him. Castiel struggled to be free of the all-encompassing strength of his brother's intent.

Castiel closed his eyes, the battle was over and he was not the victor. He braced for the press of that blade, the flash of pain, the last he would ever feel. The end he knew was coming.

'I'm sorry, Dean.'

"You will join us. It's only a matter of time." Then Uriel's grace was overwhelming his, attacking Castiel's meagre defenses that he hadn't had time to rebuild after Azazel's trap, and the rebel angel was forced into a fitful healing trance once more.

-o-o-o-

Uriel pulled away from his entranced brother, staring down at the smaller, vulnerable angel. He could feel Castiel fighting the healing, and his frustration returned to replace the fury and hurt. Castiel would do more damage fighting the trance than he would if just left alone to heal on his own.

"Damn it, Castiel," Uriel hissed quietly, lowering his blade and disappearing it back into the Ether. "Why must you always make things harder than they need to be, brother?"

The larger angel crouched back down, grabbing his brother's wrists. He would tie Castiel up, ease the trance so his stubborn idiot of a brother did not further hurt himself further, and move him to another Paradise. It was a possibility that a passing angel could have heard their tussle or felt this human's unease and decide to investigate the cause of the discomfort. So Uriel would relocate his troublesome

brother first. Then the angel would find another to help him deepen the trance properly.

In the meantime, if he found Malachi he would murder the bastard for turning his favorite brother against him.

-o-o-o-

"Okay, look, I know how all this sounds, but I'm not insane and I'm not on drugs. Okay?"

Sam pulled on a white t-shirt over his very bare chest, going for some level of modesty as he watched the woman pace his hotel room with the kind of nervous energy that he'd seen on a dozen civilians over the years after they'd discovered the existence of the supernatural. Each dealt with it in their own way. The woman in front him now was… well, unique to say the least. That was…a *lot* of nervous energy. Still, the younger Winchester knew when someone needed the reassurance of a complete stranger if only because they were utterly objective.

So he nodded as supportively as possible. It didn't seem to do much help in the comforting department.

"I am completely normal!" Ava insisted, clearly not believing that he believed her. Of course, her voice pitched a bit too high not to undermine her own words, and she jiggled her leg like she wanted to stomp her foot. It might have been nothing short of cute if she didn't also have a watery sheen over her eyes and look a few steps short of an actual breakdown. "And this…this is way, *way* off the map for me."

"Alright, alright, just…calm down, okay?" Sam stood from the end of the mattress, offering what he hoped was a calming hand. Ava fidgeted, big blue-green eyes darting between that hand and the random person whose motel room she'd just decided to track down and then invade.

Oh, god, she was totally going to get murdered.

"What's your name?" Sam asked, keeping his tone gentle and eyes as puppy dog as he knew how. Dean always swore he could win anyone over with them, and it looked like they were finally going to find out if that was true.

She chewed on her lip under the weight of those supportive, understanding eyes for only a second before dropping her arms. Oh hell. If he was some psycho murderer, she'd probably already be dead

by now. "Ava."

"Ava?"

"Ava Wilson," she confirmed, resisting the urge to ask the guy if he was a skipping record player or something. That wouldn't exactly be fair to him. She was the one who woke him up in the middle of the night, to ramble about a grenade and a trip wire and a smoking shoe. She was the one that sounded crazy. At the moment, dude-about-to-die-in-an-explosion was actually being really decent, considering.

"Ava, I'm Sam Winchester, all right?" Sam settled back on the edge of the mattress, making sure to keep his distance from her (for her sake, not his, though Ava was back to chewing on her lip as she considered whether it was the other way around). "Now, you were telling me about these dreams of yours?"

She let out a huff of air, low and long and desperate and also completely resigned. Ava crossed her arms again, this time self-consciously rather than defensively. Sam tried to keep up; she was a little all over the place. "Uh, yeah, uh…okay, about a year ago I started having these, like, headaches and just…nightmares, I guess."

Well, that sounded like a familiar story, Sam thought. She was one of them. She must be.

That, or this was another trap.

The younger Winchester straightened as the thought occurred to him. Crap. *Crap!* What had he been thinking, letting someone into his hotel room because she had desperate eyes, a good story, and a plea that he was in danger?

Shit. This could be Ruby.

Sam eyed Ava as she started talking about a dream she'd had a couple weeks ago, about three kids in some old western town.
Okay, *think,* Sam. This wasn't Ruby. The room was warded, there was salt above the door and a devil's trap painted on a bathroom towel they'd spread in front of the door (a new trick they'd started using after Crowley showed up at their hotel room. Dean had said he wanted to use the guy, not trust him in the same space they slept in). Sure, Ava had eyed the towel with a curious frown and little headshake when he'd first invited her in, but she'd walked right over it.

Azazel's girl, then. The one with the glowing green eyes.

Only, Ava's eyes weren't glowing. But, they hadn't back in that bar, either. She'd been blonde and blue-eyed. Now she was…brunette and greenish-blue-eyed? And looked *nothing* like the woman he'd met in the bar. Ava was taller, and slimmer. Though, they were still similar enough, Sam reasoned. He knew there was magic for that, even so far as to change the height or weight of a person. Difficult magic – *extensive* magic – but still very possible. And they already knew Azazel's girl wasn't a demon, assuming she'd been the one to break into the Impala (which they didn't actually know for sure, but Sam had a feeling he wasn't so willing to dismiss).

Why had he just let her waltz right into his room? Dean was going to kill him, if she didn't do it for him first.

Sam kept nodding along with the girl's story, but mentally he was scanning the room. His nearest weapon was his knife, hidden beneath his pillow. That was at the top of the bed, and he was at the foot. Close enough he might have a chance. Not that he had any clue if a blade would do this woman any damage. Damnit, he should have been on his guard.

Dean had literally just left, some damsel in distress showed up on his doorstep, and he didn't think twice about that coincidence? Stupid. He was so stupid. If John Winchester were still alive, he'd rip him a new one. Hell, Sam knew Dean would gladly take up the role when he got back.

"Then, a couple of days later, I found this."

Sam's focus locked on Ava as her hand disappeared into her purse. The hunter's fingers tightened across his thigh and he considered the amount of time it would take to dive for that knife. But what she pulled out was nothing more than a newspaper clipping. Hesitantly, Sam reached out to take it.

It was from a three days ago, from the Peoria Journal Star, the headline reading *'Mining Town Massacre Victims Still Unidentified'*. Sam stared at the black and white photo of Cold Oak, a partially burned funeral pyre sitting in the middle of the old buildings. There were three smaller photos along the bottom. Artist sketches from the remains. Sam lowered the page, a pretty dead-on rendition of Scott Carey's face staring back at him.

"I saw that guy die, days before it happened." Ava tapped the

newspaper pointedly, finger right on top of Scott's face. Her voice wavered as those blue-green pools were overwhelmed with water she barely kept back. "I watched the other one stab him. And strangle him. And it ended up coming true."

Sam stared at her, eyes wide and hand slowly unclenching from a fist. The strangling hadn't been in the coroner's report. He'd hacked it while they were back at Bobby's because they needed to know how much of the bodies had been left unburnt. If they were going to have angry spirits they needed to worry about. And because Sam was a Winchester: nothing but a deep, masochistic well of guilt and self-loathing.

The stabbing had been in the report, but the strangulation hadn't. Scott's body had been about eighty percent consumed by the fire. Muscle and tissue damage hadn't been an option for identifying cause of death. The coroner hadn't looked much further than the stab wounds, evident by knife marks on Scott's charred rib bones.

How could Azazel's girl know that? There'd been no one else, at least no one among the living, at Cold Oak when the Winchesters discovered the bodies. He knew the difference between being followed and being watched. They had been watched, for sure, by the many spirits that haunted that town, but they hadn't been followed by anything living.

Sam handed the newspaper back to Ava, wondering if she might actually be who she said she was. A woman who saw people deaths before they happened. Another of Azazel's special kids, trying to do some good in the face of a demon who only wanted them to bring pain and death.

"Last night, I had another one," Ava was saying, sniffing as she folded the clipping back up and stuffed it into her purse. "About you. I saw you die."

The Winchester, still unsure whether he was falling right into Yellow Eyes' next trap, ran his hands over his sweatpants, thinking. He wasn't ready to trust this woman yet. Not again; he needed to be smarter about this. He needed more information. Enough to catch her in a lie, if she was in fact lying. "How did you find me?"

"Oh, uh, you had motel stationery. A note from some guy named Dean?" Ava shrugged, arms wrapping around herself again, back to self-conscious. "I googled the motel, and it was real, and so…I just

thought…that I should warn you."

Sam's eyes slid to the note, still sitting on the nightstand. Too far away to read. He looked back at Ava. "What did the note say?"

"Um…something about going to get a message to someone? Cas or something? His handwriting kinda…sucked. Oh, and for you not to follow him like a…uh…" Ava cleared her throat, head bobbing back and forth before she rolled her eyes and spit it out. "Little bitch."

The hunter couldn't help the chuckle. That was exactly what Dean's note had said. And considering he'd left it less than thirty minutes ago, Sam finally let the tension leave his body. This really was another one of Azazel's kids. Another psychic.

If she was a psychic, though, then she was in almost as much danger as she claimed Sam was. Maybe not right now, maybe not tonight, but soon. Dean was right, Azazel wasn't going to stop just because Cas had kicked his ass back to hell. Ava was one of his kids, and that meant she might end up at Cold Oak, same as Scott and Amanda. Same as Andy.

Which meant Sam had a chance to save her, like they hadn't been able to save the others.

"I don't believe it," he said, eyes distant and a shaky smile spreading across his face.

Ava, however, laughed a frustrated, desperate thing, her face an expression of bitter resignation. "Oh, of course you don't. You think I'm a total nutjob."

"Wait, no, no, no," Sam stood from the bed. "I don't think you're crazy. I have visions too, Ava."

She dropped her arms and took an immediate step back from him. Another laugh bubbled forth, significantly more nervous this time. "Okay, so…you're nuts. That's great."

He held out his hands, hoping the gesture was a calming one. At least he hadn't drawn that knife on her. Then they'd be in a real mess. "Look, I believe you. And I want to hear about this dream you had, the one about me. But first, I need to make a phone call."

"Of course you do." Ava nodded along, looking like a woman ready to bolt at any moment. Her mouth was downturned in a cute trout-pout,

and she sniffed again as Sam grabbed his cell from atop the nightstand. He moved towards the door of the motel, giving her a wide berth (again, for her sake, not that she saw it that way). "If you're calling the cops, tell them I said, 'hi!'"

Sam paused at the door, phone already dialing as he raised it to his ear. "I'm not calling the cops, Ava. I'm calling my brother. Dean?"

His eyes darted pointedly to the motel stationary still sitting on the nightstand, and she followed his look with a shaky turn of her head.

"Oh…uh…right." Ava moved a little hesitantly between the beds, picking up the pad to stare at the same note she'd seen last night.

Sam smiled as the phone rang against his ear. "Don't worry, he's kinda like me- like us. He can help."

"Uh-huh. Okay. Great."

The hunter shook his head at her disbelief. She was the one who'd come looking for him, after all. He stepped out of the motel, pulling the door only partially closed behind him. He didn't really need her overhearing him talking to his brother from the future, but he also didn't want to scare her, either.

Dean's voicemail started up as the ringing abruptly died, and Sam tried not to let that worry him. He was just going to have leave his brother a message, ask Dean if he knew anyone by the name of Ava Wilson, and what her vision might be about (Sam didn't know anyone currently after him. Maybe there was a case here, after all?) Then… Dean would get back to him as soon as he could. You know, when he was done pulling off his fool-hardy plan of summoning a potentially antagonistic angel alone, without his younger brother as backup.

Sure. He'd be calling back any minute now.

-o-o-o-

The climb to the roof hadn't been easy, or as quiet as he particularly liked to be when on a hunt. Luckily, his target had been distracted by the woman, whoever – or whatever – she was, so he'd been able to jimmy his way up the side of the building using an old maintenance ladder. He crossed the flat roof in a crouch and laid down along the edge, sniper rifle propped against the lip, all without alerting his prey.

The hunter adjusted his scope, butt of his rifle tucked to his shoulder,

cheek braced against the side as he lined up his shot. He put his prey's head right between his crosshairs, centering the target on the phone as the man pressed it to his ear.

Gordon Walker let out a slow, measured breath, finger tightening on the trigger as his target turned his head perfectly into his shot.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: It has been faaaar too long since our last proper no-good dirty rotten cliffhanger, dontcha think? ;) Like, five chapters, at least!

Up Next: You all over on A03 KNOCKED IT OUTTA THE PARK!!! It is double chapter, back-to-back reward time for our 1000 kudos milestone!! I will get the next chapter up once I'm back from the movie!! Thank you all so much for your support, guys!

Chapter 90: Season 2: Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Oh my gosh, guys, I'm sorry for the delay! The movie turned into movie and a dinner, then movie and a dinner and board games when we get home!? And guys, you can not turn my dad down when he wants to play a board game. Dude's eyes light up like a puppy at Christmas (which makes no sense, I'm aware…) But For Real. The eye game is stronger than Sam Winchester's. It's ridiculous. (Even more ridiculous that I did not inherit that skill *grumble grumble damnit grumble*)

So…two hour board game later aaaand here we are! Also, I'm a little tipsy. I'm a couple of ciders, a couple of eggnogs, and not nearly enough waters later…Oh, and I still have to go paint a painting for my sister, which I promised as her Christmas present (I'm…not late on that at all…) Friends (and totally sober family members) shouldn't let friends paint drunk, guys!

But friends totally let friends post fanfiction drunk. That…that is an *excellent* idea.

Speaking of…Quality Warning! This is probably unnecessary cuz I edited this a couple days ago but…author is tipsy and still posting! So…yup, let's just leave a good ole fashioned warning for that right here.

Chapter Warnings: Dontcha also think it's been faaaaar too long since our last proper no-good, dirty rotten, back-to-back cliffhanger? I most certainly do ;)

(You were warned…I did warn you, right? I remembered to do that? Pretty sure I did.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 57

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean closed the door to the Impala, staring at the darkened gas station. It had closed up for the night, the overhead lights off, the attached store dark, and the lot around him mostly abandoned. There were a couple of cars on the edges of the asphalt block that made up the parking lot, but they were equally dark and unoccupied. The gas station shared the lot with a mechanic's place, so Dean wasn't really worried about those.

He'd driven out of the town of Lafayette, about twenty miles to the southwest, before finding this gas station on the outskirts. There was no point driving any further out; any angel to answer his prayer would know that if Sam Winchester was with his older brother, he was going to be somewhere in the town of Lafayette. There wasn't another city equal in size close enough to really mislead them. Dean had driven far enough from the motel his brother was still sleeping in to not call suspicion to it, but not far enough away to make it obvious he was trying to hide the location, either.

It was an interestingly wriggly, winding, thin line to toe, but one Dean was familiar with. Cas had once told him the trick to finding someone who was warded was to look for what wasn't there rather than what was. Like an empty motel room where all other rooms were full. Which meant, in this case, making sure Dean put himself in a spot where there were enough actual empty rooms around – enough negative space in all the white space that was the population of Lafayette – that no one gap of nothingness called attention to itself.

Not that Dean was particularly worried. Lafayette was a decent sized town but it wasn't particularly busy on a mid-week, early December night. Which meant there were plenty of half-filled motels. All he'd had to do was a pick a direction and drive far enough away to put a couple dozen of those empty rooms between him and the actually-occupied room Sam was in.

Not that it should matter because, again, this wasn't even going to work. (And also he was supposed to be summoning an angel that should be friendly. Just so long as 'friendly' was a term used loosely.)

He'd actually driven further out of town than originally planned. Dean hadn't meant to make the outskirts, but there he was, standing beneath the last roof between Lafayette and nothing but farmland for miles and miles. The hunter had been forced to driver longer than he'd wanted to because Sam had friggin' followed him (because of course he had, Dean had known the kid wouldn't let him do this alone, despite what they'd agreed to. Especially since he'd only sort of kept

his half of that agreement.) Dean had spotted the stolen car a couple miles out of the motel and decided to at least let Sammy know he'd been spotted. That way when the kid pulled up to wherever Dean decided to stop, he'd have to own up to following his brother against his word (and Dean could totally pull higher ground and ignore that whole 'told you through a note…while you were asleep…in the middle of the night…' bit…. Yeah. Total higher ground, there. *He* hadn't actually broken his promise. Just. Uh. Bent it. Yup.)

Losing Sam (which wasn't gonna happen, but Dean could at least try) meant the hunter had to drive further out of town than he'd wanted on quite the crisscross of roads, making a couple 'accidental' rights along the way. Surprisingly, the car turned off his trail and onto a side road after the first suspicious follow. Dean kept waiting for it to re-appear – his brother trying some clever trick to re-pick up the hunt – but it hadn't shown up again.

So not Sam, after all. Or Sam, but he decided to give up and turn back once he realized he'd been spotted. (So…not Sam, then.)

Of course, it could have been a coincidence. Dean was driving major roads in a city with a decent population and car count. He'd only spotted the car for a couple minutes and two turns before he'd started trying to lose them. So it could have just been the perfect line up of a normal Lafayette civilian taking the same route home after a late shift or early night. That did happen, on occasion. Somehow, though, Dean doubted it. His luck was never that lucky.

The hunter kept an eye out for the same car – or any other – but didn't spot anyone else suspicious right up to his discovery of the last gas station out of town.

Dean cast one more cursory look around the darkened structure and empty lot, double checking he was alone. Then, reminding himself of how stupid an idea this was (so, so stupid), he closed his eyes, shoved his hands into his pockets, and began to pray.

'Okay, here goes.'

The hunter took a deep breath, already feeling ridiculous. He'd never really gotten the hang of doing this, even when it had been to Cas. It always made him feel both stupid and awkward as all get out. And this definitely wasn't Cas he was planning on talking to.

'Dear Balthazar, you winged di- Angel…of…the Lord.'

Dean winced. Right. The asshole was never gonna answer if Dean forgot they didn't know each other in this timeline. At least in his, Balthazar gave as good as he got, but that was because the two of them had a mutual appreciation of hating each other. And good one-liners. Possibly the only reason they could stand each other long enough to actually get along.

'My name is Dean Winchester, I'm a friend of Cas's- Castiel's, and I need your help. Cas needs your help. He's stuck up in Heaven and I think he's in trouble. So…come on down here.'

Okay, that was better. Halfway decent, he supposed. Real civil.

Green eyes slid back open, quickly glancing left and right, even though Dean knew it would take an angel longer to appear than that. Balthazar would have to get out of a Heaven that was supposedly sealed up, find a vessel, and get to him.

Oh. Right.

'And get a vessel. I like my eyes not burned out of my skull, thank you very much.'

Okay. Slightly less civil. Not like Balthazar would be civil when he got there either, though. If he got there. Dean sighed, hands still in his pocket in the chilly air, and leaned back against Baby's side. He was probably in for one hell of a wait.

-o-o-o-

A thousand miles away, in a New York City penthouse suite of a sixty-five story skyscraper overlooking Central Park, a tall, lean man paused against the edge of his Italian marble bar, halfway through pouring himself a very fine beverage. His blond head tilted to the side, as if listening to something. Not that a human would be able to hear anything over the pulsating beat of the live DJ, the lights overhead flashing in a disco strobe effect, bodies thrashing and writhing together on the dance floor that made up two whole thirds of the room.

Then again, Balthazar was hardly the human he appeared to be.

The angel had paused mid-pour of his incredibly expensive and positively lavish Old Fashion. It was an Old Rip Van Winkle bourbon in his hand, aged twenty-five years in special barrels reserved from Kentucky's finest. He'd picked it up from a collector whose over-the-

top security system had neglected to include angelic warding.

Honestly, Balthazar didn't even care much for the taste of human alcohol, but oh, the opulence of it all was the real indulgence.

Now he hesitated, tipping the bottle back to stop his pour, staring into the world well beyond the mirrored back of the bar, reflecting the bright lights and pulsating crowd. His human guests - featuring a who's who of the city's top socialites – danced and drank and lived on, mindless of their host's preoccupation. He doubted any of the people in this room would believe he was one to bother with prayer.

Of course, their version of prayer was to whine and demand and sob into a void that would never give them anything back. Balthazar, on the other hand, was that void, or a part of it. And now, there was one such human soul demanding his attention, as though he actually expected an answer. What was really surprising, though, was the angel was actually considering giving one.

Cassie was in danger?

Balthazar looked down at the Kentucky Bourbon, half the bottle still left. The human could be lying. Although, honestly, Balthazar imagined this 'Dean Winchester' was the very man he and Cassie had left Heaven to find. How else would a random human know his name, along with his connection to the Angel of Thursday? Balthazar was somewhat proud, actually, to think his friend had gone and done a thing as outlandishly disobedient as make contact with the human. He'd half expected Castiel to immediately head back to Heaven the moment they'd been separated.

His grip on the bottle slipped, the heavy glass bottom clinking loudly against the Italian marble. Luckily, it didn't break, or leave his grip completely. Not a single drop wasted.

Balthazar hadn't thought of his friend in some time. A lifetime, really – this newly human-ish one, at least. And now Castiel could be in danger?

The rogue angel set his bottle of ridiculously expensive liquor down on his equally extravagant bar, catching a glance of himself in the reflection. In and among the shelves of pricey bottles and knick-knacks he'd nicked from some of the world's most famous private collections, his vessel stared back. Blond hair, sharp cheeks, and blue eyes, dark in the dim, ever-changing lights. It wasn't his face, not truly, but Balthazar was rather fond of it all the same.

What help would he be to Castiel? If this wasn't some random human making a mess of things or a trap laid out by an angel who learned of his somewhat exaggerated demise, there was nothing *he* could do. He couldn't return to Heaven. Even if it was to help Cassie, Balthazar would be arrested on the spot. No, he would be no help at all, really. Worse, he'd likely add to whatever it was Cassie had gotten himself into this time.

There was nothing he could do.

Still Balthazar hesitated, the conclusion coming with a disappointing lack of something, leaving him more uneasy than resolved. The angel shook his head and picked his bottle of expensive caramel colored liquor back up and resumed mixing his fancy drink. Blue eyes focused on the mirror, this time only for his party-goers. He'd lined events up perfectly tonight for a Ménage à…whatever the French word was for twelve, and it had taken a surprising amount of work to do so. He couldn't rightly throw all that hard work away, now could he?

Castiel would have to get by on his own. He'd always managed in the past and Balthazar had little doubt he would this time, too.

-o-o-o-

Dean spent exactly twenty-two minutes muttering under his breath for Balthazar to hurry the hell up (it was friggin' cold out, man), which escalated to groaning, bemoaning, and eventually just cussing the guy out before he realized (begrudgingly accepted) that the angel wasn't coming.

Bag of dicks. Always had been. The asshole.

Whelp. That was it. That was Dean's one shot. He'd said one and done.

Dean gripped the Impala's keys tightly in his hand, looking over his shoulder at his slender, gleaming lady. Time to head back to the motel, maybe even before Sammy noticed he was gone. The hunter sighed, frustrated and pissy, but mostly disappointed and turning towards anger because it was easier than coming to terms with the fact he'd failed. Dean growled low in his throat, harsh fingers scrubbing at his short hair as he opened the driver side door.

The metal hadn't even finished groaning before he was slamming it back shut.

Fuck it.

Dean spun back around, striding several feet away from the car. He wasn't giving up on Cas that easy. Screw Balthazar. If that dickwad was too busy cramming feathers up his ass to show, there were others. Dean knew others, and maybe one of them would care enough to show.

The hunter slammed his eyes shut, screwed up his face (because, damnit, this was an even dumber idea and he said – he'd *said* – he wouldn't do this), and started to pray one more time.

'Rachel. I know you don't know shit about who I am, but my name's Dean Winchester. I'm the friggin' Righteous Man and Castiel is in danger.'

-o-o-o-

Rachel was training with several of her unit, markedly lacking their leader and second in command (though they were not required for training and so the absence was not particularly noted as anything suspicious) when the prayer came through. The voice itself was not jarring, but the news of her leader – well, second in command now – certainly was, and Rachel pulled up short. Her abrupt and distracted withdrawal from the spar allowed Samandriel to skim his blade along the edges of her grace before he could halt his forward momentum, creating the shallowest of cuts.

"Oh no!" The slighter angel pulled up short, several sets of eyes all equally wide in surprise and no shortage of terror. "I am so sorry, Rachel!"

Rachel lifted her limb, observing the sharp line of brilliant, leaking light without any of the alarm of her companion. Several of the angels sparring on either side of them halted as well, but she waved them on. As third in command of the Flight, with one gesture from her the other angels resumed their mock battles without question. Rachel lowered her arm and turned to the newe3st member of the Unit.

"It is nothing, Samandriel. You should not apologize for wounding your opponent when that is the ultimate goal of battle in the first place. You should be aiming for it, in fact."

Samandriel straightened to attention, raising his blade in a small salute to her advice. There were no young angels in Heaven as angels had no age; they had all been created by God within the span of a hundred years of one other, at the very age they would always be. They did not grow, they did not change. But Rachel could not help but think of Samandriel, who had only transferred into the unit less than a

century ago, as quite young. He was new to combat, at least as his primary purpose, and fell heavily back on his previous duties, which involved maintenance and cataloguing of Heaven's assets.

In short, he was a better negotiator and weapons analyst than he was fighter, and apologized often for it. Which was illogical and pointless. Rachel would train it out of him, yet.

But that was neither here nor there for the moment. Currently, Rachel had Dean Winchester's voice in her head, asking for her help and insisting that Castiel, her commanding officer, was in danger at the hand of one of their own. Rachel disappeared her blade into the Ether, pleased when Samandriel took his commanding officer's lead and did the same.

"Samandriel," Rachel began, hesitating only for a fraction of a second. The slighter angel was known for his attachment to Castiel. Not in a way that the warrior angel was aware of in the least, not outside of that as a leader and teacher, but it was obvious enough to the rest of the Flight. Samandriel held Castiel in high regard, and was like a puppy to his master around the other angel, much to the unit's amusement. "Have you seen Castiel?"

If the other angel thought twice about the oddity of her question in the middle of a sparring session, he said nothing of it. Samandriel thought for a second, his grace swirling yellow with contemplation, but the colors and eddies ultimately settled into a more neutral tan. A no, then.

"Not since yesterday," Samandriel confirmed what his grace had already told her. "In the Archival Hall, I think. He was with Uriel in the morning, but I haven't seen him since."

Rachel felt herself pause, the never-ending movement of her own grace halting for a single second, before resuming its usual patterns of sharp lines and calculated angles as though the hesitation had never happened. Was there something to be seen in Samandriel's response, naming the one angel this human voice claimed was a traitor? A traitor potentially holding Castiel's life in his hands?

She was hardly inclined to believe the word of a human she did not know, particularly over a matter no human should know of or be involved in. However…every angel knew of Castiel's trip to Earth with Balthazar. He had spoken to few about it, but Rachel had been one of the few. She had counseled him in his grief. In their shared grief.

Castiel had spoken of demons, amassed, attacking him and Balthazar in mere minutes of being on Earth. Her brother had been very troubled by this, though he'd refused to go any further into it than that. Rachel had not known the cause behind his silence, but it had occurred to her that their superiors refusing to acknowledge this threat, forbidding him from discussing it with others, could very well be the source of his unease.

If Castiel had been on Earth to speak to a human, if this Dean Winchester was that human, and if he truly was the Righteous Man…

Rachel knew hastily connecting those dots with nothing but the limited information she had could very well lead to an incorrect and dangerous assumption, but it was difficult not to at least see the easily drawn line.

She dismissed Samandriel to resume sparring with another in the unit, to practice his precision. He still wavered in the final moment of each attack, worried he would hurt his compatriots. "Trust your opponent's skill," she insisted as she left him. "They are far more proficient in battle than you, Samandriel. They will block your attack."

As Rachel retreated from the battling unit, trusting in her brothers to continue the drills without her oversight, she spread out her wings and, with it, her awareness. The first thing she did was search for Castiel's signature. If he was in Heaven – and he was surely in Heaven, for the gates were shut and she had seen the pale nature of his grace when he'd returned from Earth, carrying with him no saturation but the guilt of Balthazar's death; he was not soon to return to the planet below without good reason – then she should be able to find him, anywhere.

Which was why she nearly tripped on the shining white, unnaturally smooth stones beneath her incorporeal feet when her senses did not succeed in finding him.

That…wasn't possible. It wasn't. Either he was on Earth or he was- No. She wouldn't think it. The unit had already lost one brother, it could not lose another.

Besides, Rachel had not felt his death. If he had been in Heaven, which Samandriel confirmed he was just yesterday, then every angel in the Host would have felt him perish. He had to be somewhere. But why could she not sense him?

Rachel hesitated again, stepping off the well-walked and yet never

worn path from the training grounds to the upper Halls, so others could pass. She, herself, had no direction. She did not know where to go with this…revelation.

Well, there was one person – one man – who did seem to know something about it. Rachel drew herself up, grace hardening with resolve. If their positions were reversed, Castiel would do whatever was needed to ensure her safety. As her brother, her leader, her *friend* – regardless of how rarely used that word may be among angels – it was her responsibility to him to do the same.

She would locate one of the holes in Heaven's defenses – the ones Castiel spoke of to her in confidence in the quiet of the barracks the night he'd come back – and find this Dean Winchester.

-o-o-o-

He'd been reduced to scuffing the toes of his boots along the rough cement, kicking pebbles and the one beer cap he'd found across the uneven pavement. Dean was all of about three seconds from pulling out his phone and playing Tetris (he'd give himself five games before calling it quits and going the hell home like he should have eighteen minutes ago) when a woman suddenly appeared about four and a half feet in front of him. Close enough for the hunter to stumble three feet back on autopilot, hand settling on the hilt of the knife hooked to his belt.

"Dean Winchester."

Holy shit. He hadn't actually expected her to show.

He had to assume it was Rachel. It looked like the same vessel as the last time he'd met her, but to be honest, Dean wasn't sure he'd be able to point that woman out in a lineup if asked. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd met Rachel in person, and he wasn't a hundred percent that number was more than *one.* She'd stuck around in his memory though. Possibly because he could also count on one hand the number of Cas's family who hadn't tried to kill his best friend or him. Even this asshole militaristic one who'd told him and Sam to back off and leave Cas alone ended up staying in his mind. At least, enough so that she'd been the second person he thought to call.

Okay, so actually that wasn't true. Hannah had been the next angel Dean thought to summon. He'd certainly met and interacted with her more times than he had Rachel. But between the two angels who had both served as Castiel's second-in-command at one point or another,

Rachel hadn't handed Castiel an angel blade and demanded he kill Dean as proof of his loyalty to their cause.

So Rachel it was!

But still. He hadn't really, actually expected her to show up.

So…what was Step Two?

"Rachel?" The hunter started out cautious, hand still on his knife, though little good it would do him if it proved he actually needed it. They really needed a solution to the only-an-angel-can-kill-another-angel problem. Like, yesterday. The hunter also found himself wishing there was a way to identify angels beyond their vessel or their word. Gadreel had taught him that lesson in the worst way, and he'd never really recovered from that particular brand of distrust. At the time, though, angels had been knocked down a peg on the ladder of 'badass and dangerous as hell'. Plus, they'd had angel blades literally falling out of the sky, so there was no shortage of weapons to kill the bastards.

"Indeed," the woman he was pretty sure was probably Rachel confirmed. She certainly regarded him with the militaristic rigidity he remembered from this particular angel. "You prayed to me?"

Dean straightened, composing himself with as much staunch strength as he could muster in a single stance. His hand stayed on the hilt of his knife. "Did you find Castiel?"

Rachel's face didn't move. She didn't even blink. Dean vaguely remembered her as the extra stoic type, even for an angel. Still, it would go a long way in that whole confidence-trust-building-thing if she'd at least let something come through.

"No. I could not locate him in Heaven. It is…troubling."

Dean almost snorted, but managed to bite it back at the last minute. Just barely.

"You are sure he is not on Earth?"

The hunter shook his head, finally taking his hand off his blade. "He said he was going back up to Heaven, and he left in a hurry. He was banged up pretty bad, said Uriel would heal him."

Rachel frowned at that. Samandriel had not mentioned any injury. In

addition, if Castiel was injured enough to need another angel's assistance, he would not have been upright or even conscious for Samadriel to see. This was all ignoring how worrisome it was that Castiel had not sought a Healer, but rather one of his warriors.

"When was this?"

Samandriel had said yesterday morning. Perhaps Rachel could pinpoint the last time Castiel was on Earth and begin filling in the blanks.

"A week and a half ago. Last, uh, Tuesday. Nine days ago." It took Dean a moment to backtrack in numbers. God, it felt like so much longer than a week and a half. A month, maybe, since Rivergrove, if you'd have asked him. Weeks, at least, since Cas dropped mother effin' Uriel's name of all people and then went missing-in-action on them.

God, they needed a break. They needed a win, and then they needed a vacation. Aruba maybe. Dean had always wanted to go to Aruba.

Rachel calculated the difference. Earth moved much faster than Heaven, in varying ways at varying times, but the angel was accustomed to the difference and comfortable estimating the average. It was more than possible that Samadriel had seen Castiel yesterday morning in the Archival building, assuming the Power had then removed himself to Earth very shortly afterward.

"How long was he on Earth? Or with you?"

Dean felt like he was being questioned by the high school principle who'd just found a bag of questionable substance on him. He managed to hold back the snark before it came out with his answer, but it wasn't easy. "An hour, at most?"

He should have made Cas stay. He should have made him- her- (him?) stay, heal up with them. Warn her- him about Uriel. Regroup and figure out a plan. Dean should have made Cas stay.

"And you believe he is with Uriel now?" Rachel was no longer looking at the human, head tilted in thought, eyes distant on the uneven asphalt. The large angel and current commander of their Flight hadn't been present at their usual sparring today, but it was not uncommon for both him and Castiel to have other duties to attend. Such was the burden of leadership, as Rachel understood it.

"She- he said that's who he was going to. Look, I get it, alright, you

don't want to trust some lowly human, but Uriel is bad news-"

"I believe you."

Dean blinked at Rachel's firm, no-nonsense interruption. She…what?

"I have never cared much for this particular brother," Rachel continued, dipping her head slightly as she spoke. "Uriel's attentiveness to the Flight is negligible at best, his overly-familiar regard for Castiel has always discomforted me, and, lately, there have been rumors of his association with the angel Malachi."

The double take the hunter did would have been damn near comical in any other situation. "The *anarchist*?"

Oh, Dean remembered Castiel telling him about that piece of work. He'd been newly graced up and avoiding details on both where that grace had come from and why he flinched anytime Dean or Sam touched him. Dean had been around torture enough to know what it looked like on a survivor. He'd spent ten years in Hell carving that reaction right out of those 'survivors'. Needless to say, Dean had drawn his own conclusions, complete with suspicions on just how a very human Castiel came by his information on the faction of angels opposing Bartholomew. A faction apparently led by Malachi.

Who had been, in all of that, a friggin' *anarchist angel*. Like that made any sense in their already messed up, crazy lives.

Rachel seemed surprised he knew the name, or any details on the angel at all. Her expression almost resembled something expressive. There was an ever-so-minuscule shift in her shoulders, and Dean realized she'd relaxed, probably as much as an angel like her ever did. It was entirely possible that until that moment, despite her words, she hadn't actually believed him at all.

"Oh, that's just great," Dean continued, ignoring the 'moment' between them since the angel probably hadn't even realized there was one. Instead, he focused on just how *screwed* Cas was if two brute assholes like Uriel and Malachi had teamed up in this timeline. God damn it, could Time not let them have a single win? "So Uriel's working with Malachi, and Castiel flew right to them."

Rachel shifted slightly, rolling her shoulders, and Dean hazarded that she was uncomfortable. Or worried. He wasn't great at reading angels other than Cas. Well, and Balthazar, but that asshat hadn't ever made what he was thinking much of a secret to start with.

"If you are certain that Castiel is not on Earth, then Uriel is somehow disguising the signature of his grace."

In turn, the hunter regarded Rachel with something she identified as concern. Or panic. Perhaps a mixture of the two? She was not very skilled at reading humans.

"Is that…bad?"

"It is not damaging to an angel. Merely inconvenient and highly suspect." This time Dean did snort. Rachel narrowed her eyes at the sound, but didn't waste the time it would take to question it. "Unfortunately, it will make locating him difficult. Stay here. I will return to Heaven and do what I can to find him."

Dean was shaking his head before she was even finished. "I'm coming with you."

Rachel blinked. It was an odd sensation – she had forgotten how much humans feel of their surroundings, at least physically – and she did it again more out of reflex than need. "That…is a terrible idea."

"Don't care," Dean insisted, even as inner Dean screamed that it was, in fact, a terrible idea (*'listen to the smart angel lady, you told your brother you'd come right back!'*) Little did that voice know, Dean wasn't one to listen to it (that voice actually knew that quite well) and he'd already made up his mind. The hunter rubbed at his chest, at a phantom ache deep in the hole that felt nothing. Dean wished that feeling was more than just wishful thinking. "I'm going with you."

"No, you are not." Rachel shook her head and crossed her arms, weight shifting to one hip in clear protest. She might as well have been physically putting her foot down. "Heaven is no place for a living, breathing human. You will be a beacon of attention on a mission that can only succeed if we remain undetected."

"Don't care," Dean repeated through gritted teeth, even though he knew she had a more-than-fair argument. The hunter knew, at this point, he was just being stubborn because he was angry and scared, and he hated being both those things. Even more so when they added up to Dean being nothing but helplessness. He was going with her, and he was going to bring his best damn friend home.

Dean's phone started to buzz in his pocket and the older Winchester knew instinctively that it was Sammy. His brother was awake and calling to rip him a new one for leaving without letting him know. For

sort of breaking that promise he'd made. The timing of his call couldn't be more perfect, of course. As if Sam knew his older brother was about to do something stupid – well, even stupider, now – and had every intention of talking (yelling) him out of it.

"You should care," Rachel scolded him immediately, words clipped and biting at the heels of his own. "If Castiel is in as much danger as you seem to think, than anything we do to alert Uriel or Malachi could end in his death."

The hunter sucked in a sharp breath, his resolve and stubbornness immediately wilting at those words. Crap. He couldn't even deny that she was right. More than right, damnit. He clenched his teeth, upper lip trying repeatedly to curl into a snarl that the hunter fought against. The angel didn't need to think he was any more of a rabid mess than he was already stubbornly acting like. Dean turned his head away to hide his lack of control, fists curling at his side.

Damnit, damnit, damnit.

"Fine," he spat out, still grinding his jaw. The phone in his pocket stopped buzzing, but it pinged one single vibration a minute later. A voicemail. Definitely Sam, then. No one else but Cas left him voicemails, and she- he- she (damnit, this was confusing as hell and getting ridiculous) hadn't even figured out cell phones. At least, not yet.

(Not ever, if they didn't manage to get to her before Uriel.)

Dean clenched his fists tighter, trying not to think about it. "Fine, you're right. Just…go get her back, alright? Him. *Whatever*."

Rachel eyed the volatile human. She suddenly had the distinct impression that leaving Dean Winchester behind would, in no way, be this easy. Which made little sense to her, so the certainty of that feeling was all the more perplexing. In fact, the angel found herself resisting the urge to tell the human to '*stay*.' Not that he would heed such an order, she was also certain. So Rachel dismissed both the urge and the odd impressions she was getting off the confusing man. Instead, the angel uncrossed her arms and spread her wings, preparing to jump into the Ether.

Still, she found herself hesitating.

"Remain here," she reminded him, keeping the command as much of a suggestion as possible. Rachel supposed, in some ways, that was very

similar to telling him to stay. Perhaps she had caved to the strange need anyway. "I will return shortly with Castiel."

Then she left, still with the very uneasy sensation she would regret something about this encounter.

Dean waited until she disappeared – in the blink of an eye and with a flap of wings – to snort again. Yeah, right. Despite the ability to literally transport anywhere in the world – and beyond – in under a second, angels never did seem fast enough in returning. Besides, he knew his best friend. Nothing Cas ever did went down easy. He was a Winchester, after all. Dean was going to be lucky if Rachel came back at all with his wayward angel, let alone in a timely manner.

The hunter sighed, hanging his head for a moment. God, he needed to be *doing* something! Anything rather than waiting. As his phone buzzed in his pocket again, a single short vibration reminding him of the missed call, Dean dug the device out. Well, might as well listen to Sammy chewing him out, then call the sasquatch to let him know he was still in one piece.

Dean raised the phone to his ear, the robotic voice telling him he had one new message. The hunter hit the '1' button without even looking at the keypad, prepared for a seriously pissed-off younger brother.

"Hey, Dean." That was, indeed, his little brother's voice, but Sam sounded way less angry than he'd been expecting. Hell, the kid barely even sounded pissy. Had he somehow *not* noticed Dean was gone? Yeah, right, then why would he be calling the older Winchester's phone in the middle of the night? "There's a woman here, at the motel."

Dean's head turned sharply to the side, a frown immediately taking over his features. A woman? Could it be Ruby? Or Azazel's girl? His fingers unconsciously tightened around the plastic casing of the phone.

"I think she's one of us. One of Azazel's kids," his brother continued, voice dropping lower and Dean realized that Sam hadn't just meant at the motel. Whoever this newcomer was, she was in the room with the younger Winchester. Dean's stomach knotted. His grip on the phone tightened even further, his other hand sliding into his coat pocket to wrap around the Impala's keys. Screw waiting around for Rachel; the angel could find him once he made sure Sammy was safe.

"She says she found me through a *vision*, Dean."

Something in the older hunter's gut shifted. It didn't loosen so much as change position; Dean's Timey Senses flared in response, but the man from the future didn't know why. Not yet. Sam's next words got him his answer, though.

"Does the name Ava Wilson mean anything to you?"

-o-o-o-

Hidden by the night and his higher ground, the stealth hunter drew in another measured breath, as silent and slow as the one he'd just released. The rifle moved with the expansion of his chest, with the slow shift of his collarbone and shoulder, but like any hunter worth his salt, his aim stayed true. He was too good for it not to. Once his lungs were comfortably full, he held that breath, one eye shut and the other focused through the scope. He adjusted his aim by a hair's width, the center of his crosshairs shifting from phone to skull.

Gordon Walker released the air from his lungs and squeezed the trigger.

The sound of the .223 caliber subsonic bullet leaving his Heckler and Koch SL8 sniper rifle was nothing more than a pop in the air. A shame, really. The crack of thunder that came from an unsuppressed rifle was one of the world's damned finest sounds, in Gordon's opinion. The bullet flew true; the time between leaving the barrel and impacting its target was a fraction of a second. His prey hit the blood-spattered pavement with a lifeless thud before Gordon was even done lamenting the silence of the kill.

The phone, sprayed with its owner's blood and likely more, clattered to the ground beside the body, screen lit with a call still in progress. The tinny, mechanical voice of a woman requesting the deletion, saving, or replay of a voicemail was the only sound in the dark, empty gas station.

Chapter End Notes

***A/Ns**: [insert even dirtier, even more rotten, even more no good grin here] Did I make you all think Gordon was going after Sam? Aw, shucks. Guess I am just that evil ;D*

*(…okay, but I *did* warn you this was gonna get ugly, right?!)*

So who has two thumbs and just killed our main character? This author right here! I feel like I can officially be inducted into the hall of

Supernatural Writers now. Can't join until you kill one of the boys all proper like XD

***Original Timeline Reference – Rachel**: I didn't want to put this at the top because it would spoil the chapter, but for anyone who doesn't remember Rachel, she was Cas's second in command in season 6. She showed up to the boys just once, warning them to leave Castiel alone as he was busy fighting a war and didn't have time for them. She warned Cas a couple times about splitting his priorities, but seemed to genuinely care about him, and he seemed grateful for that. Ultimately, she discovered his plan to open Purgatory and told him to stop it or she would. Cas killed her to keep his secret.*

***Up Next**: Who's got two thumbs, is dead, and gonna go save Cas all on his own cuz he's gonna end up right where he wanted to be all along before he even knew he wanted to be there? That's right. This idiot Winchester right there! [points awkwardly at Dean with two thumbs]*

***ANOTHER MILESTONE APPROACHING:** Alrighty guys, we are within spitting distance of 2000 reviews on ff dot net, but it is a decent distance yet. Under normal circumstances, I absolutely believe we could those eighty reviews. HOWEVER, I do try to be a nice author when I can (when plot, emotional devastation, angst, and whumpage are not factors XD), so here's your heads up: Next chapter (58) is NOT a cliffhanger, but 59 will be (just a medium one, nothing like last or this chapter ;) So, if you don't want to cash in your chips now, you could space the reviews out over this chapter and next to try and hit that 2,000 milestone during 58 so you get 59 and 60 back-to-back :D*

This has been the rare appearance of your perfectly decent, nice and friendly author. That fulfills this year's quota, she'll be back in something like six months XD

Good luck and I hope you enjoyed these back-to-back chapters!

Chapter 91: Season 2: Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I was like, sure, I can totally post this while I watch "The Boys'. It's not like I need to concentrate or anything. Just upload, quick scan through, write some Author Notes, and then done-o.

Whelp. That was about three hours ago now. *facepalm*

Also, holy crap. I had no idea that show was written by Eric Kripke. Sweet Beans. I just started watching it because A. supers and B. Karl Friggin' Urban. I want that man as my spirit animal.

Review Replies: Sorry I haven't had a chance to get back to anyone yet. Your reviews have all been amazing and awesome and you are wonderful human beings. I will be trying to get around to responses in the next week. I haven't been in a good place for about a week now, which means I'm pretty much useless, and when I'm not useless, I'm trying to force myself to write. Sigh. It'll clear up eventually.

Chapter Warnings: Dean celebrates his birthday in fake Aruba with Eliot Ness, then has a chat with Cas before shit gets real weird.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 58

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam was laughing.

Dean turned his head at the boisterous noise. Something stupidly warm curled up in his chest at the sight of his beanstalk brother coming into the room, a big smile on his face and Castiel trailing behind. Sam was holding a beer in one hand, the brown glass still frosted with cold from the fridge. Cas was in his usual getup, tie still missing but dress shirt and tan trench coat properly rumpled. The angel was holding a bucket in his hands – an honest-to-god, tin bucket

– filled with ice and a dozen popped beers. There was a smile on the angel's face, too, a rare thing for how wide and unhesitant it was.

Dean sat up, leveraging himself off the back of the plush and ridiculously comfy brown couch. They'd found it at a garage sale. Imagine that. Winchesters. Garage sale shopping. Sometimes, Dean still couldn't believe the domesticity of it all. The couch hadn't been the first piece of furniture they'd ever bought – that would be their amazing, spectacular, beautiful, world-altering, life-changing memory foam mattresses – but it was the first thing they'd ever bought for their new home that they hadn't technically 'needed.' That night the boys picked a spare room in the bunker, set up a flat screen, a DVD player with Netflix access, and built themselves a straight up Mancave. Dean had been in pure heaven. Sickeningly domestic heaven, maybe, but hell, there hadn't been a thing in the world capable of putting a dent in his ear-to-ear grin that night.

"Are you guys kidding me right now?" he asked now, smile a damn near duplicate.

"It's not Aruba," Cas started, sounding almost apologetic as the two of them stood practically shoulder to shoulder beside the couch. "But, we figured…"

"It's close enough," Sam finished with a smile, then pulled something out of his pocket. It was one of those mini umbrellas tiki bars put in frou-frou drinks. The Samsquatch popped it open, rolling the rubber-band up to the top of the toothpick to lock the parasol in place. He slid it into the opening of one of the bottles in Cas's bucket, pulling the now-frou-frou'd beer free from the ice.

Sam held it out to Dean by the neck, little umbrella sinking down to the canopy like an awkward hat. A festive beer hat.

"Happy Birthday, Dean."

The older Winchester laughed, swiping the drink from his brother. He plucked the little umbrella out of the top and took a damned happy swig. Dean remembered the offhand comment, something he had groused about to Sam just the week before (about how they needed a real vacation, maybe Aruba. Sunshine. An ocean that wasn't sporting the week's newest sea beast in need of battling. Drinks with little umbrellas in them. A cabana boy to bring them a bucket of beers on demand. (Sam had raised one hell of an eyebrow at that, and Dean rolled his eyes. '*They don't have cabana girls, Sammy, or you know that's*

what I'd have said.' *'Uh-huh. Sure, Dean,*'had been his jerk of a brother's reply.)) For lack of a better place to put the decorative thing now, Dean tucked the umbrella behind his ear, still open. It sort of stayed there, tucked against his short-cropped hair, and Dean's grin could not be beat, though he welcomed any to try.

Sam rolled his eyes, but there was nothing but mirth and fondness in the expression. He stepped over Dean's outstretched legs to plop down on the far side of the couch beside his brother, holding out his beer in cheers. Dean clinked the neck of his bottle to Sam's, and the two shared a drink.

"Happy Birthday, Dean," Castiel said as well, settling a little more awkwardly on Dean's other side. The bucket still in his lap and Dean reached out with his own to tap the neck of one of the beers within.

"Grab one of those, Cas. This calls for a toast." Dean smiled at his angel, who obliged by selecting the bottle Dean had clinked. The nerdy little angel leaned forward to set the rest of the beers on the ground, between his leg and the hunter's.

"To…. Shit," Dean paused, beer held out in front of him, as he realized he had no idea what to toast to. Birthdays were total crap in his opinion. Never thought he'd live to see enough of 'em, anyways. He looked at his kid brother, then his angel. "To family?"

Sam held out his drink as well, the sound of glass meeting glass a pleasant ring in the small room. "To family."

Cas hesitated for only a second, before he met their bottles as well. There was something somber on his face, but a light in his eyes that kept Dean's grin from faltering. "Family."

As the three enjoyed their respective drinks, Dean leaned back into the couch, spreading his free arm out along the back. Yeah, this was the good life. A bunker, his brother, their angel, and a bucket of beers. Who needed Aruba?

"So what are we watching?" Sam asked, picking up the remote and offering it to Dean. A true birthday miracle right there.

Dean swiped it with a grin. "I think today's the day. It's time to introduce Cas to Eliot Ness."

His brother let out a groan – at this point, *he* could quote *The Untouchables* line for line, and that was not out of love like his brother

– but the noise was mostly for show. Sam might draw the line of birthday suck-upage at handing over the remote, but it wasn't like Dean had elected to make them watch another Dr. Sexy marathon. So Sam didn't say anything as his brother turned on the TV and started scrolling through Netflix.

The three Winchesters sat in their Bunker Mancave, finishing the bucket of ice-cold beers and watching one of Dean's favorite movies. The older Winchester snuck a glance at his family, Sam quietly engaged in the movie despite his groaning and moaning, and Cas tracking the moving images with his usual intensity, occasionally asking questions for what he didn't understand.

Yeah, Dean thought, leaning hard into his domestic little life with all its warm and fuzzies. Happy birthday to him.

-o-o-o-

Cas was at the sink in the kitchen, rinsing out the last of the bottles to put in the recycling the next morning. Talk about domestic; Dean thought buying a couch was the height of it. Nope, that honor belonged to an Angel of the Lord taking out the recycling. (He had told Cas to leave it, but the angel insisted on cleaning up, always). Dean was watching him, leaning against the island behind his friend, legs crossed at the ankles and sipping slowly at the last beer. Cas, the dude who had pulled him out of hell and saved his ass more than a million times, was doing the dishes in his kitchen. The thought made Dean chuckle, the warmth of alcohol mixing pleasantly with the warmth of an evening spent with family.

"You know, I missed you like this," Dean offered up casually. He gestured with the nearly empty bottle at Cas's getup when the angel turned to him with a questioning look. "Don't get me wrong, Angela was a nice change up. Dragon Lady aside, I mean. But I guess…I still think of you like this, man."

"I'm fine, Dean."

The hunter frowned, going still at the odd response. Castiel glanced over his shoulder at him, eyes wide and blue as ever, but there was a level of sadness in them that Dean didn't quite like. It crashed that inebriated warmth almost immediately.

"What?" Dean stared at the angel, who smiled, nodded, and turned back to the sink. Cas said something again, but Dean wasn't listening anymore. Something here…it wasn't right.

"I know. I'm…sorry, for what happened."

It was like…like there was a disconnect. Castiel was having a different conversation than him. But that wasn't right, either. Dean frowned, the edges of the thought as fuzzy as his buzzing body. No, he remembered this conversation. He'd *had* this conversation. Cas was on script.

Wait, script?

"It wasn't your fault. It was mine." The angel sighed. "Claire is… difficult, yes, but she has the right to be angry and hurting. I am not her father."

Cas set the brown beer bottle upside down on the counter, a dishtowel spread out beneath all the draining drinks. Dean stared at the red-striped fabric of the towel, brilliant against the metal counter top. Sam had picked up a set of kitchen towels earlier that month, all of them red and green and apparently on sale from the holidays. had snorted at the sight of them and their now Christmas themed discount shopping. God, they really had changed, hadn't they?

Changed?

Dean uncrossed his ankles as his brain slowly started to catch on, bit by bit. He set the beer down on the counter. Cas was still talking, pauses in his words like he was listening to someone else speak in the in-betweens. Dean finally pinned down just what the hell all this was as Cas answered a question no one had said aloud, but Dean remembered asking years ago. He remembered Cas's answer, too, which the angel delivered word for word.

"What can I do?" Cas was saying, and Dean remembered the way the angel's fingernails had dug into the white rim of the kitchen sink, the way his shoulders hunched around his ears, the exhaustion in every line of his body and words. "I took her father form her, Dean. And now, this body…it's mine. Jimmy's soul is in Heaven and Claire…"

This was a memory. Holy shit, this was a memory. What the hell?

Dean turned to his left and right, but he was in the bunker kitchen. A complete rendition, down to the smallest details. Like the damn Christmas towels, even though it was near the end of January and the Winchesters didn't *do* Christmas.

A djinn?

No, that didn't make sense. His surroundings lacked the distinct aftertaste of a djinn; that subtle but persistent feeling of wrongness Dean had always been able to identify among even the most perfect layers of happiness in every djinn dream. The cynical hunter had always just assumed it was because true happiness wasn't a thing Dean was comfortable with in any form. But this…this didn't have that wrongness. No, this had the right level of happy-but-still-just-a-touch-miserable-because-I'm-a-Winchester-and-that's-as-good-as-it-gets. This was…it was January, because it was his birthday. His thirty-sixth birthday, he remembered that. Which made it…Dean did the math in his head: 2015.

Oh shit.

It was supposed to be 2006. He knew that. Worse yet, 2015 had *not* been a good year. And this conversation, it had all started because of….

Dean swallowed with difficulty. There was a lump in his throat made of fear and self-loathing. His mouth dried up like the damn Sahara as he slowly reached across his body with his left arm hand curling close-to-trembling fingers around his right forearm. He couldn't feel the raised skin of the Mark beneath his over-shirt, rolled up above his wrists but never enough to reveal the red, branded skin. Dean knew it was there, though. He could *feel* it, now that he was thinking about it.

No, no, no, no. Dean's breath picked up and he slammed his eyes shut. This was a memory. It wasn't real, it was a *memory*. A happy one, actually, when he thought about it and not the thing branded onto his arm. His birthday, the little celebration Sam and Cas had given him, the beers and *The Untouchables*. Sam's stupid grin and teasing about the drink umbrella that stayed tucked behind Dean's ear for the duration of the movie. All of Cas's questions and adorably serious concerns over the validity of the plot. Even this conversation. All of it had been a *good* night.

Dean dropped his hand from the Mark and tried to let go of the feel of it beneath his fingertips, running through his veins. Yeah, this might have been a happy memory, alright, but it definitely still had the distinct *Winchester-shitty-life* quality to it, didn't it? Definitely not a Djinn.

"Thank you, Dean. I will take all the advice I can get." Cas was turned around now, leaning against the sink and drying his hands on a green dishtowel (and god, it was *sparkly*. Dean had forgotten about that

(possibly because by mid-March he'd hidden every Christmas colored discount item around the bunker he could find, later to burn them all out back)). The angel was smiling gently at him now. It was sad, but it was warm, and Dean muddled through his memories for a minute, trying to recall what it was Cas was thanking him for.

Offering to help out with Claire. Because the two had come to an almost, sort-of understanding after she'd asked two of her friends to kill him, and he'd managed not to kill the two in return when they'd tried it. Yeah. Sort-of, almost understanding.

(An understanding necessary because he'd murdered her son of a bitch surrogate father figure and all his buddies who'd been doing nothing but using her, but that's not how *she* saw it.)

(Yeah, definitely the shitty quality of what constituted Dean's real life, right here.)

"I'm dead, aren't I?"

Dean blinked owlishly, even as he said it aloud. The realization had hit his brain about the same time the words left his tongue. Cas didn't even hear him, just kept on discussing parenting techniques with a future-and-also-past version of Dean that wasn't actually there.

This was a good memory. That's how Dean knew he was dead. Not a wish-fulfillment, but a memory, and a happy one at that. Despite the horror of having murdered a room full of people – dirtbags though they might have been – and realizing he'd *enjoyed* it only a month before all this, this had still been a good night. One of his few from that year, really. He and Cas had stayed in the kitchen until the ridiculously early hours of the morning, talking *parenting* tips. Which led to Dean recalling almost all of his favorite stories of Ben, both from the year he'd spent with the Braedons and the few times he'd gotten to see them after.

He missed that kid.

And Cas had been so *eager* to learn how to be a good father to Claire. Maybe not a father, but whatever she needed him to be. He was so earnest to help, to make it right, like everything the angel put his heart and soul into.

"Shit, I'm dead," Dean repeated. Because this was a memory from… more than three years ago, and also a *decade* from now. It wasn't 2015. It wasn't even 2016, which Dean still thought of as *right* when it

came to the year. No, it was 2006 and Dean had been…he'd been trying to find Cas.

Cas who should be possessing a female vessel named Angela Garrett (Dragon Lady), and not Jimmy Novak in his trench coat and suit. Angela, a woman currently lying comatose in Bobby Singer's spare bedroom. And Cas, who had been severely injured by Azazel's trap in Rivergrove and gone back to Heaven for healing. After, of course, he dropped mother friggin' *Uriel's* name. Of all the brother's he could have decided to trust and then *not* tell Dean about.

(That wasn't entirely fair. Dean hadn't asked, either.)

The hunter had been trying to summon another angel to help locate Cas, because the damn guy wasn't answering his prayers. If Dean was lucky, that was because Cas was healing and not because he was fucking *dead*. But that didn't matter right now, because he'd succeeded. Dean remembered succeeding. Rachel had answered him, had agreed to search Heaven for Cas.

She'd also absolutely refused to bring him with her. So what the hell was he doing here?

"Shit, I'm *dead*," Dean said for the third time, suddenly spinning in the kitchen. "How the hell did I end up *dead*?!"

Maybe it was a ridiculously illogical leap for anyone else, but Dean had been to Heaven, more than once. He knew what the cycle of memories that represented eternal Christian Paradise felt like, and it felt like *this*.

Shit, shit shit. Who the hell had iced him? And *when*?

The older Winchester scanned his memories, trying desperately to recall what had happened after Rachel left. Had she come back? He had no memory of that and, despite the fact that he trusted Rachel only slightly further than he could throw her (which wasn't far to begin with), Dean didn't think she'd have killed him. If the angel wanted him dead, she'd have just done it. No need for a vanishing act or false pretenses.

No, there'd been something else.

Sam had called…. No, Sam had left a voicemail! Because Dean hadn't wanted to answer his phone with Rachel around. But the angel left and Dean got his phone out and listened to Sam's voicemail, and…

And that was it. That was the last memory he had.

What. The. Hell.

"Okay, Dean, think," he muttered, running a hand down his face. "What did Sammy's voicemail say?"

His brain short-circuited before it could come up with an answer as something entirely else shoved its way into his conscience. Something that took up all the room his befuddled mind could spare.

He was in Heaven.

He was in Heaven and *Cas* was *also* in Heaven.

Dean dropped his arm. Son of a bitch!

The hunter looked around the kitchen again before moving quickly for the open door. He left behind a memory of the angel, laughing with a warm smile and crinkled eyes at a story Dean should be telling him about Ben. But he didn't have time to relive a memory right now. Dean skidded to a halt in the hallway, looking left and right. The last time they'd been in Heaven and tried to go Paradise hopping, Cas had said to look for a road.

Alright, well that was easy in this particular memory. He just needed the garage and his Baby. Dean took a right and headed down the hall.

This might not have been the plan (it really, *really* hadn't been the plan. If it had been the plan, Sammy definitely would have murdered him first for even thinking it), but it was what had gone down. So why waste it? Dean was in Heaven, the one place he didn't think he could get to, the place Cas *was* (possibly in danger or at the very least still injured), and Dean didn't plan to waste that opportunity.

He was going to find his angel and drag that feathery ass of his back down to earth himself.

-o-o-o-

Gordon pulled away from the scope, using the unaided, sharp eyes of a hunter to stare at his downed target, only fifty feet away. Dean Winchester wasn't moving. Gordon climbed to his feet, rifle by his side, and waited another moment. The downed hunter still didn't move and that combined with the puddle of blood beneath his head was confirmation enough for Gordon.

He climbed down from the gas station roof the same way he'd gotten up; a disused ladder attached to the backside of the building and a dumpster he'd had to shimmy into place just to get to the bottom of said ladder, which was suspended a good ten feet off the ground. Gordon honestly hadn't been sure he could pull this hunt off tonight. After showing up in town a couple days ago to find his original target already gone – missing for more than a week, with a clueless and worried father sure his troubled son had finally ditched town – Gordon figured Lafayette was as good a town as any to set a trap for the Winchesters.

He'd been planning on something of that nature for a couple weeks now, and the lack of intended prey meant a perfect opportunity to not waste an opportunity. The right guy stabbed in a parking lot here, the proper phone call there, and the Winchesters were sure to get word of a case in Indiana. Those boys had their Roadhouse connections and Gordon had his. It wasn't hard to get someone to call Bobby Singer with a hunt that needed hunting, and everyone knew who his go-to boys were.

Gordon hit the ground, shouldering his rifle strap. He started around the building, forgoing his car which he'd parked about a hundred feet away after pulling into the lot with no headlights, hoping Dean didn't hear the near-silent engine. To be honest, Gordon had lost the older Winchester earlier on that night. He'd found the brothers' motel with pathetically little searching; that gorgeous car of theirs had been parked right out front of the third place Gordon drove by. He'd been scoping out the best vantage point for a sniper nest when Dean Winchester came out of the room near midnight and took off in that beauty.

So Gordon weighed his options. Dean or Sam. He wasn't one for murdering men in their sleep, even monsters, so he'd taken off after the older Winchester.

Of course, the trained hunter spotted a tail within minutes. Dean did the absolute bare minimum needed to ditch his follower, which told Gordon he wasn't taking it all that seriously. Probably thought he was Sam. Still, Gordon chose to turn off before his prey upped the ante with anything more confrontational. The hunter preferred the risk of losing his target and heading back to their motel than losing the element of surprise.

He gave himself thirty minutes to find Dean Winchester again. Gordon could search the direction the older Winchester had been headed for

thirty minutes, looking for that slender lady of a car, before he'd call it and head back to catch him at the motel. Imagine his surprise when he'd actually found the hunter, twenty-two minutes in, at a gas station on the edge of town. Pretty much the last thing in town.

By the time Gordon had pulled up behind the building, gotten his rifle out, and made it up to the roof, Dean was talking with whoever he'd come all the way out here to meet. It was a woman, average looking with shoulder-length brown hair, dressed in a sharp suit. If Dean Winchester were anyone else, Gordon might have assumed a shady business deal was going down. But Dean wasn't anyone else; he was a hunter.

So it wasn't with complete surprise that the woman disappeared. In the blink of an eye, she was gone. Gordon's jaw tightened as he pulled away from the scope, staring at the lot below, now empty of all but his target.

Dean Winchester, consorting with demons. He could hardly say he was surprised, given what that bastard he'd exorcised down in Louisiana told him about the brothers. There were lines you didn't cross in this business. Betraying your own species was sure one of 'em. Associating with demons instead of killing them on the spot was another. Gordon lined his shot back up and didn't hesitate to take out the hunter that had become no better than the things he hunted.

Now Gordon stood over the downed Winchester, staring dispassionately at Dean's frozen face, eyes lifeless and entire right side splattered in blood. The vamp hunter bent down, picking the discarded phone off the pavement next to the man's lifeless hand. It was still working; the screen lit up when Gordon tapped a key. A shame, really. Everything he'd heard of Dean Winchester up until he'd met the man had been about what a good hunter he was. Gordon took no delight in depriving the world of one of their own. But when one of their own went rogue, it had to be done.

He tucked the blood-splattered phone into his pocket. Gordon would need it to lure Sam Winchester out next. Speaking of. The hunter pulled out his own phone, flipping it open and extending the device out over Dean's corpse. The flash of the camera was bright in the darkness.

Gordon checked the image, flipped his phone shut, and headed back for his car. He had preparations to see to.

-o-o-o-

Rachel stood in Arthur Staten's personal Paradise and tried to remain calm. She pulled from her millennia of training as a Warrior of God and forced down all distractions. Rachel found comfort in the familiar balm of old training.

The autistic man's memories were empty of Castiel. Each of Castiel's favored human retreats had been absent of the wayward angel. It was actually the second time she had checked this particular Paradise, because it just didn't make sense.

There was nowhere in Heaven Proper to hide one of the Host. Even if Uriel was the one dampening Castiel's signature, Heaven itself was built of the very same energy the angels were. She should have been able to commune with the walls, the archways, the plants and trees and stones. *They* would have told her where her commander was. Which meant his grace was not physically in contact with the walls, the plants, the stones, or the very ground they walked on. He was not in Heaven Proper.

Which left the Paradises. Unfortunately, there were, quite literally, millions of them. If Uriel was the one hiding Castiel, he could have picked one at random. Rachel was never going to find her missing commander, especially not before her ambiguous promise of 'I will return *shortly*' ran out and Dean Winchester took matters into his own hands.

Not that she knew what a human could possibly do in this situation, but the volatile manner in which Dean had insisted he accompany her back to Heaven had left Rachel…wary. Which meant she had to find where Uriel was hiding Castiel before that undetermined amount of time had passed on Earth.

The only variable that remained was *how*?

She could enlist the help of the rest of her Flight. With all of them divided and searching the Paradises, they just might find Castiel in time. She'd need a cover story for why the angel had somehow… misplaced himself in a human Paradise. And how Rachel somehow knew about it. And how no one was to discuss it with Uriel…

Standing in the middle of Arthur Staten's fourth birthday party – the balloons bright blobs of colors and the other kids moving wavelengths of energy and noise – Rachel let out an irritated noise. Her wings flapping restlessly and the balloons bobbed back and forth in the wind

created by her agitation.

Wait. Of course! *Uriel.*

Her performance in this matter so far had been grossly inept, Rachel chided herself. How many centuries had she and Castiel studied together, testing themselves on strategy and tactic, all for her knowledge to fail them both so blatantly now? Uriel may have found a way to cleverly disguise Castiel's grace, but he would not have disguised his own. All she had to do was search for Uriel, who would eventually lead her back to wherever he was keeping Castiel.

Rachel exited the human Paradise, closing the door to Arthur Staten's memories behind her. The hall was silent, it's ethereal floor and walls a welcome calm from the chaos of the human's domain. Rachel was in the A's, still quite close to Heaven Proper, and could feel the hum of grace buzzing through the walls. She leaned her back against one, wings pressed flat to the white expanse beside Arthur's door. In the distance, the sound of her brothers' voices raised in song was a reassuring comfort, and Rachel pulled on her training once more.

She closed her eyes, extended her senses and-

"I can't believe the Righteous Man ended up dead *two years* early!"

Rachel slid her eyes – all sixteen pairs of them – back open in a single, coordinated snap. *What?*

"He's not supposed to be up here at all," another voice added, far more hushed than the first but still quite clear in the long, resonating halls. This angel's words were distressed, ringing out with an air of *wrong* in the peace and calm of Heaven. "Zachariah is furious. I've never seen him turn that color red."

"Let's just…find him before the boss takes it out on *us* instead. Which way are the D's? I've never been down here before…" The voices carried away until Rachel could no longer discern them.

The Righteous Man…. If Dean Winchester had been telling the truth (and Rachel had been inclined during their initial meeting to believe him) then… He hadn't even waited an *hour* for Rachel to fulfill her promise? He had *killed* himself just to come find Castiel on his own?

Of all the imbecilic, self-righteous…!

The angel made another low noise deep in her core, feathers bristling

in indignation and irritation. *Seriously*? Of course Castiel, an angel with the patience of a river carving its way through solid rock, would find the one human physically incapable of restraint! Not to mention boorishly insistent on doing things himself. Rachel pushed off the walls, immediately turning away from Heaven Proper and hurrying down the long corridor of A's.

She had been in and among the Paradises before – several times, in fact – and did know her way around. Mostly thanks to time spent hunting down an errant commander who enjoyed an autistic man's heaven and was often late to sparring sessions and Flight drills because of it. Rachel would get to Dean Winchester's soul before those other angels, give the human a firm lashing for not even giving her the allotted time to search for her brother *safely*, and then…deal with getting him back to Earth.

Somehow.

(For the moment, Rachel had neither the time nor the patience to question what business Zachariah could possibly have with the human soul. It was a relevant question, she knew, and one to revisit later. The only reason she could fathom off the top of her grace was that the Dominion wanted to send the soul back to Earth. If Dean was, indeed, the Righteous Man than his death had clearly been a mistake.

However, that was not Zachariah's department…)

-o-o-o-

Dean opened the door to the bunker's attached garage expecting his beautiful ladies and a road, and instead stumbled into a hallway that was obnoxiously white. Like…Martha Stewart running a mental hospital on steroids levels of white. Dear God, sterile much? Dean blinked in the brightness, the truly blinding existence of light which felt like it was coming from everywhere. Actually…it kind of was. The hunter squinted, sticking his neck out like a turtle as he stared at one of the walls around him. The smooth, white expanse of it really was glowing. And not like an opaque glass or plastic with a light source behind it. No, the surface itself, the material itself (whatever *that* was), was emitting light.

The hunter pressed his hand to the surprisingly cool surface. The edges of his fingers curved the light in a soft, golden-white glow. It was…kinda pretty. Calming almost.

Dean pulled his hand off the wall with a frown, glaring at the thing

for daring to be…what? Peaceful? Yeah. That. The older Winchester spun around, taking in the weird hallway he was in. Aside from glowing, it was also lined with white lights, white frames, white arches, and white doors. They, too, were obnoxiously shiny: some kind of freshly polished silver, metallic material that gleamed in the diffused light. Each door had an equally polished plaque, names cut into the material and backlit by, you guessed it, more white light.

The one directly in front of him – the one he'd just stumbled out of – had *his* name on it. Along with the years, 1979-2006.

Well, that probably wasn't good.

Dean glanced down the hall to his left, which seemed to stretch forever, and then to his right. Same result either direction. Just white, light-lined archways, walls, and doors, endlessly repeating like something out of *The Shining*, only if *The Shining* had taken place in a dystopian author's wet dream of a sterile Sperm Lab in some underground, secret, billionaire's bunker.

It was like staring at one of those pictures on the internet where, if you looked long enough and hard enough and forgot to blink, the lines started to vibrate. That was usually right before the website told you there was a high percentage chance you were a psychopath. Dean remembered being damn proud of how fast his little lines vibrated, at least until Sam read the second part of the 'test' aloud. Then he'd just been uncomfortable and defensive, calling Sam a liar when the younger Winchester insisted the lines had only moved a little bit for him. Nuh-uh. If Dean was going down as a psychopath, he was sure as hell taking Sammy with him. Winchesters stuck together, after all.

"Hulloo?" Dean called out, wincing when his voice, even just that exaggerated whisper, echoed all around him and seemed to travel down both ends of the hallway for a ridiculously long amount of time.

What the hell.

The last time they'd 'hacked' Heaven, Dean had never left…well, his own memories. His and Sam's. They'd just traveled through different versions of them, always along a road of some sort. At least until they'd bumped into Ash, who had helped him and Sam actually hack Heaven the right way. But this…this place definitely wasn't in his memories. There was no road, for starters. As for Ash, that mulleted, loveable little freak should be passed out drunk (but very much alive) on a pool table in the back of the Roadhouse about this time.

So…where was Dean? Was this still heaven? Or had he gotten the whole memory-déjà-vu thing wrong from the get-go?

This still didn't feel like a Djinn dream. Maybe…a pocket dimension? Dean knew they were due to run into Gabriel sometime soon, though he couldn't remember down to the month or day. This could be the archangel and Dean just didn't remember bumping into him or getting tossed in here. Which meant Sam was probably in here somewhere too…. Though what the lesson was this time, Dean didn't have a clue.

The hunter squinted at the glowing walls again, reaching out a hand to poke one. He shook his finger when it remained very solid. Something about this place…the white, the gleam, the glowing plaque with his name… Sure, he would give Gabriel points if this turned out to be him. This over-the-top sterile, fake, light-obsessed environment was absolutely what Dean would expect Heaven to look like. Cartoonishly so, which was right up Gabe's alley.

But…it also stank so much of high heaven – with its hoity-toity, holier-than-thou odor, clinging heavier than a middle-aged French heiress' perfume – that Dean was actually pretty sure it *was* Heaven and not a cheap knock-off intended to make him just think it was.

He was just…seeing it differently this time.

Which was a mystery for another day. A day when he wasn't mysteriously dead or trying to find his angelic best friend in a hallway maze where he half-expected to find a pair of twins standing, holding hands, asking him to come play with them.

Alright, whatever. Visuals might have changed, but the plan hadn't. Dean still needed to find Cas.

Which…okay, he had no idea how to do.

Time to break it down into steps. Step one, pick a direction and go with it. At least his first decision was easy. Left or right, because the hallway looked like it just kept going in either direction and those were the only two options.

Dean glanced down both, shrugged his shoulders in utter indifference because he honestly had no friggin' clue, and went with right.

-o-o-o-

Rachel stood in the open doorway of Dean Winchester's Paradise and

stared, something between stupidly and apoplectically, into the empty room. Just four walls and nothing more. No furniture, no décor, no memories to fill the space with warmth and personality and life. Because there was no *soul* in this Paradise.

"Are you *kidding* me?!"

-o-o-o-

He made it about sixty doors down (Dean had lost track somewhere in the thirties and kinda just figured he'd walked about twice that, so far), when he crossed another hall. It branched off to the left in a standard T-intersection from the one he was currently in. Dean stared down it, which turned out to be fairly pointless because it looked *exactly* like the one he was currently in.

Seriously. Glancing between the two identical paths made him dizzy and sort of short-circuited the logic portion of his brain.

Did he even still have a brain if he was dead?

Well, might as well turn left down the new aisle of doors, Dean figured. It was true that he was less likely to get lost if he stayed on his current trajectory of endlessly straight-to-the-end-of-all-eternity-including-his-sanity-and-good-god-only-sixty-doors-and-he-already-wanted-to-scratch-his-eyes-out-of-his-skull-seriously-what-was-with-angels-and-their-white-and-their-light-and-their-sterile-stoic-no-change-bore-bore-bore. However, anyone who might come looking for him (and they would, because 1. he was the Righteous Man and definitely wasn't supposed to be dead yet and B. last time he'd ditched his personal heaven, angels had been on him and Sam pretty quickly in the form of a weird, origin-less searchlight in the sky) would absolutely find him in less than a hot second, since all they'd have to do to spot him was look down a hallway.

So far, it had been nothing but a straight shot six hundred doors down with nothing to look at but him and the endless eternity that was the other end of this god-forsaken hallway. Anyone came looking for him, he was a dead man.

Er…Deader.

In short, Dean turned left.

-o-o-o-

Rachel was going to kill this particular human. Which, logically, she was currently incapable of doing. Dean Winchester was already dead. But if ever there was a human to test Rachel's ability to defy logic, it was *this* human.

He wasn't in the D's.

The angel had flown down the entire length of the corridor until it dead-ended at a T-intersection with the V's. She had not spotted a wandering soul for the entire length of the hallway, though she had passed two other branches that went into the H's and the R's. Now Rachel had to make a choice she had hoped not to make. What she had hoped for was to stumble over the human soul in his *correct* hallway. Even better would have been his correct Paradise, where he *belonged.* But neither of those had happened, had they?

Rachel debated between the four options available to her: the H's, the R's, and the two directions of the V's, one which led to the M's, the other to the F's. After consulting every bit of strategic data she had ever consumed, adding to it the (admittedly limited) human knowledge she possessed, Rachel decided to backtrack to the H's. It was the first turn Dean would have come upon and, if he knew he was on the run in a place he shouldn't be and possibly being pursued, it was the logical choice.

At least, it was the choice she would have made. Not that that was saying much, because Rachel wouldn't have chosen to leave her Paradise in the *first* place.

There was another option, of course. The human could have entered any of the Paradises along the D corridor. However, Rachel dismissed it as a possibility. For one, because no human soul should be able to enter another's Paradise (then again, Dean Winchester should not have been able to *leave* his), and two, because if he had, then she was never going to find him.

Like she was never going to find Castiel, at this point.

Rachel turned into the H's, taking off down the hallway at as fast a flight speed as she deemed safe in the fairly narrow corridor.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: See, That was almost entirely not really even a cliffhanger at all! (Actually, about half of this arc will be less cliffy, more stopping-kinda-in-the-middle-of-things-cuz-where-else-are-we-

gonna-stop!?)

Review Responses: The previous two chapters and the holidays were such a whirlwind that I forgot to address some of the big questions/points/guesses that came up in reviews. I'm going to take a minute to do that now, so feel free to skip these notes if you're not interested in chatter.

Balthazar: Yes, Balthy is alive! Most of you guessed that he was ;) I really appreciate many of you mentioning that while you disliked his decision not to interfere, it was also in-character of him. It wasn't an easy decision for me to write him that way so I appreciate hearing it. I like Balthazar and I loved his friendship with Cas. What I want in this story is more of that, so it was hard keeping him as his early-asshole-self. (We'll get there eventually :D)

(P.S. Shameless plug: If you like Balthazar and my writing combined, you should check out my other story, Cadence. It's not complete yet (because I apparently *can not* work on two stories at once) but it is a fun twist on what life might have been like for Dean if it was Balthazar that had pulled his ass out of Hell instead of Cas XD In other words, *another* timeline AU, just waaaaaay shorter than this one)

Gabriel: A lot of people guessed that Dean would summon Gabriel, and as this is the second time that's happened, I'd like to address why Dean hasn't gone after our favorite Archangel. First, I love Gabe and I promise, he will have a big part in this story. However, I think there's a major difference between how we the audience see Gabe and how the boys see Gabe. We friggin' love him because, among many reasons, he's funny. The things he does are downright hilarious. However, if you were Dean or Sam, you probably wouldn't feel that way. What Gabe does is horrible if you have to live through it, and if not horrible, than incredibly frustrating and exhausting. There are Sam and Dean, with the entire fate of the planet literally resting on their ability to stop the apocalypse, and the one guy with enough power to actually help, who might just ally with them, won't stop playing games. That would be so damn infuriating. And when the angel finally agreed to help it was only because all of his pagan friends were going to die (we the audience can see more into his character, but I don't think Dean necessarily did) In 2006, all Dean knows is that Gabe wants the apocalypse to get started so it can finally be over. He doesn't have any leverage to change the angel's mind, so he's not

going to actively seek Gabe out until he's got something tha'll get him to help.

Of course, Gabe's gonna interfere all on his own loooong before that XD Cuz, ya know, Time wants to stay the same and, also, Gabe's an ass ;)

Chapter Reference – Gabriel: I very quickly mentioned where Dean's head was at concerning Gabriel when he was brainstorming options to save Sam way back when the kid pushed too hard and almost died. See Chapter 16: Season 1 Chapter 15 if you would like that refresher, but it is just a paragraph (and that was two years ago so I will not be surprised if people do not remember it :P)

Up Next: We catch up with Sam and Ava, Gordon gets busy texting and rigging explosives (not at the same time), Rachel has a few choice words for Dean, Dean has a few choice words for whatever idiot designed Heaven (that would be God, Dean), and Castiel is surprised to find himself still alive.

Chapter 92: Season 2: Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

A/Ns : No one poked me this weekend to make sure I remembered what day it was! I can't decide if I am honored or neglected :D

Review Replies: I have still not gotten around to answering anyone yet, and for that I am very sorry! I still would like to, so it's on the to-do list for this week. In the meantime, thank you to everyone who comments or reviews, shares your thoughts or offers up encouragement, even when I don't always get back to you. I really appreciate every one of you that takes the time to 'pay' me for my work, if you will :)

Previously on TRSF… Sam woke up to Dean leaving their motel room in Lafayette, Indiana after they showed up on a case that turned out to not be a case. There was a knock on the door, Sam answered, and it turned out to be Ava Wilson, who seemed surprised to see him and tried to warn him he was in danger. Sam listened to her story about visions and his death, then left the room to call Dean. He had to leave a voicemail, since his brother didn't pick up. Meanwhile, Castiel awoke to Uriel helping him heal. He turned on Angel Radio and received Dean's prayers (warnings). He confronted Uriel about his plans to raise Lucifer, and the larger angel forced him back into a healing trance.

Chapter Reference – Cas's Panic Attack in Heaven: An earlier time in Heaven, Castiel and Uriel discussed Naomi and her memory tampering. Uriel confessed he had seen something like that happen to Castiel, in Egypt and again in Sodom. This realization that his mind had been tampered with sent Castiel into a panic attack, and he ended up fleeing Heaven to seek out Dean, Sam, and the grace in Dean's chest. See **Chapter 54: Season 2, Chapter 21** for a refresher.

Chapter Warnings : Man, I am drawing a total blank for funny stuff here, damnit. Ava is unsuccessfully trying to get Sam to leave town, Sam is successfully heading right for his own death, Dean's already been there, done that, Rachel's pretty much ready to kill every human, and Cas is…well, Cas is just surprised to be alive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 59

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Oh come on, why can't you just leave town?" Ava Wilson looked like she desperately wanted to stomp her feet up and down, but was holding back because she self-identified as a grown-ass woman. "Please? Before you blow up?"

"No, I can't," Sam insisted from where he was sitting once more on the edge of the mattress, tapping his cell phone into the palm of his hand, mind running a mile a minute and a hundred miles away.

Dean hadn't called back. Sam hadn't told Ava much when he'd come back into the room over two hours ago, just that his brother hadn't answered so he'd left a voicemail. But Dean was pretty good about answering his phone, and the fact that he hadn't... Sam knew he was out trying to summon an angel – not exactly the kind of thing you could take a call in the middle of – but no way that took two hours, with absolutely no available minute to check his phone.

Something about it all wasn't sitting right with the younger Winchester.

He needed to get dressed, get out there and figure out where his brother was. If Ava and her vision were right – that Sam was going to get himself blown up in some abandoned house – then someone was after him. That meant they could be after Dean, too. They could have already gotten to him and that's why he hadn't been able to call Sam back. His brother could be tied up in that abandoned house Ava had seen in her vision. Or he could be dead for all he knew.

Okay, so Sam was being a tad melodramatic. His brother wasn't dead, he just…wasn't answering his phone. Because he was summoning an angel. Which apparently took *hours* to do, on the one night another psychic showed up to tell Sam someone wanted him dead.

Great timing on that one, Dean.

"Oh, god, please? Please just leave? Why won't you listen to me?" The

woman standing in his motel room looked beyond distressed. She'd passed stressed out and gone right into resigned despair somewhere after hour number one. Plus, she still wasn't sold on the idea that he wasn't crazy, which both irked and amused the younger Winchester.

"Because there's something going on here, Ava. I've got to figure out what." Sam climbed to his feet and grabbed his duffle bag from the floor, throwing it on to the bed. He needed clothes, first. "Besides, I'm not leaving without my brother."

Who would be calling back. Any minute now. Unless he was tied up and/or dead in an abandoned house.

"Do you remember that address, the one from your vision?" Maybe Ava's vision came true because Sam went to the address to try and find his brother. He knew about the trip wire now, thanks to Ava. He could avoid it and whoever had set it up in the first place.

"Okay," Ava breathed out, the word a little shaky. She ran her hands through either side of her hair. "Okay, you know what? No. Screw you, buddy! I came here to- to- I don't know, save your life, I suppose, when I should be at home addressing wedding invitations!"

She lifted her hands, one spread wide, the other pointing to a delicate, beautiful engagement ring. Sam's heart pinged for a moment, not only for this woman whose life was about to be – no, currently was – turned upside down, but because he had been her. A year ago, with an engagement ring of his own and someone waiting at home for him to come back to. Sam swallowed down the memory and turned away.

"Do you see this?" Ava continued, voice pitched in hysteria. She didn't notice Sam's discomfort, and carried on with her overly energetic bluster. "I am getting married in eight weeks, and I have a thousand things I have to finish before then. Instead of doing any of that, I drove out here to save your weirdo ass! But if you just want to stay here and die, fine. Me? I'm due back on Planet Earth."

Sam's phone dinged from the comforter beside his duffle bag. He picked it up, staring at a text from Dean. A message with nothing more than an address and the words, *'Sorry for radio silence found something'*.

Six words. Just those six words; nothing about Sam's voicemail, a woman named Ava Wilson, or the fact that the younger Winchester was standing in their motel room with one of Azazel's special kids. Sure, it sounded like Dean, but anyone with Dean's phone could have

just as easily scrolled through his text messages to pick up basic vernacular and syntax.

The hunter held the message out to Ava. "This the address?"

Her blue-green eyes widened, a watery sheen turning them into pools. "Oh god." Her wind-up speech about going home deflated right along with her composure. She looked up at him, those pools pleading. "Don't go. Please?"

"I have to," Sam answered, but paused as he pulled out a pair of jeans. He turned to her, looking the frustrated, frantic woman up and down with a sympathetic eye. She was freaking out, probably scared half to death, but she'd come here trying to do the right thing and was still standing in his motel room attempting to do just that. Sam gave her an encouraging and, what he hoped was calming, smile. "Look, I'll be okay."

"Yeah, sure you will."

He huffed out a vaguely amused breath of air. "I will, Ava. Thank you for coming here and warning me. But you need to go home, now."

The woman blinked, drawing back for a moment in pure surprise. "What? I- no…I don't...I don't think I should leave."

Sam's smile turned a little more brittle, but not because of her. All of Azazel's kids, at least the ones he'd met, were all something else. Kind or compassionate or brave or bold. Six months ago, it would have amazed him. Now, all he could think about were three dead bodies in Cold Oak and their friend in a hospital, muted for the rest of his life.

"I want you out of harm's way, Ava," Sam said, words firm and the conviction behind them even more so. He wasn't adding another body to that growing list. The hunter took a cautious step forward, telegraphing his movements loud and clear in case she rejected them. Sam knew she still wasn't sure about him. The feeling should probably be mutual, but everything in his gut told him Ava was telling the truth about who she was.

Instead of putting more distance between them, she just looked up at him with those big doe eyes. "What about you?"

"Harm's way doesn't really bother me." Sam offered a quirk of his lips and a semi-playful shrug. He settled an arm on her shoulder, a soft squeeze communicating his appreciation and his concern. "You did

what you came here to do. You warned me."

"But…" Ava was shaking her head. She gestured to the phone in his hand. "You're walking right into my vision. I mean, this is how you *die*."

Sam squeezed her shoulder again before dropping his arm. "It doesn't matter. It's my brother."

Well, it could be his brother. He hoped it wasn't, but that text pretty much sealed the deal that it was.

"I- that…it *should* matter!" Ava protested. She let out a frustrated noise as Sam turned back to his pants, rifling through the bag for a shirt as well. "Maybe I could help. I may just be a secretary from Peoria, but there has to be something I can do!"

Sam paused, flannel in hand, to glance at her. Not in any sort of condescension, because secretary or no, that was a hell of an offer. One he didn't think she really meant, but appreciated anyway. Sam lowered his gaze, tossing the shirt onto the bed and starting to pull his pants on over his boxers. "You've done all you can, Ava. Just…just go back to your fiancé."

The word stung his heart like a perfectly formed barb, but it seemed to do the trick. Ava's resolve faltered, her right hand coming up to her left, twisting her engagement band around and around.

"Are you sure?"

Sam straightened, buttoning his jeans and turning back to her. He scooped his long-sleeved shirt off the bed, starting to put one arm it. "Yes, I'm sure. Go home, Ava. You'll be safe there."

She glanced over her shoulder at the door, her car parked just a couple rooms down from this one. Hesitantly, she turned back to the man who towered over her as he adjusted the flannel, fixing the collar. "Well, just…promise me you'll call then. I mean, when you get your brother, just to let me know everything's alright."

That he hadn't blown up, is what she didn't put into words.

Still ringing her hands, Ava pushed past him to walk over to the nightstand between the two beds. He watched her scribble down her number on the back of the same paper Dean had left him. She ripped it off the pad and handed it to him, waving the thin sheet insistently

when he didn't take it right away.

"Alright," Sam agreed, folding it up and tucking it into his breast pocket. "I promise."

Ava Wilson stood there awkwardly for another moment before she nodded – twice – and then moved past him once more, heading for the motel door. Before she could open it, however, Sam's voice stopped her.

"Wait. Here." In a last minute decision, Sam reached across the length of the bed, digging beneath his pillow for his hunting knife. Before turning back around with it, he grabbed the sheath from inside the duffle, making sure it was fully seated and snapped shut before Ava saw it. Sam held the blade out to her, handle first. As unthreateningly as physically possible. "Take this."

Ava blinked at the offered weapon, then at the man holding it. "Did… you just pull that from under your *pillow*? Dude…who *are* you?"

"Uh…" Sam's genius mind ground to a halt, utterly blank. What could he say to that, other than 'exceptionally prepared' which any normal person would only take as 'incredibly paranoid.' "I, uh, just watch a lot of crime TV. Home invasions and…you know."

"Uh-huh." Ava took a few steps back into the room, still eyeing the ginormous hunting knife with trepidation. "And, uh, why do I need the world's biggest knife?"

"For…home invasions?" Sam tried, smile about as weak as the attempted joke. He flopped the knife back and forth as she stopped a few feet shy of taking it. "Look, remember that guy I told you about? The yellow-eyed demon?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm not gonna forget a story that crazy in…ever."

Sam resisted rolling his eyes and instead held out the knife again, pointedly. "If he comes for you, if you end up in an old Frontier town with other kids like us…just…keep this on you, alright? For protection."

"Protection, huh?" Ava took the last three steps hesitantly, but did reach out and take the weapon. It was clear by her awkward grip on both hilt and sheathed blade that she had no idea what to do with it. "I told you, the only protection I need is from my future Mother-In-Law."

And when it came to Brady's mother, there wasn't a knife on the planet big enough for that job.

The younger Winchester smiled tightly, his expression closer to a grimace than anything else. "I know. Just…promise me, alright? Keep it on you."

The woman chewed on her bottom lip. She'd never even handled a Swiss Army knife, let alone a blade *this* serious. Well…pointy end goes into the badguy, she figured with more than a little self-deprecation and sarcasm. After a moment, realizing Sam probably wouldn't let the subject go until she promised, Ava nodded. She twisted to tuck the hunting knife into her purse, still hanging off one shoulder. Getting it in there was definitely awkward, given its size relative to the size of her handbag. Which seemed hilariously – hysterically – ridiculous if you asked her. Ava nervously rubbed the palms of her hand on her thighs, her skin mysteriously clammy and really happy to be free of that blade. "You'll…um…call me, right?"

"Yeah." Sam nodded, and Ava stood there awkwardly for another moment, unsure whether or not to believe him, before she abruptly turned and headed for the motel door again and, this time, her car. Beyond that was home and a sleeping fiancé.

Once she was gone, Sam grabbed his jacket, wallet, and called for a cab on the motel landline. Dean had taken the Impala and all their weapons (again, nice timing, *Dean*), but Sam still had his gun, a backup blade he always kept in his boot, and his lock-picks. That would have to be enough.

-o-o-o-

Heaven was stupid.

Nothing there made since. Dean had been in a hallway entirely comprised of doors with 'D' names. Dean. Dean. A third Dean. Then Deandra, another Deandra, a couple more Deandras (who the hell was named Deandra, anyway, and why were there so many of them?) and then the Deidres started (Dean wasn't gonna even get into that one). Until finally, Dean had come to that left-ward hallway and decided to take it.

Now he was up to his neck in Humphreys, Hughes, and Hudsons. Why, in Hell or Heaven's name, would the H's connect with the D's? In what world did that make any sort of sense?!

A Winchester's world, Dean reasoned.

Anyway. Not his problem. His problem was Cas; he needed to find the idiot angel, but all these doors were clearly Human Paradises and not a place angels seemed to hang out.

(He'd opened one – just one – to investigate, only to bear witness something he could never un-see. Apparently, happy memories included *happy* memories. Also, Humphrey Beauregard the Fourth was very, very gay. Like, very gay. And into orgies. Which was not what Dean had expected from a man who died clear in the 1800s according to the date on his door (from what Dean was gonna guess was… Syphilis. Yeah, definitely Syphilis), along with being, as one could only assume from the interior décor and the *name*, very, very, *very, very* southern.

Gave a whole new term to the word *'buck*.'

God, he needed soap for his eyes. And his brain. And his eyes. And his, just, *everything.* So, so much soap. Soap made from pure acid would be A-Okay by him.)

(This was *Andy's* fault. He'd been the one to start this. Dean was positive the kid was somehow to blame for the *one* door he'd dared to open in Heaven leading to more friggin' gay porn.)

He needed to get the hell out of these endless hallways. Especially since there was no way he was risking opening any more doors, which left him nothing *but* hallway. Endless, endless hallway. Dean needed to find the place with the angels. Wherever that was. Of course, him walking into a room filled with nothing but angels was gonna be the equivalent of Sam walking into a stripper joint just to order a salad. In other words, yelling *"Look at me, I don't belong here*!" at the top of his lungs and hoping to get a Caesar with tasty croutons out of it.

A bridge to be crossed (or straight up lit on fire) when he got to it, Dean supposed. Which he currently hadn't, cuz he wasn't gonna find an angel in these parts.

Which was the reasoning Dean would be giving anyone who might ask him later why he screamed like a little girl – "I didn't do it!" – shoulders hunched like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, when a female voice shouted his name with sound *and* fury. Dean barely had time to spin around before he was being tackled into the wall, pinned against the glowing surface by an irate angel.

He blinked at the familiar face.

"*Rachel*?"

"I told you to wait for me!" she practically yelled, one hand shoved against his shoulder, keeping him pressed to the wall, the other firmly on his wrist, which he'd started to raise in some futile hope of self-defense. "You couldn't wait *one* hour for me to find Castiel? You reckless, self-centered, suicidal-"

"Hey, I *was* waiting!" Dean asserted loudly in self-defense, raising his other hand up, fingers spread in pure innocence. "I don't know how I ended up here! I just woke up and-" he flapped that hand, flashing his fingers open and closed like jazz hands- "here I was! I figured…why waste it?"

Rachel released the human even as he shrugged his free shoulder in sheer nonchalance. Was…was he serious? This human managed to get himself killed within ten minutes of Rachel leaving him, and he'd just…woken up in Heaven, essentially realized he was *dead,* and his first thought was to break out and find Castiel himself?

Who *was* this man? Besides that point, *how*? That wasn't even supposed to be possible!

"So…did you find him?" Dean asked.

Rachel a raw noise that the human easily interpreted as annoyance – could practically see her ruffled feathers – but she did withdraw from his personal space. She composed herself, tugging at the ends of her blazer.

"I was searching for Uriel when I heard of your death and had to go searching for *you* instead."

Dean beat back the flash of guilt at those words. This was *not* his fault, he hadn't planned to die. But, like he said, he wasn't wasting it, either.

"Uriel?"

"I was hoping he would lead me to Castiel."

"Great. That makes sense." Dean clapped his hands together. "So where is he?"

Rachel tried not to be irritated by the human but failed. Mostly, she

failed. "I got a quick sense of his location earlier. He was in the Paradises, adding credence to my suspicions that he is hiding Castiel in a set of human memories."

Dean tried not to snort. He tried. He, too, mostly failed. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, instead.

The angel eyed him for a moment, her explanation on pause, before she continued without comment. "He was in the G's. I know the approximate location. We will split up and search the rooms."

Dean winced at the idea, though not for any reason Rachel could discern or guess. But then he was nodding and looking around, so she didn't concern herself any further with it.

"Alright, let's go. Lead the way."

Rachel stared at the human, long enough for Dean to start wondering if she was gonna blink or just let her eyes get, all, like, dried out. What she was actually contemplating was whether or not to return him to his human Paradise. Taking him with her was nothing but an unnecessary risk. However…Rachel got the feeling she should not surrender him to Zachariah's men. Though she did not know why.

"You are a liability," she finally insisted, though even Dean could sense her hesitancy.

"You're wrong."

The angel blinked at the human's rapid-fire and, frankly, preposterous response. Dean stepped forward, bringing his face surprisingly close to her own. Rachel regarded the move – possibly a method of intimidation in his species? – with curiosity.

"Just point me in the right direction and I'll find Cas myself. If you're so worried about my dead weight than fine. Seeya."

Rachel's face flickered towards annoyance. She supposed the feeling of not handing him over to Zachariah was coming from the man's own blatant stubbornness. If he was this determined to locate Castiel, Rachel had a growing suspicion her friend and superior would be equally irritated to learn she left Dean Winchester behind. Knowing her commander as well as she did, Castiel would likely insist they immediately return for the wayward human. Which would prove troublesome if Zachariah located him first.

"Very well," the angel sighed. "It will be faster if we fly. I will carry you."

"Uh, yeah, no."

Dean immediately stepped back out of her space, putting himself against the wall once more since Rachel had never given him much space away from it to start with. She wondered if this action, too, was a human custom: to immediately yield intimidation upon success. It seemed…counterproductive to her.

With the wall pressed flush to his spine, Dean didn't have many other movement options – and he needed to move, apparently – than to slide awkwardly to his left a couple steps. He stepped into the hallway beside her, the angel turning to face him every inch of the way. God, she was as awkward as Cas had first been. Even more so, cuz she wasn't *Cas*.

"I'm good with walking. I've got legs, I'll use 'em. You should too, or you're gonna get flabby."

With that, he clapped his hands together and looked left and right down the hallway they were currently in. Rachel just stared at him.

"So…is it this way, or, uh, that way?"

-o-o-o-

"Angels do not get 'flabby.'"

Dean blinked at the woman walking alongside him, voice as stiff and taught as her posture. The defensive tone alone would have had Dean choking back a laugh if they weren't in a somewhat time-sensitive and kinda dire situation. Still, he had to bite back the snort that was desperate to slip free.

"You might not, but your vessel will."

Rachel gave him a sidelong glance, head tilting ever so slightly in a way that was just reminiscent enough of Cas to make Dean's chest ache. What was it with all the angels on his side pulling that move? Was it just the equivalent of 'I'm-actually-innocent-and-well-intentioned-unlike-the-majority-of-my-dick-family' in angelic body language? Or was it a thing that Cas had, like, *taught* his people?

"I am not currently in possession of a vessel."

Dean sorta tripped over his own feet and blamed a crack in the absolutely crack-less tiles they were walking across. He straightened back up and stared at the angel with incredulous eyes as they kept up the quick pace. "You mean you actually look like a middle-aged Martha with three kids and a minivan?"

The look Rachel gave him was something between *'I have no idea what you just said'* and *'I am perfectly aware you just insulted me, you little ingrate'*, but what came out of her mouth, with a curious lilt and none of the sarcasm, was, "What do I look like to you?"

The human had to cycle through several inappropriate or not-as-funny-as-they-would-be-if-said-to-just-about-anyone-else responses and settled instead with the truth. "A middle aged woman named Martha with three kids and a minivan."

That look definitely shifted more towards the *'You're insulting me and I'm going to kill you* slowly*, ingrate*' end of the scale. Dean shrugged, only a little apologetically.

"You look like a normal lady. Caucasian, about five seven, maybe, without the heels? You've got brown hair, green eyes." The hunter fidgeted as they kept up the quick walk, feeling more than a little odd describing to an angel what she looked like.

"The vessel I possessed when I spoke to you on Earth," Rachel confirmed, nodding.

Dean glared at her. "That's what I said."

The angel regarded him again, sidelong, before nodding once more – just a single, sharp bob of her head up and down – this time in concession. Dean wanted to roll his eyes, realizing that because he had not, *literally*, said those words in that order to her, she hadn't connected the dots. God, *angels*, man.

"As *I* said, I am not currently possessing Sonya Salomaa." The angel took a sharp right, practically cutting into Dean, who was on her right and ended up muttering under his breath to give a guy some warning next time. He opened his mouth to ask why she looked like her vessel then, but Rachel cut him off. "I can only assume you are viewing Heaven through the limits of your previous body."

The hunter stared at her. "Huh?"

"It is your human perception. You are incapable of translating what

you are seeing into anything that makes sense to a soul used to viewing its surroundings through human eyes." When he just continued to stare, she sighed. "Basically, your current existence has only ever experienced the world through light waves translated into readable data by your severely limited human brain-"

"Hey, watch it, lady."

"-and your soul, which can see much more than your human eyes ever could, doesn't know any other way to tell you what you're seeing." Rachel concluded her (frankly insulting) explanation with a firm nod, like she'd solved cold fusion.

Dean was caught between glaring and admitting that that sort of made sense.

"So…what am I actually seeing?" He both did and did not want to know. Of course, curiosity won out as he looked around the endless hallways of white, white, and more white. And then Rachel. What did an angel's true form really look like? Dean had always sort of pictured Cas as a big, flowy, rainbow ghost the size of the Chrysler building.

Like those underwater aliens in *The Abyss*. Shiny, elegant, even goddamn pretty. And also utterly capable of eradicating life as they knew it, should they feel like it. Yup, definitely Cas in a nutshell, that one.

"If you were to embrace that you were nothing more than energy now? No body, no physicality, no eyes to see or brain to process?" Rachel gave him that sidelong look again and this time Dean did scoff at the judgement there. She didn't think he could do it. Well. He'd show her. Uh…if he felt like it. Later. The angel returned her gaze to the hallways, gesturing that they were taking the next left before she took it, this time. "You would see Heaven as it truly is. I have two faces, five limbs, and thirty-two eyes."

Dean didn't make the turn, stuttering to a dead halt and staring after the angel.

Rachel stopped when she realized her charge had and turned to look at him, blinking serenely. Like she was doing it all on purpose. "Oh, and a single pair of wings."

"What, some angels have more than just one?" Dean joked weakly, voice kinda cracking at the mental image her words had conjured.

She tilted her head to the side again and Dean resisted the urge to rub at a chest he apparently didn't actually have right now. Friggin' angels. "Of course. The Archangels have three."

"Three *wings?*" Dean pulled his head back, frown on full and eyes all squinty. Now she was definitely pulling his leg. He hadn't thought Rachel was capable of humor, to be honest. "How does that even physically make sense?"

"Three pairs," the angel corrected, that look sliding from judgmental to impatient. She gestured for the hallway. "We need to keep moving. Especially if you insist on *walking* there."

Dean started moving again, passing Rachel as quickly as he could and still reasonably call it a walk and not a run. He refused to look at her, to picture what she actually looked like past his human perception, despite the several times his eyes and brain tried it. And he definitely, *definitely,* absolutely wasn't thinking about what Castiel must really look like.

Nope. Nope, nope, nope. He was good with the human woman and trench-coat wearing man, thank you very much.

Walking alongside him once more, the corner of Rachel's lips twitched. Dean didn't know if he'd said it aloud or, because he apparently didn't have a mouth and was just a ball of cosmic energy, it even mattered. Either way, she'd clearly heard him, because she shrugged one shoulder in as close to amusement as he'd seen her yet.

"Like I said. Limited.'"

-o-o-o-

When he woke, Castiel was very surprised to do so. He had not expected to ever wake again. Or to be alive at all.

He was bound – coils of Uriel's grace pinning his wings to his main mass with his limbs all tangled together – and in a different Paradise then before. He seemed to be further into the memory, as well. His view of the doorway out to Heaven was obscured from his current position on the ground, behind a piece of furniture. The memory of humans and the one this Paradise belonged to moved about him, heedless of his presence.

Taking stock of his condition, Castiel realized with a pang of dismay that he was worse off than before he'd been forced into the second

healing trance. He did not know if that was because very little time had passed – he had no way of judging how long he had laid unconscious – or because the healing trance itself had been damaging. Castiel had never before heard of a trance being used as an attack. He was uncertain of the ramifications of a non-consensual healing.

He also did not understand the point of his brother attacking him in such a way. Why had Uriel left him alive? Why attempt to further heal him? Perhaps his brother did not want to kill him where it would be so obvious or so quickly discovered. Perhaps Uriel and Malachi had plans to take Castiel down to earth and kill him there, and stashing him away in a Paradise under a healing trance was merely a holding pattern until they could accomplish this.

Due to the coils of his brother's grace firmly wrapped around him, binding his grace as surely as they bound his physical form, Castiel could do nothing but wait to find out.

He felt so very foolish. Miserably so. Dean had warned him about this very thing happening, and yet Castiel still trusted the wrong angel. They were his family. His brothers. Though it pained him now to see the truth behind that familial term Uriel used in their last conversation, the larger angel had not been wrong. They had once been brothers in arms. Castiel had fought alongside Uriel more times than he could count. Perhaps more times than he wanted to count. While the two of them had their differences when it came to the manner in which they performed their duties, how they interpreted their father's words and superiors' orders, the two angels fought well together. They worked well together.

Did they not?

Were all the memories Castiel had of working beside his brother false? Implanted in his mind to cover countless times just like this, when he had discovered Uriel's true nature and rebelled against it? After all, Castiel's memories of their mission in Egypt, in Sodom and Gomorrah, were incorrect and he and Uriel had worked together then. Was it possible all his memories of his brother were false? Could Uriel have been a traitor all along, and Castiel was the one who caught him, countless times? But then, why was it Castiel who was punished? Castiel whose memories were removed and replaced to be something they were not?

The angel's injured, pale grace lost what color it had left, leaving him a quivering puddle of liquid light. Ugly grey and dull, pooling on the

carpet of a dead human's precious memories.

How could Uriel be in the right and Castiel the one disciplined?

Overwhelming emotion collected in Castiel's chest, pushing at his insides, expanding his damaged grace, making him feel like the skin he didn't have was too tight. The swirls of his grace began to churn and toss together. He felt vaguely nauseous. Castiel was not used to such devastating sensation; he did not know what to do with it. Panic was not an acute experience for him, not really, but this was reminding him of the last time he had been in Heaven. The last time he had started to feel as though the walls were closing in. The last time he had felt like something was *wrong* with him.

How could Uriel be right and Castiel the one built wrong?

"He's not right," the smaller angel spoke aloud. The sound of his own voice was bolstering in the quiet, and so Castiel said it again, "Uriel isn't right."

Even if it turned out that Castiel *was* wrong – that this was not the path God wanted him on, that he was disobeying – that did not make Uriel right. Castiel may not know what his path was supposed to be. He may be 'winging it' as Dean and Angela would say. But he knew that raising Lucifer was not right. Uriel was not right.

Strengthened by the revelation, Castiel's determination to escape his brother's confines increased tenfold. Unfortunately, there was still very little he could do while bound, and he had yet to conceive an escape from his fetters. It was possible to find the door back to Heaven while restrained, using what he could physically see, rather than sense it with his grace, but it would take time. Worse yet, he was in no condition to be walking about Heaven. Even if he did manage to escape either the bindings around his wings or around his legs long enough to actually fly or walk the hallways, his grace was still quite damaged, and Castiel feared he would not make it far. Especially when he no longer trusted himself to recognize friend from foe.

Still. Those were not reason enough not to try. If he could find the door, perhaps he could find a brother not aligned with Uriel or Zachariah who would be willing to assist him. He had to try. For Dean.

Castiel attempted to get himself upright. It was difficult, between his injured grace, weakened state, and bound position. But he had to try. He needed to get back to Dean, to apologize for making him worry,

for not listening, not heeding his warning. And to warn him about the extent of corruption in Heaven, something Castiel feared even Dean might not realize the true depths of.

Castiel had to escape. For Dean and Sam, for the coming Apocalypse, and the world.

The angel had not yet leveraged himself into a seated position, trying to brace his mass against the back of the upholstered furniture, when the sound around him shifted tellingly. The noises of the memory – of the life in a living room held precious to one human soul – became dull and muted and the sounds of Heaven became loud and encompassing.

Someone had opened the door to this Paradise. Uriel had returned.

Castiel froze, back pressed to the couch at an awkward, half-slumped angle. He raised his bound limbs above his head, prepared to attack. Footsteps landed, soft and mostly silent, along the carpet. The angel could feel them almost more than he could hear them. They moved slowly, cautiously around the far edge.

Uriel must know he was awake. He must have sensed his return to consciousness, monitoring him still. The thought, which Castiel had once found comforting, now sent shivers through his grace.

Something metallic was moved, a light screeching as something hollow but made of metal moved across the floor. Castiel tilted his head to listen, but he could not make out what part of the human memory had been adjusted. Then the footsteps resumed, more readily this time.

The sounds of Heaven beyond remained strong and Castiel blinked in surprise. His brother had left the door open. The angel took the equivalent of a human breath, first in realization and welcome relief. Then deep and calming, forcing the churning of his grace to settle. Uriel had left the door propped open for some reason. Which meant Castiel had one chance to overtake the other angel and make it to the door. He could lock Uriel inside the memory and find help.

One chance, and it was a slim one.

A shadow moved along the side of the carpet to his left and Castiel readied himself. He gathered his legs beneath him, prepared to launch himself at his brother as soon as Uriel rounded the edge of the couch.

-o-o-o-

The cab idled about a quarter mile from the listed address, which happened to be in the middle of nowhere. The driver glanced around, then at the meter, and then his fare in the backseat.

"You sure this is where you wanna get out?"

Sam dug through his wallet for a couple bills, reaching over the front seat to hand them to the guy. "Yeah, this is good. Thanks."

He climbed out of the taxi, shutting the door and watching the driver hesitate, then shift into reverse and start backing down the single-lane paved road they'd found themselves on for the last thirteen minutes of the drive.

Middle of nowhere. Perfect for a trap, especially one involving a grenade.

Sam took a deep breath, pulling out the note from his brother and checking the back, where he'd scribbled down the address beneath Ava's phone number. *5637 Monroe Street*. He stared at it for a moment, wondering if this was just what she had seen him do in her vision, before Sam pulled out his phone and hit the first speed dial. Dean didn't answer, the call ringing until it went to voicemail, and Sam hung up.

The hunter started down the dirt road, towards an abandoned house that was supposedly up ahead and on the right. A house that better have his brother – *alive* – inside.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Way nicer cliffhanger this time, no? Like…two baby cliffhangers. Itty-Bitty-Cliffies! I don't think I will ever top the killing-Dean-via-Sniper-Gordon cliffhanger again. All other cliffhangers shall look so small and gentle in comparison from here on out XD

(Actually…there is one more planned waaaaay down the line that might just top it, but we've got a long way to go for that one ;D)

Fun Fact #576: Dean definitely tried to picture Rachel's thirty-two eyes as being entirely contained on her two faces when, in fact, her eyes are all over her body and wings. XD Poor Dean. Thirty-two eyes on just two faces *would* be a creepy sight.

Spider angels. On eye steroids.

Fun Fact #577: Although I have seen several artistic renditions of angels with eyes all over their body before, it was a Supernatural Fanfic (of which I have not been able to find again, unfortunately) that really got me to embrace it here. In that one Cas had multiple eyes, many on his wings, and the author put in one line, one incredible line, about how Dean always got annoyed when Cas wasn't looking at him when he talked, but what the human didn't understand was that Cas was *always* looking at him, just not always with the two eyes Dean could see. I *looooooooved* that line and appreciated how the author fully embraced angels as being 'other.' So that was the inspiration for all the angel eyes in TRSF :) If I ever find that story again, I'll add it as a note.

Up Next: Dean is not happy to be stuck opening more Paradise doors ('Please don't be more gay porn, please don't be more gay porn'), Castiel is fighting for his life, tackling that douchebag Uriel straight outta Paradise and back into Heaven, and getting rescued by his own charge (not necessarily in that order), while Gordon's setting up shop (and by that, I mean grenades. He's setting up grenades).

Chapter 93: Season 2: Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Sorry for the delay from my usual Sunday posting time. Truth is, I've been off work for a while to recover from burnout/ stress/depression, and I go back for the first time tomorrow. I thought I was doing okay until I woke up as a giant, seething, writhing ball of anxiety and anger, stomach somewhere in my lungs, lungs competing in a speed race with my heart. Fun times! I probably should have realized something was gonna happen when I didn't get this chapter edited at all this weekend or doany of the stuff I have to do before returning to work tomorrow.

Reviews: Uh, on that note, if you all could be extra kind and giving today (if you're able to spare it) I would really appreciate it. I haven't gotten back to any of you yet, but I'll pencil in another chapter on the to-do list, and I *will* get to it. Lately every time I open up my laptop to reply to reviews, the Muse is like, 'Free time? Let's WRITE.' Not the end of the world, certainly, but it does mean I'm very behind on answering any of you (but well ahead of my chapter stockpile, which is GREAT considering a return to work is gonna seriously limit my free time)

P.S. On the subject of reviews, we're only 25 reviews away from out back-to-back chapter reward over on ff dot net. So if you all want to overwhelm me with reviews, you'll get something out of it, too! :D

Poking: Thanks for those that nudged me today. Always feel free to do it, guys, I never mind. On occasion it's a memory lapse (like over Christmas), but more often than not a missed or late update usually means something's up in my world, and I will never take you guys reaching out as a negative thing (unless you're just being rude or demanding about not getting an update :P But none of you have been that way at all) I love that you like this story enough to actually seek it out (it really improves my headspace and always will) and those of you that reach out to make sure I'm okay are incredibly appreciated.

Alright, enough A/Ns, let get this story rolling!

Chapter Warnings: Gordon's prepping preparations, Dean's opening doors, and Cas is very much surprised about many

things. Oh, and Uriel's a pussy ;)

Actual Chapter Warnings: Cas and Dean have a heart-to-heart guilt fest that is totally ruined when Cas asks how just how exactly Dean got to Heaven.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 60

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Gordon crossed the length of the back door incredibly carefully, stretching the second trip wire tight across the entryway, only an inch and a half above the old, rotting floorboards. He twisted in his crouched position, very slowly securing the end of the wire to the second grenade he'd positioned about six feet further into the room than the first.

Sam was a good enough hunter to spot the first trip wire, Gordon figured. He wasn't one to underestimate his enemy, after all. Also, if that demon had been telling the truth, than the kid might be as psychic as his brother, and Gordon needed to prepare for that possibility.

But no one ever expected the second, and that's how he'd get him.

The hunter withdrew from the setup slowly, double checking the concealment and security of his trap from a safe position several feet away. Satisfied, Gordon returned to the main room of the house, what had probably once been a living room. He picked up his rifle from a dangerously leaning dining room table, the thing rocking with the weight change. Grabbing the most stable chair he'd managed to find in the house, Gordon dragged it over to the wall beside the kitchen entrance. That wall, dilapidated as it was, would serve as both cover from Sam Winchester when he entered through the back door and protection from the grenade, should any debris make it so far. Gordon settled into the rickety thing, a Winchester M70 rifle in lap (a fitting – almost poetic – choice of guns to take out the last of the Winchester hunting line, Gordon figured), and started idly cleaning it with a cloth.

He checked the time on Dean's phone, still covered in the Winchester's dried blood. Sam had shot a quick *'On my way.'* back about thirty minutes ago now. Which meant he'd be scoping the building any time now. He'd spot Gordon waiting with his rifle, eyes on the front door, and decide to try his luck with the back entrance.

All Gordon Walker had to do was wait.

-o-o-o-

"This is the approximate location of where I last sensed Uriel," Rachel announced when they were about a quarter of the way down their most recent hallway. The G's, apparently.

Dean couldn't believe people – modern people, given the dates on the doors – were still naming their kids *Garfield*. You'da thought that shit would have stopped after the fat cat cartoon. Definitely after the Bill Murry movie.

"It is likely Castiel is hidden in one of these Paradises. We will split up to search and meet in the middle."

Rachel took wing before the hunter got any say in the matter. She vanished in the blink of an eye according to Dean's *'limited'* human perception, reappearing about fifty doors down. Within seconds, she disappeared again, this time into one of the paradises. Dean gave an irritated grunt – *angels* – and turned towards the first door on his left, mumbling about flabbiness. He reached out, fingers curling hesitantly around the silver knob.

"Don't be gay porn, don't be gay porn," Dean muttered under his breath, mental fingers crossed as well before he twisted the knob and pushed the door in.

Well, there weren't moans, panting, or anything *wet* sounding in the room, so that was a good first step. Hesitantly, the hunter stuck his head in just past the door edge, glancing around at the Paradise. It was nice, actually. A warm and inviting and totally, utterly *normal* living room free of orgies of any sort. A family was seated the dining room table in the next room for what looked like Thanksgiving dinner. No, Christmas; there was a tree in the corner across from the door Dean was hiding behind. Much better than Humphrey's happiest (read: humpiest) memory, that's for sure.

But empty of an angel. Dean scanned the room: the neatly organized coffee table with a set of treys and a decorative box on the bottom

shelf, the L-shaped couch with perfectly positioned pillows and a throw tossed over the back, the bookshelves that lined the wall with a half desk in between, the tree with unwrapped presents tucked beneath in neat piles, one for each member of that family currently sitting at the dining table.

No angel, no signs of a struggle, nothing suspicious in the slightest,

Dean hesitated, hand still wrapped around the knob, body partially hidden behind the safety of the door. He didn't know why, but he had the distinct urge to search the room. Almost like the room was drawing him in, though the hunter was pretty sure that was just his conscience trying to get him out of searching more (potentially mentally traumatizing) rooms. That, or maybe human memories were designed to pull you in or something.

(Nope, no, nope, not that. That definitely wasn't a thing. Dean hadn't felt anything resembling pulling on that last door he'd opened. Abso-fucking-lutely not. He'd gone sprinting as far from that room as physically possible as quickly as possible. There was no *pull*.)

But maybe Uriel had hid Cas's body or something. *Alive*, Dean added hastily. Definitely alive, just hidden. In case someone came looking for the angel. It was worth checking, right?

Feeling like an intruder (which was total bullshit because how many houses and lives had he broken into with complete confidence (and the person who owned this one was *dead*)), the hunter slipped into the room quietly. He was careful not to shut the door, worried he might not find it again (it sounded like a silly thing, but Dean knew these memories didn't always function like you expected them to. Sometimes you closed a door only to re-open it to a completely different room. He didn't have time for some *Labyrinth* level crap right now). So he grabbed an umbrella stand – the closest thing to him – and shoved it between the door and the frame with his foot. Then he started poking around carefully, just to make sure there wasn't an angel hiding behind a piece of furniture or locked in a back room.

If Dean was trying to hide Cas from everyone else, he wouldn't just leave her tied up on the couch to be found by the first person to open a door.

(Him tied up? Damnit, he'd just gotten a handle on the friggin' pronouns and Rachel had to go and fuck that up for him too.)

Of course, Dean wasn't Uriel (translation: he wasn't a dick), so he

didn't expect to actually find anything when he rounded the edge of the couch. He definitely didn't expect to have his legs taken out from under him by a blur of tan and black flying out from behind the piece of furniture. It collided into his lower half with the force of a damn bulldozer.

Dean went down *hard* and that ball of tan went with him.

Hunter instinct and years of fighting for his life kicked in immediately. Dean rolled his assailant until he'd pinned the guy beneath him. He didn't have a weapon up here in Heaven, but Dean had been a hunter a long time, now; his body could be the weapon, need be. He pressed his forearm down onto the throat of his attacker, his other hand fisting in black hair. Messy, black hair and blue…. Blue eyes. The bluest blue that stared up at him with such shock, so wide and almost innocent but never quite innocent enough, that Dean froze, just staring into them. He knew those eyes. Knew that blue that he still dreamed about some nights. Those were Jimmy Novak's eyes, set into Jimmy Novak's face, on a Jimmy Novak body, complete with blue tie, black suit, and tan trench coat. Just like Jimmy Novak.

The man from the future could only stare, shocked brainless, at the face of his best friend still pinned beneath him.

"D'n!"

His bound, gagged best friend, who he was currently straddling, hair fisted in his hand, and arm pressing down dangerously hard on his neck.

"Holy shit. Cas!" Dean pulled back as the world suddenly sped up, his brain kicked into overdrive to make up for its pathetic delay, and the world decided to make sense again. He scrambled off the angel, who was restrained at the wrists, torso, legs, and ankles, all wrapped in at least five coils of glowing rope. There was a fold of fabric secure around his mouth and neck, effectively muting him.

Dean hesitated for a second, hands hovering over his friend's body, searching for injuries he didn't even know if he'd be able to see here.

Damn Rachel for getting into his head with that shit.

Oh, right. Rachel.

"Rachel!" Dean hollered, stretching his neck to get his head above the side-sectional, which Cas had tackled them behind. "He's in here!"

The hunter started tugging at the glowing ropes around Cas's wrists, not waiting for the other angel. He didn't even know if Rachel would hear him from a good fifty feet down the hall. She probably wouldn't if she was in one of the Paradises. But he didn't have time to worry about that now.

"Rayful?"

Dean cursed, realizing the ropes around Cas might be a priority, but the gag was limiting. He reached for what looked like normal fabric and frowned when he couldn't find a knot anywhere. Dean started with the back of Cas's head, becoming increasingly confused as he moved his hand along the cloth and couldn't find any sort of tie or bind of any kind.

What the hell?

"Full!" Cas tried to say, but it was utterly muffled by the fabric. He tossed his head, pulling out of Dean's hands. When the hunter tried to grab the fabric again, Cas tossed his head once more, and Dean frowned. "Full!"

"Damnit, Cas, I can't understand you. That's why I'm trying to take the damn thing off in the first place," Dean growled, latching onto the gag once more. This time, Cas pulled his head back quickly and Dean froze as the fabric *stretched*. Like it was putty.

"What…the…"

Dean didn't waste time asking any more questions. *Pull*. Cas was telling him to *pull*. Blue eyes met his and the hunter nodded. He grabbed either side of the gag and stretched the thing – which had definitely been tight across Cas's lips – up and over the angel's head.

Cas coughed as it came free, licking his lips and taking deep breaths through his mouth. Dean looked at the fabric in his hands, which had somehow defied physics seconds ago but was now back to being just fabric. When the whole thing started to shimmer very suspiciously, Dean dropped it like a hot potato. It dissolved into nothing more than light, which fizzled down and out against the carpeted ground, like friggin' fairy dust.

"Okay, *what* the hell!"

"Grace," Cas supplied, trying to sit up and failing given how constrictive the bindings here. He was tied up like rope had been on

sale. "Uriel bound me with his grace. Whatever you are seeing it as, it isn't."

"Yeah. Rachel warned me about that," Dean muttered, rubbing his hands on his jeans like he could wipe off the reminder of touching Uriel's grace. The dude definitely seemed like the type you could catch something from.

"Rachel," Cas repeated again. Now that he could speak, the confusion and incredulity were clear. They were pretty damn clear in those big, blue eyes, too, but Dean didn't have time to be making eye contact. He was busy trying to find a knot in a knotless coil of rope around the angel's wrists.

"Yeah, Rachel. I had to call one of your buddies to come get you. Rachel's the one that answered." Dean's tone was chiding and Cas was momentarily distracted from the fact that Dean was here, in *Heaven* – that Rachel had gone to Earth, collected Dean, and brought him *here* – by the fact that Dean was chastising him for being unreachable.

Which, given the panic that had been in the back-to-back prayers the man had sent him endlessly for many days, at least, Castiel couldn't really find fault in that.

"I'm sorry," were the first words out of his mouth, rather than the far more pressing matters they really should be discussing.

Dean's fingers faltered on the rope, stilling as he stared at his friend's bound hands. He finally looked up, green meeting blue, and swallowed roughly. All that fear he'd been feeling, all that panic he'd been desperately pushing to the side this past week and a half, came gurgling up. He'd been *right* to be afraid. Cas had been in danger, he was friggin' tied up and hidden away for god-knows-what Uriel had planned.

But right now he was alive. Okay. And right there, in front of Dean and going home with him.

The hunter wrapped his arms around Cas before he had time to talk himself out of it, pulling the angel into a crushing hug.

"What did I tell you about talking to strange angels, man?" he muttered into his friend's neck, a fresh wave of emotion over-coming him at the familiar – and missed – texture of Jimmy Novak's trench coat.

Castiel, who seemed to miss the bitterly sarcastic edge to what was supposed to be a joke but had missed by about a mile, lowered his forehead against Dean's shoulder, unable to reciprocate in any other form while bound. "Uriel's betrayal was…unexpected."

The guy's tone was crushing and Dean closed his eyes, beating back that second round of emotion. He remembered the way Cas had looked at him lying in that hospital, while he was wired up to more tubes and drugs than he'd ever been before. That angel had been stunned, having to acknowledge his brother's betrayal. Stunned and hurting.

Which sounded right about on track with the angel in his arms now.

"I'm sorry, too, Cas," Dean tightened his hold for a second, taking a deep breath before he pulled away from the angel. Lucky for him, this Cas didn't know the appropriate length of man hugs, so he wouldn't have anything to say about this one going on for far too long. And no one else was around to see it, so as far as Dean was concerned, they could all just fuck off.

Deep blue eyes were still locked on him, leaning back against the couch since Cas couldn't keep himself upright without Dean's assistance. There was a serious uncertainty in those eyes telling the hunter he didn't understand why Dean was the one apologizing.

"I should have warned you," he clarified, throat all sorts of clogged with self-loathing and frustration. "I should have told you about Uriel, remembered that he was a threat. I should have given you a list of angels you can't trust."

"Would Malachi have been on that list?" Cas's bitter growl was low, his gaze ducking away in frustration of his own. The angel had had plenty of time, tied up and expecting death, to be disgusted by his own poor judgement.

"The anarchist guy?" Dean countered with a raised brow and clear skepticism in his voice, which immediately drew the angel's attention back. Cas honestly hadn't expected him to know Malachi's name. "*Yeah,* Cas, he was on the list. What, the *anarchist* part didn't give it away?"

Cas looked away, this time in definite shame and self-loathing. As Dean went back to pulling at the rope around his wrists, the angel muttered, both defensively and bitterly, "Uriel trusted him."

Resisting the urge to sigh, Dean closed his eyes for a moment and reminded himself that this wasn't the Cas he knew. This wasn't *his* Cas, even if he (she?) looked like him. Not yet, anyway. This place was still this Cas's home. Those angels were his family and he wanted to believe in them. Knowing everything Dean and Sam had conquered *because* they were family, the hunter couldn't really be angry at his friend. Angry this had happened, sure, but not because Cas wanted to believe in his brothers.

"I should have given you names," Dean muttered again, countering Cas's guilt with guilt of his own. Well, anger, in this case, but it was backed by guilt and they both knew it.

"It likely wouldn't have mattered." The angel's voice sounded resigned. Dean found his gaze darting up again, but Cas was still staring at his bound wrists. "Given your lack of surprise at Uriel's betrayal…. Time is asserting itself to make sure the same things happen that should happen. It is likely that even if you had warned me, a confrontation with Uriel was inevitable."

Dean made an annoyed noise in the back of his throat (a growl, it was called a growl, only Dean didn't want to admit he was growling at the angel he was currently rescuing. Well. Trying to rescue). The weird rope wrapped around the angel was *not* stretching and pulling like the gag no matter how much the hunter tugged. He shook Cas's wrists with it until the angel met his eyes. "Hey, don't start talking about inevitably and destiny or any of that shit, alright? Cuz I don't believe in that crap and neither should you."

His angel just stared at him and Dean smirked.

"We're re-writing the book, remember?" Then he went back to pulling at the damn glowing rope. There was just *no* give on these. Didn't Cas say they were made of the same stuff, damnit? "How the hell do I get these off you, Cas?"

"They are made of grace," the angel repeated (what Dean already knew, the hunter muttered unhelpfully). This time though his tone sounded a lot more matter-of-fact about it and Dean got a bad feeling. "Only another angel can undo it."

"Bullshit. I got the gag off, didn't I?"

Cas huffed and Dean was happy to hear a little bit more of that holier-than-thou angel he knew and loved. He didn't like seeing the more subdued version of his friend, talking about events they couldn't

escape no matter what they did. It rang with the bitter taste of a deadbeat dad and an entire liquor store consumed in one go.

"That is not the same thing," Cas argued, still huffy. All the better for it, Dean thought. "The gag was…the equivalent of a balled up cloth shoved in my mouth. All you had to do was pull it out."

Dean glared pretty damn deadpanned at his unhelpful (and ungrateful) angel. He held up Cas's wrists by a single finger hooked under the rope binding them together. "So how do I pull this one out?"

Blue eyes glared right back at him for being purposefully difficult. Which, hey, Dean didn't think was fair. He was not the one being difficult, here. "You can't. Grace is…*intent*, Dean. It is not untied, it is…'canceled out' with a different intention. Only another angel can do that."

"Yeah, well, we'll just see about that," Dean bit out between clenched teeth. He decided if he couldn't slide the rope over Cas's hands like he'd been trying, maybe he could break it. It wasn't really rope after all, right? The human wrapped his hands around two sections and started to pull in opposite directions.

"Dean, stop, it is physically imposs-"

The rope snapped in half almost immediately, enough so that Dean ended up on his ass from a serious misjudgment of force and balance. Cas's wrists came apart as the rope dissolved into lights and fairy dust once more.

Dean sat back up in a flurry, eyes wide and jaw hanging open. It morphed into a grin in no time, and he scrambled back to his knees, shoving a finger at Cas, who was staring wide-eyed at his wrists. "Ha!"

The last of Uriel's grace dissolved, leaving the angel sitting, stunned, in four more coils of the glowing restraints. But his arms were free, which *shouldn't* be possible. Blue eyes focused past his freed limbs to lock on his human charge and, apparently, his rescuer. "How?"

"Uriel's a pussy."

Castiel did not know what a pussy was, but given Dean's wide grin and the context, he was fairly confident the human was calling his brother weak. "I assure you he is not."

Uriel was one of the strongest angels in Castiel's Flight. The only

reason he could best the larger angel in a fight was due purely to Castiel's speed and skill with a blade.

"What does it matter?" Dean shrugged, already reaching out for the next set of bindings. But Castiel stopped him. His now-freed limb shot out to spread, palm outward and flat, across Dean's chest. The hunter froze, breath catching, as he waited (prayed) for that flare of something inside him to respond. He waited for the usual front flips and back flips and that warmth he'd desperately been missing for a week and a half now.

Nothing happened.

Dean clenched his fists to hide the fact that his whole damn arms trembled with loss. Cas didn't seem to notice. The angel, bound as he was, could not currently access his grace, which meant he could not sense Dean as he usually would. He could only go off of what he could see in the human soul before him.

"Perhaps…" The angel shook his head, withdrawing his hand. Dean tried and failed not to expect the flagging complaint from his chest on the withdrawal. He was severely disappointed when he didn't get it, and brutally shoved that feeling down as damn deep as it could go. "Perhaps the sliver of grace is enough to break Uriel's binds. But I am very surprised."

And concerned. It was bad enough that a fraction of his grace had entangled with Dean's soul enough to live symbiotically in his human body. But Dean did not *have* a body right now, yet there was Castiel's grace, still curled within the Hell-Scar that marred Dean's soul. The edges of that sliver blended in with the brilliance of the soul enough so that Castiel had to *look* just to see it at all.

The attachment his future self's grace seemed to have taken with the Righteous Man's soul was…disconcerting. For both for them.

It did explain, at least in one possibility, how Dean was able to break Uriel's bindings. With the presence of grace within Dean's soul, the human might register as another angel, at least to Uriel's detached grace. An angel's grace was not sentient in such a way that it would be able to determine Dean as an imposter when confronted with enough of Castiel's essence entangled within him. It would also explain Dean's presence in a human Paradise that was not his own or his soulmate's (Sam, in this case.)

Disconcerting indeed, Castiel thought.

Dean seemed to agree. When Cas returned his focus to his rescuer, he realized the hunter was staring at him with more intensity than he'd displayed so far. His hand had closed the distance between them, grabbing at Castiel's freed limb with a desperately tight grip. Cas frowned at the distressed human. Perhaps he was finally realizing the dangers that sliver of grace presented.

"You mean…" Dean couldn't breathe right. He shouldn't even have to breathe here, but he definitely didn't seem to be doing it right. "He's still in there? Chest Cas is still alive?"

Castiel's look immediately shifted into something like confusion and uncertainty. Like he wasn't sure which to address first: the question or the name given to his slivered counterpart. "Yes. Nothing can kill an angel but another angel. What would make you think he was gone?"

The hunter practically deflated. In surprise, elation, joy, relief, and straight up annoyance because, "Are you kidding me?" Cas blinked at the exclamation, and Dean gestured wildly to himself. "You friggin' drained me like a battery, Cas! I got a black hole sitting behind my sternum! Of course I thought you'd absorbed him all or…something."

The angel, realizing his misstep that had led Dean to believe his… friend was gone (even if that friend posed serious risks to the human's soul and *humanity*), attempted to be more sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Dean. It is true that I took as much as I could; it was paramount to do so to defeat Azazel at the time. I know it was of great discomfort to you, but I did not realize you would think I had…taken my counterpart….um, chest…Cas from you."

"Dude, stop talking."

Cas followed the request, which was good because Dean couldn't take much more embarrassing chatter and heartfelt apologies.
From *either* party, since he was pretty much just as guilty. The feels in this place must be contagious (it was Heaven, he supposed). Dean dropped his eyes and hands back to the next set of ropes. They came apart as easily as he had the first ones.

"I'm not mad. I'm glad he's still in there." Thrilled, even, not that he'd ever admit it, because *feels*. Dean hesitated, manly inner manliness telling him to *shut up* and mouth trucking right on ahead. "And that you're okay, too."

Contagious and *unstoppable* apparently. Good grief. It was like forced confessions of a dead, time traveling hunter up in here.

Cas watched him as he pulled apart the next set of restraints like the angel knew there was something else Dean wasn't saying. The hunter didn't know if it was about the hole in his chest or the fact he was relieved to still have an angel soul all up in his. So Dean didn't ask and, thank fuck, Cas didn't push.

"I am more concerned how a sliver of grace that never should have been there in the first place is apparently so wrapped up in your soul it accompanied you to Heaven." The wide eyes, blank face of a Cas who hadn't figured out facial expression yet was almost comically. Dean snorted but opted not to comment. Would probably just get himself in trouble.

Cas allowed Dean to pull him upright. With just his thighs, knees, and ankles still wrapped up, the angel was able to hold himself in a sitting position without assistance while Dean finished undoing the last of the restraints. In the meanwhile, the hunter was trying his damnedest to ignore the current topic of conversation.

"Dean, the amount of influence it seems to have over your spiritual manifestation is dangerous. It's possible-"

"Hey, it's saving your skin right now, so just drop it," Dean growled defensively. Whelp, so much for ignoring the topic. Yeah, Dean had never been so great at keeping quiet or knowing when to shut up. He ripped apart the glowing grace rope from around Cas's thighs with a bit more viciousness than strictly needed, even for a douchenozzel like Uriel.

"I don't have skin," was the angel's response in exchange for 'dropping' it.

Dean froze, hands going for the rope around Cas's knees. Nope. Nope, nope, nope, he still wasn't going there. Still didn't want to know. Still just thinking about Cas looking like a human woman. Er, man. Whatever.

Luckily, Cas was not paying close enough attention to notice Dean's pause. "How did you get here, Dean? You appear to be just a human soul, but with my grace bound, I can't properly see you. Where is your body, and why would Rachel bring you here? That was an incredibly reckless decision."

"Wasn't Rachel's call." Dean unwound the fizzling light rope from Cas's knees, perfectly avoiding the angel's gaze with the task he didn't actually need to do considering the rope would dissolve itself

completely. But if he was busy, maybe Cas would ignore what he was about to say. "I went and got myself killed."

He felt more than saw Cas go rigidly still. So much for that hope and dream.

"You…what?"

Dean shrugged, still refusing to look up even though he wasn't moving on to the other rope yet, either. It didn't help that Cas had drawn his legs into his chest in a defensive attempt to force this human to have this conversation. "Woke up here, figured I'd come looking for you. It's no big deal."

"You…" Castiel was starting to understand how Dean got angry when he was concerned. Cas was feeling *very* angry himself right now at the human's stupidity and, worse, indifference to said stupidity. "Are you *insane*?"

Green eyes snapped up to his with those words, brow furled angrily. "Me? Who the hell went up to Heaven with no back up, injured, and no ears on!"

Cas tried to hold that gaze, righteous in his own justified anger, but he could not. He was quickly learning that he was defenseless against those eyes when they were filled with such hurt and concern.

"I prayed for *weeks*, Cas." Okay, that was a slight exaggeration. It had only been a week and a half, but Dean didn't think he'd gone a whole ten minutes without praying that entire damn time. That, if nothing else (and there was so much else), made it feel like weeks.

"I…time moves differently here," Castiel said quietly, a pathetic defense and he knew it. "It has only been a matter of days. And I- I did not expect Uriel to…"

In front of him, the hunter deflated, anger fleeing in the face of Cas's guilt and regret. Dean's shoulders sagged and he finally looked away too, just as guilt-ridden for entirely different reasons. He really needed to learn to reign in that temper of his. Not that that was likely to happen anytime soon. "I know, Cas. Look, let's just get out of here before Uriel comes looking for you, alright?"

"Yes," Cas agreed with a nod, straightening his legs back out so that Dean could reach the binds wrapped around his ankles. "That would be best. Depending on how much attention he is paying to his grace

and my own, Uriel may already be aware his restraints have dissolved."

Those hands froze on his ankles once again. When he met his charge's eyes, Dean was back to glaring. "Are you kidding me right now? *Lead* with that next time, Cas!"

The hunter frantically grabbed at the ropes, urgency now in every line of his body.

"It is very unlikely that he will be watching that closely-"

The door to the Paradise around them – the one Dean had propped open with the metal umbrella stand – burst open hard enough to bang into the wall and bounce back. Uriel stopped its movement with a meaty fist, expression *furious* as he took in the disturbed human memory of an empty living room and a family dining in the next room.

Behind the side sectional, Dean and Cas were frozen. The two of them currently hidden by the length of couch, he was pretty sure, but that wasn't gonna last long. All Uriel had to do was move about four feet to the left and they were gonna be in serious trouble.

His hands still wrapped around the last of the glowing rope, Dean clenched his teeth. Green eyes met Cas's shocked blue. Keeping his voice really low, Dean hissed out, "You were saying?"

Castiel's breath quickened as the hunter tore apart the last of the restraints binding his being. Grace flowed back into his wings with the sudden freedom, into each of his limbs and all of his being. Without hesitation, Castiel shot forward, wrapping himself around Dean in the kind of grip reserved for raising a soul from Perdition.

The angel burst out from behind the couch, human soul in his arms, and barreled past Uriel hard enough to send the angel flying back into the hallway with a thunderous crash.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Omchuck, I don't think I have any notes. I can't tell if that's the anxiety or I just straight up doing have anything to say for once.

(...it's gotta be the anxiety. I don't know how NOT to talk.)

Up Next: I suppose I could do one of these. Hmmm, let's see. Dean and Cas are fleeing Heaven, Uriel is hot on their heels, Rachel is hot on his, and one of them isn't gonna make it. The gate's gonna take a beating, so is some poor field in Nebraska (or...somewhere). Cas is definitely still injured, Uriel's done giving him second chances, Rachel's in a completely different world of hurt, Dean's pulling his best Captain Kirk, and Sam's setting off grenades.

And, oh yeah, next chapter would be a most excellent time to get **back-to-back** posts. Because if all that ^ sounds like a lot, it absolutely is and it's gonna end abruptly, leaving you all like "WHERE'S THE NEXT ONE, DAMNIT" (I'm just guessing. I could be wrong ;)) So bring it on, ff dot netters! Get us over that milestone :D

A/Ns: There it is. There's the talking. See, half an hour focusing on this story, getting a chapter up and I already feel better. You guys are like my heroin or something (does heroin make you feel better? Ecstasy, maybe? You guys are my ecstasy)

(...Nope, nope, that sounds wrong. Let's stick with heroin.)

Till next time!

Cheers,
Silence

ADDITIONAL A/N, 12/21/2020 - Sam and Dean as soulmates: This is the problem with forgetting what you're going to say in your A/Ns. You forget to add stuff about important things, like calling Sam and Dean soulmates *facepalm*. Okay, so here's my reasoning on this (after several reviewers have been like "Hold up, wait a second!! Explain yourself!")

First, I'm sure hoping the last 600,000 words have displayed little to no interest in Wincest on my part. Even with the slowest of slow burns (which I am now known for), you'd still have picked up plenty of such a vibe. I've never been good at keeping undertones out of my writing XD

Second, I very strongly believe that soulmates can be platonic. Friends, siblings, cousins, and so forth. As someone who identifies as ACE and possibly Aro (still figuring that bit out), relationships that aren't romantic or sexual in nature are incredibly important to me and I often lament the fact that western society spares so

little focus on those bonds.

Third, and most importantly, I really threw this into the story here and now because it was an itty bitty (potential) plothole in the show and I love filling in holes :P In the episode where Sam and Dean go to Heaven and follow the road to find Joshua, it did not make sense that Dean could leave his Heaven and find Sam's. Especially as they later point out that navigating paradises is hard and Ash's hacking of heaven's system is quite an impressive feat (a feat I very much loved!). They also specify that every soul has their own heaven, with a few exceptions of shared paradises, like in the case of soulmates. My head canon therefore accepted that Dean and Sam share a paradise, which is how Dean was able to cross into Sam's memories (and it makes sense that even when sharing a paradise, two people could have their own memories from time to time, reliving a cherished experience where the other wasn't present). Therefore, Sam and Dean must be soulmates. Which, honestly, with everything the show has showed us about their unending loyalty, love, and co-dependency on one another, really isn't all that surprising.

So, in conclusion [cuz this is obviously an essay], this story will remain Wincest free, as it is not a pairing I'm particularly fond of. However, it is a pairing I am particularly fond of making fun of, poking with a stick, handing that stick off to every other character on the show, etc. Some of my favorite spn moments definitely come from other characters mistaking the boys as a couple or Crowley endlessly making fun of the two for their codependence. I love those bits. So, while there will be no Wincest in this story, there will be plenty of characters poking fun at it now and then and I won't be shying away from the close (platonic) relationship they have and the fact that the show itself (sort of?) made them soulmates.

Cheers (again),
Silence

Chapter 94: Season 2: Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Whelp, this season is officially twice as long as I thought it would be. Oi Vey. And, and, and we're not close to done with it. *head thud*

Milestone! Whelp, we did it! We have crossed that 2000th review on ff dot net. Thank you everyone who took the time to help, both this chapter and every chapter before it. YOU all keep this story alive. I'm very serious about that.

I wanted to get this chapter up this morning (Saturday) and the next tomorrow morning. Alas, along with returning to work and having significantly less free time, I did not realize I would have significantly less energy as well. I got no writing or editing done this week at all, leaving two chapters to be edited over the weekend. Le sigh.

The next chapter will be up tomorrow (Sunday) night, and that is still good, regardless of the timing being later than I would have originally liked.

Chapter Reference – Cas demoted: When Balthazar was killed and Cas returned to Heaven to await punishment, Zachariah demoted him and put Uriel in charge of their flight.
See **Chapter32: Season 1 Interlude I** for a refresher. Fun fact: you might remember this happened in the original timeline, too, but because of Cas's shifting priorities (aka: caring too much about his human charges :P)

Chapter Warnings: Rachel is chasing Uriel, Uriel is chasing Castiel, Castiel is gripping Dean Winchester tight, and Dean is screaming like a little girl because he's mother effing *flying* and that is not okay. Oh, yeah, and other things happen too, like craters and brush fires, and explosions going off, and shoes smoking. Ya know. A normal Tuesday. (Pretty sure it's Thursday...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Rachel was on her nineteenth door to yet another Human Paradise empty of her commanding officer when she heard the crash. Her first immediate thought was that Zachariah's men had found Dean Winchester. The second (far less credible) thought was that Dean Winchester had found Castiel. Because it was Castiel's energy she felt spike, along with the briefest flash of her commanding officer as he barreled down the hallway, Uriel in heated pursuit.

"Uriel!" Rachel yelled, both in alarm and abhorrence. She had not felt the second angel arrive in the Paradises, but she also had no longer been keeping an eye on his grace signature. Rachel took off after her two superior officers, realizing with a flash of terror that the energy coming off of Uriel now was volatile. Her fear of him harming Castiel had just become very real.

She had no time to wonder what had become of Dean Winchester in all of that, or check the paradise Castiel had come bursting out of. Having witnessed his commitment to Castiel first hand, she had no doubt the human was somehow still with the other angel.

-o-o-o-

They shot out from behind the couch with the kind of speed and force that Dean knew was gonna hurt like hell when they hit the ground. Honestly, the hunter's brain was still trying to catch up with Cas wrapping around him like a human octopus (angelic octopus?) and then *launching* himself (and therefore Dean) straight off the ground and over the back of the couch like they were liquid speed itself. All his *limited* human brain got out of any of that was that it was going to hurt like a son of a bitch when they hit the ground.

Only they never did.

They hit something, for sure, but it gave like flesh, grunting as they barreled past it and into the white, white, white of the hallway. Which they kept barreling down. That was about the point where Dean realized they were flying. Actually *flying.* Sure, he'd traveled Angel Air with Cas on more than one occasion, but this time, this time he could *feel* it. He could feel the air warping around them, his jacket flapping in the turbulence. He even got the distinct impression of wings on Cas, the high-frequency ruffle of feathers in wind, the great spans beating back air and gravity with each powerful flap. He

couldn't see them – couldn't turn his head from where he was cradled into Cas's body (not cradled, that's friggin' *girly*), but he could still tell, somehow, that the wings were there. Like a presence, more than a reality. Something more for his human brain to deal with. Awesome.

When Dean managed to open his eyes against the buffeting winds, protected only somewhat by Cas's body wrapped around him like a trenchcoated cephalopod, he could barely make anything out as it blurred past. He caught a flash of something that looked like a gate before they were barreling right through it, Vin Diesel style. Dean braced for the impact, but Castiel took the brunt of it, with those impressions of wings suddenly wrapped around them like a downy cocoon. A downy cocoon battering ram. That was…pretty damn cool, actually.

Was Cas always this cool in his true form?

Then Dean could see stars and dark sky and space and clouds and mountains and rivers and oceans and the whole of the Earth so so so very far below. It- It was incredible. Incredible and beautiful and… coming up really fucking fast.

That was about the moment Dean realized – truly realized – that he was *flying* (falling). It happened to be the same moment, down to the microsecond, that Dean also remembered he didn't *like* flying (because it absolutely included the possibility (inevitability) of *fucking falling!)*. Both realizations simultaneously led to the next moment, where Dean started screaming like a little girl.

When they finally did hit the ground it was, point of fact, hard as hell. The impact was jarring, so much so that Dean felt his brain rattle in his skull, and he was just a soul with no physical body (no matter what that soul was trying to tell a brain that didn't actually exist so that it could rattle or interpret that rattle through its *limited* human existence. Fucking Rachel. Fucking angels. Dean would show them. Just as soon as he could figure out which direction was up and then go that way). It was disorienting as hell, body or no, and anything but comfortable. Even a glowing ball of light in the shape of Dean Winchester protested against playing pinball where *he* was the ball. But as Dean did manage to figure out which way was up and get his feet back under him in order to go that general direction, he couldn't feel any damage. A quick assessment revealed no new bumps or bruises. Had he been good old flesh and bones, he definitely wouldn't have gotten up from that.

(Dean's limited human perception was also totally comfortable with the idea that he'd hallucinated the last three and a half minutes. And was currently still hallucinating, considering the *crater* around them.)

Cas was on his hands and knees beside the hunter, probably having taken a lot more of the impact than Dean. Despite the fact that he looked pretty normal and alright in Jimmy Novak's vessel (not a vessel, Dean reminded himself, just an interpretation of human eyes), Dean was pretty sure the angel wasn't entirely healed up from his bout with Azazel's trap. For one, he was panting. For another, he hadn't made it back to his feet yet.

Dean looked around them, at the ten foot crater they'd created, which he and Cas sat in the bottom off. From what he could see over the ridge of upturned earth and through the cloud of dust still settling, they were in a field of some sort. Looked like the Midwest, though that covered a lot of possible territory. It was too dark to make out much more than the fifteen or so feet around them, though the brush fires along the edge of the crater were helping.

(They'd fucking fallen (not flown. *Fallen.*) from Heaven hard enough to create a crater and *brush fires*. Jesus, how were they even alive? Oh, right. He wasn't, for starters.)

Then Cas was grabbing him and they were flying again, though not nearly as nicely (not that the first time could be called nice). It was more like being tossed, really, as the two of them flew out of the crater, hitting the ground a half dozen feet away and rolling the rest of that dozen. Something came screaming out of the sky above them and slammed into the space they'd occupied only seconds ago. Someone had apparently decided to show up their crater with an even bigger crater. Dean curled in on himself, feebly covering his head with his hands as dirt and clods of long grass rained down around them, a couple on *fire*. Luckily, none that fell around him and Cas. Dean could hear the angel stumble to his feet in the dust-darkened space around him.

"Cas?" Dean coughed in the dust, and how was that even fair? He wasn't supposed to have *lungs* right now!

"Uriel," the angel responded to his unasked question and Dean scrambled to his feet, too. The two friends back away from the rim of the crater, edging out of the settling dust cloud. Castiel kept his hand out, forcing Dean to stay behind him, but the hunter made sure the two moved in tandem, his hand fisted in the back of Cas's coat as a

reminder that the angel better be backing away right alongside him. They got another ten feet back before Castiel stopped, his sword dropping into his hand from the sleeve of his coat. Dean tensed, one hand still clenching the angel's jacket, the other desperate to wrap around a weapon of his own.

"Stay behind me."

"Like hell," Dean growled in return, but then Uriel was stepping out of the crater – looking like the exact same douchebag Dean had known in his timeline – before Castiel had a chance to remind the human which one of them was more vulnerable.

(Cas. Cas was more vulnerable and Dean had a friggin' fifteen-point lecture complete with Power Point on just why that was.)

"You would choose this- this *human* over me, Castiel?" Uriel roared, dropping his own blade into his hand. Those dark eyes slid from his brother to the man standing just behind him, possessively close, and Uriel sneered to see him clinging to Castiel like an infant. He knew it must be the Righteous Man. "Winchester."

The hunter had the audacity to smirk. "Chuckles."

"Dean," Castiel murmured, so low that the human almost missed it. But he didn't miss the warning in it. *Don't push your luck*. Yeah, yeah, he got that, but he'd never been particularly good at listening, now had he? Before Dean could teach his friend that lesson through practical experience, Castiel raised his voice, calling to the dickwad, "You are the one who chose Lucifer over your brothers, Uriel."

"Lucifer *is* our brother! He was the best of us and we abandoned him for the humans. For *them*." Uriel spat the word like a bad taste in his mouth, leveling his sword at Dean. Castiel purposefully put himself between the blade and his charge, no matter the fifteen feet that separated them. Such a distance was nothing for an angel and, unlike Dean, Castiel was under no illusion of who Uriel's real target here was.

He couldn't let the other angel reach the Righteous Man's soul.

His brother charged with a rage-filled cry and Castiel shoved Dean as far from him as he safely could with one push. He met Uriel's blade with his own, the clang of celestial metal loud in the otherwise quiet night. Castiel's weaker leg gave way under the ferocious attack and he fell to one knee, using both arms to brace against his brother's strength.

Uriel was stronger than him, but Castiel had his speed, unrestrained by the weight of a vessel or the weakness of cracked and healing grace. He pushed off the ground, throwing his strength into Uriel in a feint before darting quickly to the side. Predictably, Uriel countered the false strike with the full force of his might, tripping forward when he was met with no resistance, Castiel already spinning past him. Uriel stumbled to the ground and Castiel turned, blade up and ready for another attack.

The smaller angel suddenly staggered out of nowhere, his vision spinning. His grace flagged as it distributed power unevenly across his injured mass, causing nothing short of disorientation. His vision and strength both dipped in power while his wings buzzed with a surge of energy, over-correcting for the imbalance.

Okay. So, he was still not fully healed. Yes. He would need to remember that-

Uriel charged again, slamming into Castiel and sending both of staggering back towards the crater. Castiel turned into his brother's thrust, managing to evade another blow as Uriel's weight glanced off his side and the smaller angel side-stepped his mass. He kicked at the back of Uriel's weight-bearing leg, sending him to the dirt once more. But a hand lashed out, wrapping around Castiel's arm and pulling him harshly into the upturned earth as well. The dirt hardly had time to give beneath Castiel's body before the smaller angel was scrambling away, rolling several times until he could safely climb back to his feet. He knew Uriel would try to pin him if given the chance.

"Don't make me do this, Castiel." Uriel climbed to his feet far slower, the earth clinging to his grace until he brushed it free. He raised his blade, pointing it at Castiel once more. "I beg you, brother. Do not make me kill you."

"I am not making you do anything." Castiel straightened, his own grace – still pale from his yet-healed injuries – swirled angrily. "You are doing this all on your own, Uriel. You chose it."

His brother's fury – what was really denial he could not afford to embrace, Castiel knew – turned his grace a brilliant, bloody red. It was a color the smaller angel only now realized he saw entirely too often on his- on this angel he had once considered a friend. Castiel raised his sword, realizing the inevitable end to this fight, should he survive to achieve it.

Uriel charged, and Castiel blocked once more.

-o-o-o-

Rachel flew for the gate, in part utterly disbelieving that Castiel had broken through it. Of course he had. At this point, Rachel's understanding of what her fellow angel and friend would and wouldn't do was whittled down to *'was a human named Dean Winchester involved?'* Still, it was looking more and more like that human had been right: Uriel had attacked, hidden away, and was now in pursuit of Castiel. So Rachel would follow. She was loyal to her commanding officer, and that officer was Castiel, regardless of what Zachariah had decreed as punishment for Balthazar's death.

She was within striking distance of the gate when four armed angels launched themselves in front of her, barring the way with spears that identified them as part of Heaven's Guard. Rachel pulled up sharply, wings countering her incredible momentum with harsh, violent flapping as she came to a painfully abrupt halt inches from them.

"Let me through!" she demanded, standing tall.

"The gate has been forced open," one of the guards replied, deep voice like unmovable stone in the large expanse that stood before the gate. "Heaven is now on lockdown. None may leave."

"My commanding officer is in danger," Rachel bit out, pointing at the beautiful, ornate entrance to Heaven, currently dented almost in half by what she could only assume was Castiel's mass bursting through it. "Our second in command has turned traitor. You must let me through!"

"None may pass," the same guard said again.

Rachel opened her mouth to tell him just what she thought of his *professional* opinion on the matter when the angel to his left stepped forward.

"You have knowledge of what has occurred here?" His tone was not like earth and rock, but something in the way he regarded her, like he was testing her, made Rachel instantly wary. She straightened under the angel's gaze, glancing at the other three guards.

"Yes. I was present when Uriel-"

"Zachariah will want to speak with you, then." He nodded to the two

on either end of their line barricade, and Rachel suddenly found herself flanked by her brothers. "You will report to him."

"I need to help Castiel," she insisted, growing frustrated with these angels' inability to understand what she was making very obvious.

"You will report to Zachariah."

The two angels on either side of her latched onto her limbs, hard enough that Rachel was unable to pull away. Something unpleasant twisted in her grace, a trepidation and worry she was neither familiar with nor comfortable addressing. But her brothers would hear nothing of her protests, however logical she insisted (and knew) they were. The two on either side of Rachel escorted her back the way she'd come, heading for the inner ring where Zachariah's office was located.

-o-o-o-

Sam kept his spine pressed to the back of the old house, glancing down at the doorknob of the back entrance he stood beside. He'd already managed to pick the deadbolt, quietly as possible. Though, in the silence of an abandoned house…. Sam was worried it hadn't been quiet enough. He'd already given the knob itself a preliminary twist. It had some give, so it wasn't locked or rigged with a tripwire, a trick hunters often used with a loaded shotgun on the other end for the more corporeal monsters they tackled. John had spent countless hours teaching his boys how to feel the tension of a rigged door. But just because this one wasn't rigged didn't mean there wasn't worse waiting for him beyond the door. Sam was going to be very careful about this. This wasn't a monster he was hunting, it was a *hunter*. A dangerous hunter, according to his brother.

It was Gordon Walker sitting in the living room of this broken down house, with a gun trained on the front door and Dean's phone very obviously sitting on a table a half dozen feet away. Gordon Walker who had set a fake message, obviously a trap, and expected Sam to walk right into it. Gordon Walker who knew where his brother was and who had a lot of explaining to do.

If Sam didn't kill him before he could talk.

The younger Winchester hadn't spotted his brother through any of the windows as he'd made his way around the house when he'd first arrived. But that didn't mean Dean wasn't in there, the hunter told himself. His brother had told him before what Gordon Walker was capable of; he'd tried to kill Sam in another timeline, he'd used Dean

as bait when he failed, and laid a trap for Sam to come calling. Dean hadn't gone into details, but Sam didn't imagine Gordon was creative or unpredictable enough to alter the timeline. Sam was betting this was exactly the same trap.

Which meant Dean would be in that house. He had to be in there, somewhere out of sight. If he wasn't, Sam was going to beat his location out of Gordon.

Slowly, back still pressed to the wall, Sam reached out and gave the knob a slow, full twist. The door swung inward an inch or so, the creak of old hinges minimal, which Sam was grateful for. Sneaking up on a hunter was already going to be a challenge without added obstacles.

Speaking of obstacles. Sam bent down, door still only cracked, and stared at the trip wire two feet away. It gleamed silver in the very dim light. Honestly, if he hadn't been expecting it – not only because this was a hunter he was dealing with and an obvious trap, but literally because Ava had warned him it would be there – Sam probably wouldn't have seen it. It was far enough in front of the door that he should be able to push it open enough to get fully through with some clearance before he had to deal with the wire. Which, according to Ava, was attached to a live grenade.

It was a tight fit for his gargantuan frame, but Sam was able to squeeze between the door and its frame, side stepping into the kitchen without tripping the wire. The large gap made sense, really. There'd be little point in having the door itself be the thing to trip the wire, at least not until it was fully open. Anything earlier than that and you would just be giving your target a natural shield of inch-thick wood when the explosion was triggered.

Sam knelt down, backside all but pressed against the interior wall now, as he traced the wire to – sure enough – a grenade taped securely to the side of the kitchen counter. Quietly, and with a glance up towards the silent living room, Sam pulled out his knife and put it to the wire, close to the pin. He didn't cut it, though, as another thought occurred to him.

A grenade going off was a good distraction. The best he could ask for, actually.

Sam checked the doorway to the living room again, but there still wasn't movement. Gordon either didn't realize he was in the house or

was waiting for him to trip the wire. Well, Sam wouldn't want to disappoint him.

Slowly, the hunter shuffled to the other end of the trap, where the wire was wrapped around a screw that had been driven into the side of the kitchen counter. With great care, Sam snipped the wire with his knife, as close to the screw as he could without risking wetting the whole thing off. He let out a breath, wire in hand and eye on the pin of the grenade, which never moved.

Sam dropped the wire to the ground, where it coiled, loose and harmless. Then he grabbed the back door, still kneeling and keeping an eye on the living room. Shuffling himself back into the corner and crouching into as small a ball as he could make himself, Sam pulled the door back towards him. It formed a little triangle of space between the counter, door, and wall. Now, with a shield in place between him and the grenade – a low enough yield from what Sam had spotted that it shouldn't penetrate the door – Sam reached out, picked up the loose wire, and purposefully tugged it towards himself.

The sound of the pin clattering to the floor was almost the only sound in the silence, and then it was immediately overtaken by a concussive explosion. Sam winced at the debris that hit the door, the door itself banging pressing into him, but the wood held up. Smoke and dust filled the kitchen, along with the acrid smell of burning metal and incinerated chemicals. Sam covered his mouth with his sleeve to keep from coughing. Quickly but still as quietly as possible, he swung the door outward (which was a little harder than he predicted, given one of the hinges was no longer fully intact) and stood.

The kitchen was a war zone, but that didn't matter. Sam could barely see through the dust and haze, but he thought he saw movement in the direction of the living room. Not enough to be Gordon entering the kitchen; he'd wait until the smoke settled before checking for Sam's corpse. The younger Winchester didn't plan to let him find it. The hunter pulled his gun from his backside, holding off on cocking it in case the click so close to his opponent gave away that he was still alive. He raised the weapon in front of him, thumb poised on the hammer, and took one careful step forward, minding the debris. The younger Winchester instantly froze, eyes wide, as his ankle met a thin, taut resistance he hadn't been expecting.

Sam looked down at the second trip wire in time to hear the pin it was connected to hit the floor.

Crap.

-o-o-o-

Dean scrambled back to his feet, thrown a good twenty feet from the fight as the angels battled on. He groaned, his chest pounding furiously from his son-of-a-bitch best friend shoving him out of the way (with angelic strength, he might add). The landing he'd taken after a twenty-foot soar hadn't done anything nice for him, either.

Had he mentioned lately, *son of a bitch*?

"Cas!" he screamed as he started back towards the fight at a full sprint. He had no weapon, no defense, but Dean didn't give a shit. That was a fight he belonged in, a fight Cas needed him in. One the angel was very clearly loosing.

Uriel delivered a vicious kick to Cas's midsection. The angel had managed to block his latest barrage of attacks, but it had left his midsection wide open to a lower attack. Cas tumbled over the edge of the crater and disappeared beneath the rim.

"Damnit," Dean swore, but he didn't stop to think about what exactly he was gonna do. Instead, he straight up tackled the bulky beast of a man that was Uriel.

The angel grunted in surprise, having not expected the attack from behind (or the audacity of a measly human soul to try taking on an *angel*), and the two hit the ground together. Uriel managed to turn as they fell and Dean landed heavily atop the other angel, already raining down punches. Blood splattered from a dark cheek and busted lip, but Dean didn't stop to wonder how he was getting blood out of an angel that wasn't apparently wearing the vessel he swore he could see.

"Enough!" Uriel roared, grabbing a fistful of Dean's shirt in his meaty hand, halting the hunter's next swing.

"Oh crap," Dean had time to breath out before he was soaring like a bird (ha, Big Bird, maybe) for the second time that night. He landed hard, groaning into the loose soil beneath him. A heavy hand fisted the back of his jacket and Dean was hauled back to his feet before he had time to blink the dust out of his eyes.

"You think you can take on *me*?" A fist crashed into Dean's face and goddamn it was a good thing he didn't have an actual jaw, because he

was pretty sure it just broke. "You, the *mud monkey*?"

"Grk-" Dean took in a staggering, abruptly cut-off breath as Uriel wrapped that ridiculously large hand around his throat and lifted the human clear off the ground. Dean kicked out with his legs, struggling to find purchase with just the tips of his toes. The entire weight of his body (not body? Was his soul seriously a hundred eighty pounds too?) was resting on his neck, currently being crushed beneath McMeaty's paw.

Uriel stowed his blade. He would not need it for this pathetic *man*.

"You are vermin. You are a plague upon this earth." He shook the pathetic excuse for a lifeform and watched as Dean Winchester's body jiggled in response. Meat and bones wrapped in a bag of flesh. Disgusting. How their Father could call them his favorite, Uriel would never understand. "I'm going to drag you to the nearest crossroads and you're going to sell your soul to the first demon filth that comes calling."

"Doesn't…sound very…Righteous to m-me," Dean managed to spit out past Uriel's firm grip on his windpipe.

Dark lips split into a wide, dangerous smile. "Then we'll fetch your abomination of a brother and kill him first. Wipe the scar of his existence from this planet. Then we'll see how *righteous* you feel."

The hunter clenched his teeth, hand fisting across the muscular forearm holding him captive. He even drew blood – could feel it welling up beneath his nails – but Uriel's grip didn't lessen. No one threatened Sammy. "You touch my brother and I'll kill y-grk!"

His captive's hand tightened dangerously, cutting him off with a clear warning of just what this angel thought of his feeble threats. The hunter could feel his face turning dangerously red. His hands scrabbled for purchase anywhere: across Uriel's arms, stabbing at his neck and chest, even pushing at his stupidly thick waist.

Could he even be strangled to death when he didn't have a friggin' body?!

"Pathetic." Uriel shoved Dean's hands away with his other arm and the human made a grab for his wrist, latching onto the sleeve of his suit. The angel batted off like a horse would a fly. "You're species has grown even weaker than the last time I held one of you by the throat and squeezed the life out of you."

Despite the way Uriel's grip tightened suggestively, Dean managed a grim smile. He was busy thanking John Winchester for years of leaving him on his own to fend for Sammy. It had taught Dean to develop certain…five-fingered talents he'd never forgotten (or stopped using, really).

"I…grt…yrr…ss- ss-"

Uriel brought him closer, a sneer on his upper lip and Dean didn't both to hide his red-faced, bulging grin as he was pulled within breathing space of the douchebag (also, *ew*). But holy shit. It was actually working; the angel was playing right into his role, damn near perfectly in fact. A role he obviously didn't know he was supposed to be playing, because the movie Dean was thinking of didn't even exist yet. Maybe Hollywood wasn't so fake, after all. Suck it, Bill O'Reilly.

Ha, that was kinda funny, actually. Or maybe it was just oxygen deprivation.

"What was that, mud monkey?" Uriel barred his teeth, and Dean pulled a face at the wave of hot air and nasty breath he had to endure (okay, stupid brain on this one. Bet if he was seeing all grace and light and wavelengths of celestial intent, he wouldn't have to *smell* it) "If the fleshbag has something to say, it better speak up-"

"Uriel!"

Dean hit the ground with a painful jolt and a gigantic gasp of air as Uriel was ripped clear away from him by a flash of black and tan. Castiel tackled the angel into the dirt and grass, the two grappling together. Uriel's meaty hand wrapped around the smaller angel's wrist, all that kept his brother's blade from piercing his chest as Cas came out on top.

"Cas!" Dean started forward, rubbing at his throat and choking on the word as it battered it's way past a raw and damaged windpipe.

"Damn you, Castiel," Uriel hissed, throwing the injured angel off of him. It wasn't difficult. His brother was clearly weakening and Uriel knew Castiel could not remain on his feet much longer without further healing. Healing that the larger angel was still willing to offer. For certain concessions, of course. Uriel climbed to his feet once more as his brother did the same, albeit slower and with an obvious stumble. Still, the smaller angel flicked his sword, the blade held out at his side once more.

"You are a fool, brother." Uriel straightened, chest swelling with the bulk of his large mass. "This can end only one way, and you know it."

He stretched out his own hand, flicking his wrist to summon his blade from the ether. Castiel stared at him with hard, blue eyes. Uriel blinked, turning his head to look down at his empty hand.

"What-"

Castiel charged and Uriel, still shocked, was forced to block the attack with his bare hands. He still had great strength over his brother, injured as he was. He caught Castiel's sword hand in his own, his other forearm raised to block the rest of the angel's momentum. Even without his blade, this fight was his to win.

He had simply yet to decide if it would end with his brother's death. A decision that was Castiel's to make.

There was movement at his back and a moment of time – a single blink in the span that was the universe - for Uriel to garner further frustration at the pathetic human who dared interfere, before pain suddenly erupted throughout his chest. With a gasp born of pure shock more than agony, Uriel lowered his eyes to stare at the tip of an angel blade – *his* blade – sticking clear through his grace.

"I said…" Dean rose from behind the angel as Uriel fell to his knees with a heavy thud. Castiel's wide – so wide – blue eyes shifted from his brother's stunned face to the hunter's. Dean twisted the blade deeper, Uriel groaning, as he leaned his weight into the angel. "I got your sword."

-o-o-o-

Gordon waited for the second explosion. He didn't move, didn't surrender his protected position, didn't even breathe until the next blast ripped through the kitchen. When it went, it took a portion of the wall with it, and Gordon turned his head away from the concussive force.

He'd known Sam Winchester was too good to be tripped up by just the first.

The second grenade had been a higher yield and located much closer to the kitchen doorway than the first. A plume of dust erupted into the living room, blasted through the kitchen door by that second explosion. Gordon waited as a couple pieces of wood and smaller

debris clattered against the walls and floor. A brass cabinet knob, slightly singed along the edges, rolled in through the doorway, doing lazy little circles on the ground before coming to a stop next to Gordon's boot.

Now he could make sure his target had been properly taken out. He gripped his rifle in hand and stood from his rickety chair. Should Sam Winchester be unfortunate enough to still be alive after that, Gordon would make it quick and put the man out of his misery.

The hunter entered the kitchen slowly, gun ready for anything. This wasn't any normal monster. This was another hunter. A damn good hunter, according to his Roadhouse connections. Gordon wasn't taking any chances.

There was a shoe in the middle of the kitchen, close to where the second trip wire had been. It was large – six-and-a-half-feet-tall large, and male – and hadn't been there before, Gordon was sure of it. Also, it was smoking.

"Hm," Gordon hummed, lowering his gun.

It was the wrong thing to do.

The hammer of a handgun locking into place clicked off just behind his ear, and Gordon froze as a ring of metal, solid and deadly, was pressed to the back of his skull. Damn. His connections hadn't been wrong.

"Where's my brother, Gordon?"

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: :D

So, turns out I wrote the 'up next' of last chapter ("Dean and Cas are fleeing Heaven, Uriel is hot on their heels, Rachel is hot on his, and one of them isn't gonna make it.") and totally meant 'one of them's not gonna make it out of Heaven'. Then reviews start coming in telling me I better not kill Rachel, it better be Uriel that dies, and I was like….'ohhhhhhh….I see what I did there…yeah, that's not what I meant at all! No one dies- oh, wait…' only to realize, haha, that still holds up, one of them doesn't make it out of Heaven, and one of them doesn't make it at all! XD Go me and my very big awesome brain (snort).

Yet Another Star Trek Reference: Lol, this one wasn't intentional or planned (actually…none of them have been… Huh…I may need to work on diversifying my references… daaaamnit). I had Uriel choking Dean and realized Dean could totally steal his blade off of him in the meanwhile (I knew Dean needed to get the blade, but originally Cas knocked it free and Dean scooped it up). Then as I was writing it, I was like "huh, this feels familiar, why does this feel familiar- oh." That is literally a scene from Star Trek 2009. So…yeah, I rolled with it. I'm betting Dean woulda liked that movie and seen it often enough to quote it (like all movies). Besides, it would have made his total fanboy-self insanely happy to successfully re-enact a badass scene from a movie he likes.

Up Next: Next chapter will be up tomorrow! Awesome job, FF dot netters. Thank you all so so so so much for 2000 reviews! [blows big, dramatic, overrated-Hollywood-star-on-the-red-carpet kisses]

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 95: Season 2: Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Welcome to part two of our back-to-back chapters! You guys earned it :D

Chapter Reference – Dean and Chest!Cas Heart To Heart: After making a tentative deal with Crowley to share information to help avert the Apocalypse, Dean slept and dreamt of Cas. They had a real chat about how he sent Dean back in time, what it cost him, and why he was just a shadow – a sliver – in Dean's chest, inconsistent in his help and ability to respond to Dean's requests. For a refresher, see **Chapter 51: Season 2, Chapter 18**

Chapter Warnings: Uriel may be out of this fight, but Gordon sure isn't. He's got a couple tricks up his sleeves, including a certain photo he took of a dead hunter. Cas and Dean are trying to undo that damage, but they might not make it in time if Cas keeps passing out and Dean's gotta choose between his body and Cas's, uh...wavelength of celestial intent. Yeah, sure. That.

Actual Chapter Warnings: There is a brief description of the kind of damage that comes with being a victim of a sniper rifle. Heads up to anyone who's not a big fan of depictions of gore, particularly of a main character. (Don't worry, Cas is gonna fix it all up in a jiffy. If he doesn't pass out, first.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 62

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Uriel stared at the tip of his own blade, protruding through his mass in what he knew was a death blow. Grace was igniting around the edges of the celestial metal, flickering and sparking in miniaturized, bright bursts. The angel groaned, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. "H-how?"

Castiel's eyes fell to his as Uriel's grip on his wrist faltered, freeing the smaller angel's sword. Uriel's gaze, his grace, spitting and churning in shock and pain, locked onto the blue that his brother always seemed to be. Such a sad shade of blue, Uriel thought. His arm fell from Castiel's and instead reached forward to curl around the back of the angel's neck. His brother tensed, blade ready to defend, but his movement faltered as Uriel's grace merely curled against his own. Not an attack but a seeking of solace in its final moments.

Castiel lowered his sword, staring at his brother as Uriel's grace began to surge, the last thing they both knew it would ever do.

"For-Forgive me, brother," the larger angel whispered, but Castiel did not know what specifically his brother asked for. He knew Uriel did not regret his loyalties; Castiel could see that in his eyes. Perhaps, the angel reasoned, it was his brother's actions in following those loyalties for which he wished forgiveness. He knew that, even now, even after everything, Uriel still cared for him as a brother. A twisted care, perhaps. Castiel could see that now. But bringing him harm had hurt Uriel as well, and for that the larger angel was sorry. Castiel could see that, too.

"Close your eyes, Dean," Cas whispered as Uriel's grace began to churn and stutter in rapid succession.

The hunter perceived that death-surge as pure light, glowing from the angel's eyes, overflowing beneath the skin until it reached his nose and mouth. It spilled out with growing intensity until that blue-white brilliance encompassed the rest of his face. Dean staggered back, leaving Uriel's sword still buried between thick shoulders.

The angel threw his head back with a scream of pure light. Uriel went up before Dean could fully comply with Castiel's soft demand; the hunter caught a glimpse of wings among the blinding brilliance. Wings that stretched a story high, flecked with a thousand colors, some Dean couldn't even name. It was almost beautiful. Would have been, if it wasn't also a douchebag and the death of a brother Castiel had cared about.

The hunter slammed his eyes shut and turned away. A weight hit the ground a moment later and, when Dean dared look back in the darkness, (expecting to blink spots out of his vision but finding it perfectly clear) there was no body. Only the burnt shadow of an explosion across the dirt and a pair of wings etched out from the center of the blast, stretching a dozen feet in either direction. In the

middle of them lay an angel blade, soaked to the hilt in red blood.

Beside it, Cas knelt in the scorched earth, one hand on his knee, the other flat against the burnt and blackened ground. His blue eyes were wide and grim.

"I forgive you, brother."

-o-o-o-

"Drop the gun."

Gordon hummed in response to Sam's demand, something like amusement playing at his lips as he started to turn his head. But Sammy's weight leaned into the weapon pressed flush to his skull and the hunter stopped, the warning clear.

"You know," he said casually, almost conversationally, "you shouldn't take your shoes off around here. Might get Tetanus."

"Put it down, *now*-"

Gordon didn't let him finish. He did drop the rifle, but he also spun around, one hand striking the kid's forearm, pushing the gun to the side before it could fire, the other coming from below to force the barrel of the gun up, twisting it out of the Winchester's grip. An old army trick his pop had taught him, way back in the day.

Sam's expression was completely taken off guard as the weapon clattered to the ground and Gordon used his momentum to continue forward, tackling the man who had a good half foot on him.

The thing with a man like Sam Winchester – a man who thought he was good, who tried to be good, who *wanted* to be good even though he wasn't – was that he didn't use those six and a half feet and some two hundred pounds to his advantage. Sammy was the kind of man who hunched his shoulders to look smaller, who curved his back and dipped his head to be less looming.

Body like that, Gordon would have let everyone around know who was in charge. Sam Winchester had no practice at putting his full weight into anything.

Gordon delivered a swift uppercut to the kid's jaw, following with a one-two punch to his lip and forehead. Not what he'd been aiming for, but the kid had turned into the punch, slanting Gordon's knuckles

right off the sweet spots and saving himself from two far more devastating blows.

He might not be good at using that intimidating frame, but he sure knew how to take a punch. Gordon wondered if Sammy's daddy had also been a mean drunk, beating up on his kids like Gordon's had. With the reputation John Winchester had, he wouldn't have been all that surprised to hear it.

The kid got a good swing in, twisting Gordon's head to the side and sending him staggering back a couple feet. He had a lot of muscle on him and good weight behind the punch. But Sam went down hard when Walker lifted one booted foot and slammed it into the kid's stomach. The younger Winchester bounced off the kitchen cabinets, taking one clear off its hinges, and hit the floor on his stomach, groaning and trying to shake off the hits.

Gordon raised the back of his hand to his mouth, wiping at the blood pooling on his lip. He spat the remainder out on the floor before starting towards Sam. Eyes locked on his prey, he drew his hunting knife from his belt, intending to finish this. It was bloodier than a gun, sure, but Gordon wasn't squeamish.

Sam picked his head up from the floor, one hand curled under his chest. There was the kind of glare on his face that immediately drew Gordon up short. A promise of violence a man like Gordon had seen before, on other hunters and other things before they tore into their prey and ripped away lives. The younger Winchester curled his upper lip in a sneer, pulling his arm out from under him, hand wrapped tight around something silver.

His gun. The kid's gun. Sam had hit the ground right on top of his gun.

With wide eyes and a surprised intake of breath, Gordon turned one-eighty. He dove out of the kitchen, throwing himself into the living room as the other hunter fired three shots off.

-o-o-o-

Dean was still staring at the nuclear shadow burnt into the ground when he saw Cas start to list to the left. The hunter was by the angel's side, dropping to his knees, in time to catch his friend before he hit the ground.

"Cas!" The angel was not quite dead wait in his arms, but he wasn't much better than it. "Shit, I thought you said that douchebag was

going to heal you."

Cas struggled to get back to his knees without the human's assistance, but only half managed it. The angel found much of his weight still leaning against Dean, much to his chagrin. "His betrayal came before the healing was complete."

"Yeah, that figures." Dean maneuvered one of Cas's arms up and over his shoulders, latching onto the floppy wrist with his other hand. "You gonna be okay?"

It was almost a redundant question, at this point. Dean knew his friend wasn't bullet proof, but Cas was damn near close. And persistent as hell.

"I will manage," the angel answered predictably, though Dean could hear the exhaustion in his voice.

Before he could get them back on their feet, though, Castiel reached over with his free hand, latching onto Dean's shirt. The hunter paused, understanding instinctually that Cas was asking him to wait. He met those intense, captivating blue eyes, and waited. There was a lot in that silence exchange, some that Dean most definitely got and more that he didn't. Then the angel lowered his gaze back to the last of his brother. A permanent scar across the earth and that bloodied angel blade.

Proof of what he'd done.

(What *Dean* had done, not Cas. The human would defend that decision until he was blue in the face, right along with Cas's lack of blame in any of it.)

Realizing that blade was a resource they absolutely couldn't afford to waste, Dean bent at the waist to pick it up. Cas watched him with those wide eyes that were so easily mistaken for naïve. Dean had to fight back the surge of insecurity and self-consciousness at the intensity of that gaze, which did not diminish as he straightened back up and wrapped his arm, sword in hand, around Cas's waist once more.

Maybe taking the sword of a murdered angel was a serious faux-pas in angelic culture? Not that the Cas Dean knew had ever complained before. Of course, that Cas had been through two celestial wars before they really got to that point. There'd been as many discarded angel blades lying around as there had been angels still trying to kill them.

"How did you do that?" Cas finally asked, voice filled with astonishment, confusion, and exhaustion, but not so much anger.

"Sleight of hand," Dean answered with a weak smile, hauling the angel up to his feet. How the hell were they gonna get out of here and back to the Impala – back to *Sam* – when Dean didn't even know where they were and their usual ride could barely stand upright? "I picked his pocket, Cas."

The angel continued to stare. As that feeling of self-consciousness kept right on increasing, Dean shrugged awkwardly. "I saw it in a movie once."

Castiel recognized the defensive tone, the way that this particular human spoke when he was deflecting. But that was not what the angel was concerned about. His gaze dropped to Uriel's blade, tucked into his side by Dean's supportive hand around his waist.

"That is an angel blade," he clarified, though he knew from the absorption of some of that grace in Dean's chest that the hunter was familiar with the weapon. Perhaps not enough to understand Castiel's astonishment, or concern, though. "It is a manifestation of grace, tied to the specific angel who summoned it. You should not even be able to *hold* it in this form, let alone have removed it from Uriel's person."

No human soul should have been capable of wielding an angelic blade. The fact that Dean had been able to 'pick his pocket' without Uriel even realizing his blade had been removed from the ether and taken off of him…

"Yeah, well, you know," Dean's shoulders lifted up again in a shrug, Cas's arm going with them as they started hobbling towards what Dean thought was a road in the distance. It was an edge of the field, at least, though whether or not there was pavement at that edge was something to be determined in a minute. "It's like what you said, in Heaven when I broke Uriel's weak-ass grace-rope. It's the- that sliver- it's Chest Cas. Or something."

When those ridiculously wide blue eyes just kept right on staring, Dean started getting more than just defensive.

"You're the one that said it," he grumble darkly, but Cas was already shaking his head.

"If that is true, it's very alarming."

Dean glared at his best friend, who had a blank look on his face. That one that old Cas (pre-Apocalypse Cas) used to get. The one of numb shock. It was the face he'd worn when he'd come back from their 1973 weekend, 'surprised' to be alive.

"Yeah, well, it's saved your skin twice now, so just-"

"Drop it. Yes, I know," Cas finished for him, nodding his head tiredly. He gave Dean the side-eye, but didn't push any further. "For now, we have more important concerns."

Dean knew that tone right along with that face. That was the tone that Sam had, and Ellen and Bobby and Jody, too, when they were taking his forced attempt at a subject change with grace and a grain of salt. It was the tone that said, *we're not done talking about this.* In fact, almost everyone Dean had ever interacted with for more than a day in his life seemed to possess that tone.

It was like they all thought avoiding conversation was a habit of his, or something.

"Yeah, sure," Dean agreed, knowing he might have to revisit this discussion later but still happy to be done talking about it right *now*. He didn't know why he got defensive anytime anyone brought up Chest Cas like he was a bad thing. Okay, he absolutely knew why; that was the last of his best friend and he'd be damned before anyone took that sliver of angel away from him. But that was serious chick-flick territory and Dean didn't venture into that territory unless he was dragged kicking and screaming. So, for now, he'd just stick with the defensiveness.

(The world could suck it up and deal for all he cared.)

In the meantime, Cas had a point. They had other problems. Plenty of them, in fact. Dean hefted the angel a little tighter to his side, taking on a little more of his weight as he looked around, still eyeing the edge of the field and possible road. The middle of absolute friggin' nowhere.

"We gotta get out of here."

They needed to get back to civilization, back to Dean's body, back to Sam who was most definitely in danger. Whoever it was who'd taken him out had some serious skill. Dean hadn't even seen them coming. And if they were targeting both Winchesters, then Sam was gonna need all the heads-up Dean could get him.

If they weren't already too late, of course. In which case, Sam would need the backup.

(His little brother had better not be dead already, damnit. They'd *just* gotten free from Heaven. There was no way they were going back for a second rescue mission.)

(Unless, of course, Sam was dead. Which was why he *better friggin' not be*.)

"Yes. We were not discrete in our exit from Heaven." Cas sounded repentant about that and Dean wanted to roll his eyes. Like they'd had the luxury of stealth or forethought while they'd been running for their lives. "Now an angel is dead. Heaven will be coming for me."

The hunter pulled up, realizing what his friend was saying.

'I'm hunted, Dean. I rebelled and I did it, all of it, for you.'

Dean stared at Cas, halfway through a swallow that was now very much stuck in the rough, raw lump in his throat. He stared at his friend, who was caught between despondency and resolve, and something in Dean's chest twinged for him. He'd never been good at sympathizing with Cas's loss of home and family, because Dean always figured he'd gotten a better home, a better family, in exchange. But he'd also forgotten what that loss looked like, up close, on Cas's face.

The reminder of it kinda sucked ass. Dean looked away, adjusting his grip and getting them moving again. "Rachel will back you up. She'll explain what happened, Cas."

Cas shook his head, the weight of it hanging in exhaustion. He still only barely understood his third in command's role in all of this, but he knew what it would lead to. Re-education by Zachariah's hand or reprogramming by Naomi's. Neither of which he would ever wish on his friend and kin. Knowing Rachel as he did, she had likely been attempting to fulfill what she believed to be her duty.

"If she does, Zachariah will only hold her responsible for my transgressions. No… It would be best if she were not involved any further." Cas hesitated for a moment and Dean unconsciously tightened his grip on the angel's wrist, eyes still on that possible road. "I believe my time as a 'spy' in Heaven has ended. My ship has 'sunk', as you said."

It took Dean a moment to recall the memory. Partially because he was

distracted by the angel – weak, struggling to stay upright on his own – still using his dwindling energy to make damn air quotes. Dean was gonna have to have a serious talk with Angela about what kind of shit she kept putting in his head. But the memory of Sam trying to convince Cas that returning to Heaven was a ship that had sailed (and Dean grumpily snarking that it was just about sunk in his opinion), did eventually come to him. The hunter winced.

He wanted it to be true, he couldn't deny that, but Dean knew Heaven was still this Cas's home. To hear the angel give up on it…. Well, it was apparently a reminder he didn't *get* to ignore.

He'd seen Cas abandon his home once before. He'd seen the angel chose Dean over Heaven, and struggle with the pain that choice brought him. The weight of it on his shoulders, carried alone, because Dean was no good at sharing weight, be it his or anyone else's.

And he knew where it had led, too. To an angel, drunk on one hell of a bender, telling Dean to all but fuck off because he and his brother broke the world, and Cas had lost everything for nothing.

Dean wanted things to be different this time. He was *trying.* Damnit, he was giving it everything he had, but that still might not be enough, and he knew it. Dean knew, from experience now (plenty of it) that he couldn't promise any of those changes. He couldn't promise Cas they wouldn't break the world anew, again, maybe even worse this time.

'Of everything that has happened or will happen…meeting you and Sam is not one that I, or any version of me, will ever regret.'

Green eyes slipped closed at the memory. The voice of an angel in his head and in his chest, sitting on a picnic table with him at a kid's birthday party, their knees knocking, sharing a beer and a talk so long overdue.

'Not for all of Heaven would I take back what rebelling brought me, Dean.'

Family. Cas had said it brought him family. All that pain, the loss and anger and despair, had given him what he'd always wanted in the end. A family that loved him. Dean had to trust – he *had to* – that Chest Cas wasn't wrong. Wouldn't be wrong. That the Cas in his arms wouldn't live to regret this any more than the past version of himself.

"I'm sorry, Cas," the hunter said quietly. Even though he wasn't sorry to get his angel away from that toxic place filled with winged dicks, he was sorry for what it cost his friend. What it still might.

"It was inevitable," was the angel's hollow reply, and Dean didn't like the monotone drag of it one bit. Or his friend being back to that inevitable destiny crap. But, he supposed, Cas was allowed his time to grieve and Dean had to get better about giving that to him.

"How bad are you hurt?" Dean asked, deciding to change the topic for now. They needed to get out of there and Cas was their fastest option, if that option was even available. "Can you get us out of here?"

They needed to get back to his body. If they could do that, then Cas could rest and Dean would take care of the rest. Figure out which son of a bitch pulled one over on him and where Sam was. Though, at this point, the hunter was seriously worried Cas might not have it in him to bring him back to life, which he'd sort of been counting on since this little misadventure began.

"Yes," Cas replied, but his weak voice wasn't installing much confidence in the human. He remembered more than once when Cas announced he was perfectly fine when he absolutely was not. "Where is your body?"

Deciding the angel was – hopefully – being honest about his capabilities, Dean rattled off directions the best he could. An approximate location, a gas station on the southwestern edge of Lafayette, Indiana, and before he could go into any further detail – like asking Cas if he even had it in him to bring Dean back – they were whisking away on Angel Air.

-o-o-o-

As he hit the ground in the living room, bullets from Sam Winchester's gun flying right by his ear and head, Gordon rolled. It took three turns to the side, across debris-strewn ground, but the hunter didn't stop until he was out of Sam's line of fire. He scrambled to his butt once he was clear, shuffling backwards in a rapid crabwalk until his back hit the wall between him and the younger Winchester. Once there, he kept carefully pressed to the wall, legs coiled into his torso, ready to spring back up. His fingers itched to wrap around a weapon longer-range than his knife.

His rifle was still in the kitchen. With Sam. He wondered if the kid would try to take him out through the wall. There wasn't much left to this old house, but Winchester's handgun wasn't the type of caliber to make it through the dual layers of wood (probably). His rifle, on the other hand…

Gordon eyed the table six feet away, two handguns sitting on top, just waiting. Waiting, of course, in perfect line of sight of the kitchen. The hunter leaned his head back against the wall with a breath of laughter, loud enough for Sam to surely hear him. He doubted the kid had it in him to use that rifle. With a chuckle, Gordon decided to roll the dice on that bet. Letting his head loll to the side, he eyed the doorway into the kitchen, smoke and dust still lingering in the air. "Not bad, Sammy."

"It's Sam," the Winchester barked back from the kitchen, moving away from the doorway cautiously, kicking the rifle back against the far wall and well out of reach. He stuck to his trusted .45 handgun, raised in both hands, just waiting for a target to shoot.

As he moved cautiously – quietly – towards the other end of the room, putting as much distance between himself and Gordon as possible, Sam marked potential exits. (Back door, window over the sink, window on the far wall, partially blocked by junk leaning against it from the outside.) He triple checked for any other traps Gordon might have rigged. As he got to the end of the galley kitchen, Sam realized the far end of the wall between the living room and kitchen, the wall Gordon was obviously pressed to the other side of, had been partially taken down. Probably by some teens and a sledgehammer during a drunken night, given the discord of the deconstruction. By the grace of those drunken kids, though, there was a four foot gap beside the exterior wall, leaving a clear path to the living room. To Gordon.

Sam checked back towards the doorway, but he couldn't see the hunter from his current spot. He thought he might know where Gordon was against the wall, given a lack of light coming through sections of the deteriorating wall, but he wasn't sure. Maybe he could sneak up on him through the gap, get into the living room without the other hunter seeing it coming. As long as Gordon didn't manage to round the corner into the kitchen and target him first, assuming he had a backup weapon on hand (he was a hunter. He had a backup, the only question was what kind?). The younger Winchester kept himself pressed to the exterior wall beside the hole, gun up, keeping his eyes trained between the far doorway and the man-made gap.

"Where the hell is my brother, Gordon?" he called out, hoping to get a read on Gordon's location as long as he could keep him talking. And a location on his brother, damn it.

"Dean?" Gordon let out another low chuckle that set Sam's teeth on edge. "Oh, Dean's dead."

Sam, who had been stepping over what was left of the wall – a low-lying foot or so of boards, broken studs, and plaster – froze. He almost put his foot down on the other side, but pulled back at the last second, both feet firmly in the kitchen. Sam found his gun down by his side before he realized he'd lowered it.

Then the anger hit. And with it, the buzzing just beneath his skin.

"You're lying," he spat out instead through clenched teeth. His fingers curled into fists, ever tightening, until his joints ached, his fingernails cut through skin, and his knuckles turned white. The hand wrapped around his gun started shaking.

Gordon was lying. He *was.*

"I'm not," came the honest reply. Too damn honest.

Then something was sliding across the ground. Sam could hear it. The hunter tensed, eyes immediately going to the hole in the wall he stood next too, expecting a grenade to roll right into view. Only it wasn't the sound of something rolling, but sliding. A phone, bumping along the uneven ground, skidded into view, stopping a few feet short of Sam but well within grabbing distance.

(So much for the element of surprise. Sam should have known. No hunter chose a location for a meet without knowing every inch of it. Like a four-foot hole into the kitchen.)

It wasn't Dean's phone, so it must be Gordon's. It was on, screen lit with a picture Sam couldn't make out from the distance or angle. But he wasn't stupid enough to stick his head out right where Gordon could shoot it.

"Go on," Gordon drawled, a chuckle in his tone that had Sam clenching his free fist. "I won't shoot. Scout's honor. All I've got on me's a knife, Sammy."

Sam's face twisted in indecision, in frustration. But his brother was worth the risk. Dean would always be worth the risk and the younger Winchester *had* to know.

He stepped through the gap in the wall, gun up and immediately trained on Gordon, who was watching him with those dark, intense eyes of his. The hunter was crouched in a squat over by the kitchen entrance, knees up and ready to spring, but hands raised out by his sides. There was nothing but a knife in one of them, just like he'd said.

Gordon kept that arm – his far arm – purposefully loose and lower, no indication that he planned to throw that blade.

Sam lowered himself to one knee beside the phone, gun and eyes never leaving the other hunter. He grabbed the phone off the ground and stood immediately, weapon gripped so tightly that it was only seconds away from shaking. He thought about asking Gordon why he shouldn't just shoot him now. But he knew the answer, both the one he'd get and the one he knew for himself. So he crossed back into the kitchen, out of sight once more, and looked down at the phone.

He should have shot him. He should have shot the son of a bitch.

It was Dean. The photo on Gordon's phone was of his brother, lying on the ground in a pool of blood, the aftermath of a rifle round obscuring half his face in blood and damage.

Oh god.

Sam lowered the phone, looking away, then back, then away again. His eyes shot to the rifle, a dozen feet away and capable of getting through that wall, easy. He thought of taking Gordon's head right off his shoulders. Then Sam could take a fucking picture of *that.* The hunter shook his head, teeth clenched so tight his jaw shook in pain. His eyes dropped to his hands, to his own body as it shook, at his fist wrapped around a gun that openly trembled in rage.

That buzz was growing. Like bees in his ears, he almost couldn't hear anything else. The younger Winchester (could he be the younger if there was no longer an older?) slammed his eyes shut as it became overwhelming. *Kill.* It wanted to kill. It wanted to tear and rip and revenge. It wanted *blood.*

His eyes shot open and Sam was lucky Gordon was on the other side of the room. Not only because there was no question the younger hunter would tear him to shreds if he so much as caught a glimpse of him right now, but also because, unbeknownst to Sam, his eyes had gone pitch black.

-o-o-o-

When they landed, they landed hard, but Dean hadn't been expecting much better. He managed to keep on his feet, just barely. Unfortunately, Cas staggering to the side took them both down to their knees.

"Shit, Cas," Dean muttered, no heat in the words and far more concern. They were at the gas station Dean last remembered, kneeling on the dirty, oil stained pavement between the pumps. The roof above them was dark, lights still off.

At least it was still night. They hadn't been gone that long.

Dean craned his neck to the left and right, back going rigid when he found what he was looking for. His body, twenty feet away, lying cold and lifeless on the ground a half dozen feet from his untouched Baby. Thank god for that, at least. There was a lot of blood, but it looked like the Impala had escaped most of it. Not that Dean could really tell from so far away. The blood splattering his dead, grey skin, pooling on the ground, thick and congealed, was so dark it looked black anyway. Dean shivered, tightening his grip on Cas's waist without realizing he was doing it. The angel was breathing heavy, leaning against him, and Dean swore again.

"Are you even gonna be able to bring me back?"

"Yes," the angel replied, voice firm even if the volume was weak the word a bit breathless. Then, after a beat, he conceded, "I will try."

Yeah, that sounded more like it. Not that Castiel, Angel of the Lord, knew how to do anything half-assed. Dean knew too well that his friend was more likely to get himself killed trying than to stand on the sidelines when there was work to be done.

"It's not gonna kill you, right? Cuz I'm not cool with that, just so you know." Dean tightened his hand around the angel's wrist, readjusted his grip around Cas's waist, and hauled them both back to their feet. The angel next to him tried and failed to hide a groan. "And don't tell me you'll be 'greatly weakened' when what you mean is, 'yes, Dean, this will damn near kill me.'"

The lack of immediate response was telling, and Dean resisted the urge to roll his eyes for about the tenth time that night. Ya know, he didn't usually hate being right, but when it came to the angel currently in his arms, he almost always did end up hating it. The price of knowing someone too well, he supposed.

"It *will* greatly weaken me," Cas insisted, resisting the air quotes and managing a very reserved amount of sarcasm, something he was still learning how to apply in the first place. "But I do not believe it will kill me. I am not as damaged as I was in Rivergrove."

Dean arced a very skeptical eyebrow as he started them, one step at a time, towards his corpse. "You sure about that? Cuz you sure as hell look just as bad."

The angel was leaning heavily on the hunter as he shuffled one foot at a time alongside him. Dean supposed the guy's color was better than it had been after that trap, after he'd- she'd exorcised the shit out of Azazel. But Dean also knew from his chat with Rachel that he wasn't *actually* seeing a human body right now. How he was supporting Cas, his hand very clearly fisted in the angel's stupid trench coat when he wasn't even wearing one – wasn't even *physical*, apparently – the hunter didn't have a clue.

Too much for his *limited* human brain, apparently.

Well, fuck that, Dean thought, hauling the angel ever closer to his body. The hunter glanced around surreptitiously as they got out from under the roof of the gas station. Whoever had iced him had done it with a high powered rifle. That much was clear from the damage his skull had taken (and 'damage' was not a descriptive enough word. God damn, was that a mess. A mess Dean had not needed permanently implanted in his psyche, thank you very much). Rifle meant sniper, though, and if it had been Dean doing the shooting, he'd have taken the shot from the gas station roof. The guy (or girl. Dean was totally an equal opportunity victim of murder) was likely long gone, but there was no reason to be stupidly oblivious *twice* in one night.

The length of the roof was dark and empty against the starry sky. Not that Dean had really been expecting anything else.

The older Winchester bit back a dozen curses he wanted to let loose as they moved into the open space and his corpse just beyond that. Dean was friggin' annoyed with himself for making such an amateur mistake. 2006 Dean might not have been able to spot a sniper or been prepared for someone trying to take him out, but 2016 Dean sure as hell had a lot more experience with that shit. He shouldn't have let his guard down so damn much.

"Who did this to you?" Cas asked, voice quiet and grave as they got to his body. Dean helped the angel down to his knees, Cas immediately reaching out to press a hand to Dean's forehead. Well, the corpse's forehead. Dead Dean's forehead. Whatever.

"Don't know. But whoever they are, they're gonna be dead once I catch up to 'em." The hunter shook his head and looked away, not really

needing the image of his own corpse stuck in his head, or Cas kneeling beside it, either. The bullet had clearly entered above his right ear and taken a baseball sized chunk of his head with it, but the angel didn't seem to care that he was getting covered in half-coagulated blood and what was most definitely brains. Dean was trying really, *really* hard not to think about it.

Looking away was totally helping. A hundred percent. Abso-fucking-lutely.

He scanned the roof again, but came up empty. Given that congealing blood and the color of his skin (likely the temperature too, though only Cas could confirm that and Dean *wasn't* asking), he'd been dead for a couple hours. No sniper was going to hang out waiting for a dead body to wake up. Well, no normal sniper, anyway. Dean itched to get up on that roof, to look for clues as to who the hell had the balls to take Dean Winchester out and not do it to his face.

Something was poking at the back of his brain, the very beginnings of his Timey Senses tingling, but Dean couldn't pinpoint the cause yet. It was pissing him off, almost as much as being murdered.

He turned back to the kneeling angel and Dead Dean. Cas's hunched posture and the barest tremble in his fingertips gave the hunter immediate pause. As did the fact he wasn't already re-alive. The angel wasn't usually one to waste time. Like, at all.

"You sure you got this in you, Cas?"

"Yes," the angel confirmed, sounding more confident this time. Cas shifted, blue eyes looking up to meet Dean's. The graveness in those watery pools was achingly familiar to the hunter. "But it *will* weaken me. The demonic trap caused damage to my core. Uriel began the healing process, but the fight has undone some of that. The cracks are…mended, but still-"

"Tender," Dean completed almost instinctually. Like a freshly closed wound. Pulling at it still hurt like hell.

"Yes. And it is…incredibly draining. Continuing to heal them on my own is taking up a lot of my grace." That explained the dark circles under Jimmy Novak's eyes and the breathlessness of his words. Like the guy had just run a marathon, stopped for a break to bring a dude back from the dead, then went on to run another. "I am more tired than I am in pain."

Dean crouched down beside him, eyeing his own body as Cas withdrew the hand from his forehead. The angel had dragged his fingers over the hunter's eyes, closing them. What a…human thing to do, Dean thought absently, and wondered where Castiel had learned that. He turned away from the trails of blood, two near identical ones, left on his eyelids from Cas's fingers and looked at the angel, instead.

"You'll recover, though. Right?"

"With rest, yes." Castiel met his gaze, the seriousness in his expression was as much a warning as his next words. "This may be all I am able to do for a time, Dean."

"Got it," the hunter answered firmly, with as much confidence as he could muster. What was he always telling Sam? He was a friggin' competent hunter, he didn't *need* an angel to do everything for him. Just…literally save his life, first. "You get me back in my body and I'll take care of the rest, alright?"

Cas nodded and turned back to the body beneath them.

"Um, here," Dean said suddenly, voice both uncertain and rushed. Cas looked back over at him, only to drop his eyes to the angelic blade at the end of Dean's extended arm. "You should take this."

Because Dean was pretty sure he wouldn't wake up with it magically in his hand once he got back in his body. (And he didn't want to think about where it would be if it didn't go along with him when he woke up. He knew Cas pulled his blade from the 'ether', whatever the hell that was, and Dean really wasn't comfortable with the idea of a magic floating sword hanging out next to his soul somewhere in 'magic space'. If that's even what would happen. Dean was pretty sure upon re-entry, he'd just drop the dumb thing and it would sit, invisible, in a gas station parking lot for the rest of all eternity. Wouldn't that be a waste.)

Cas stared at the weapon, his face unreadable. Dean had to tell himself – twice – to give his friend the minute he clearly needed, before Cas silently reached out and took the blade from Dean. He stowed it in the sleeve of his coat and turned back to the corpse below them. Cas reached out again, pressing two fingers to the cold, dead skin of his charge. Dean sucked in a breath of air, eyes closing against his will as he expected to feel…something. Maybe a pull back into his body, or just a surge of energy or…something.

He kind of expected to jerk upward and find himself in a freshly

healed body sitting in a pool of his own blood.

Instead, he heard a thud and his eyes shot back open.

Cas was unconscious, sprawled on his side beside Dean's corpse, which was…no longer a corpse. His first fear that Cas had totally miscalculated what he had left and had passed out before bringing Dean back was completely negated by the breathing, fleshy, pink-cheeked, *glowing* body beside it. The hunter blinked at it, temporarily stalled in his usual, instinctual need to check on Cas by the glowy-ness. The not-corpse was emitting a faint, golden light and, as Dean realized he could almost feel it, the hunter took a much slower, measured breath in.

It was like a faint pull. No, not even a pull, an enticement.

Come to me.

Oh, Dean wanted to. He even shuffled towards that goal, unconsciously reaching out for his body, before he remembered his unconscious best friend passed the hell out beside his not-corpse.

"Shit, Cas." The hunter turned away from the glowing body, disturbed by how difficult that was to do, and instead knelt beside the collapsed angel. He reached out, shaking the guy's shoulder, but Cas didn't so much as move, let alone wake. "Cas, come on, buddy!"

Dean glanced at his body again. Okay. He could totally handle this. Just…uh…climb inside, wake up, get Cas in the car, and figure out who had killed him, was probably after Sam right now, and oh, yeah, Sam's location. No problem. He totally had all that. Totally.

The hunter stood back up, ready to do just that, when he faltered for a second time. Dean glanced back at Cas's body, then his own, eyes growing wide with pained realization.

Oh shit. *Shit!*

Cas wasn't *in* a vessel right now, no matter what it looked like to Dean's *limited* human perception (still a sore point, clearly). The angel was pure grace beyond that trench coat and tie. Celestial wavelengths of intent or some shit like that. Point was, the angel wasn't actually an unconscious body lying on the ground. Whatever he actually was, it was something Dean wouldn't be able to *see* once he was back in his body, let alone pick up and carry to the car.

"Son of a *bitch*," Dean cursed, glancing between the glowing, soulless body beckoning him like a sweet, sweet siren, and the pile of limp, unmoving angel on the ground. They didn't have *time* for this, damnit. He needed to get to Sam, to warn him something was coming. But it wasn't like he could leave Cas behind, either. "You couldn't have passed out *after* I got back in my body, Cas?"

The lone hunter looked around the gas station, wondering what the hell he was going to do now.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: It's not…entirely a cliffhanger? It's like…a crumbling edge of a cliff, and you're standing a couple feet back but there's also a wall at your back (don't ask) and you've got nowhere to go and that crumbling cliff is coming your way!

…Yeah, sure, that analogy totally checks out. Let's go with that.

Reviews: I am slowly trying to get through at least some of your awesome, spectacular reviews! I've started over on ff dot net, but I'll move to AO3 by end of week hopefully! Thanks again for all your awesomeness, guys!

Up Next: Cas needs to lay off the fries, Dean needs to work out more, Sam's doing scary shit, Gordon's realizing he's in deep shit (serves him frickin' right), and Angela Garrett wakes up at Bobby's with a tube down her throat and distinct lack of angel in the driver's seat.

Chapter 96: Season 2: Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: You know what happens when I don't have time to edit a chapter until Saturday, and then I waste half of that Saturday procrastinating? I'm too damned tired to be funny in the A/Ns. ._. This is no bueno.

Chapter Reference – The Start of This Hunt: Since it has been like six weeks since this arc began, this is a reminder that this whole hunt started with a case Bobby caught wind of: a possible werewolf in Lafayette. The boys checked it out, only to find it was a bust. Just a random guy stabbed in a parking lot, possibly with the silver blade, after some very random animal attacks that coincided to make it look like a werewolf. Also, Dean drove further out of town then he meant to because there'd been a car on his tail (which he thought was Sam) that eventually turned off when he started trying to lose him. See **Chapter 89** and **90** for a refresher.

Chapter Reference – Dean's time as a Ghost: After the Season 1 finale when the Impala was t-boned off the road, Dean was in a coma and dying. He spent time as a ghost in the hospital, running around with Cas (who was really Tessa). He (she) gave him lessons in being a ghost, which pretty much boiled down to "stop trying to attack it, you idiot." As per canon, when Dean woke up, he remembered none of this. For a refresher course, see **Chapter 35: Season 2, Chapter 2**.

Original Timeline Reference – Cole, the ghost Kid (4.15 Death Takes a Holiday): The Winchesters meet a kid named Cole, who died and never had his soul picked up by Reapers. In order to talk with the kid, the brothers get the help of Pamela Barnes to project their souls on the astral plane and spend some time as ghosts with Cole, who teaches them how to interact with the world and move things without touching them.

Chapter Reference – Gordon: Quick reminder that the boys ran into Gordon in this story the same way they ran into him in the original timeline; they caught a vampire case and found Gordon tailing them. Dean insisted they leave him to it, but slipped up by saying a line Gordon said to him the first time around. Dean was unaware of it, but it set alarm bells off for Gordon, who asked

around and learned Dean was psychic. See **Chapter 60: Season 2, Chapter 27** for a refresher!

Original Timeline Reference – Gordon Learning about Sam (2.10 Hunted): In the show, it was not 100% clear whether Gordon learned about Sam as a psychic from his Roadhouse connections or from the demon he exorcised in Louisiana who started babbling about the upcoming war, psychics on Hell's side, and Sam Winchester as one of them. I like to think it was the demon, and his Roadhouse connections managed to confirm it. I'll be playing something similar here.

Fun fact #210: I have googled the transcript for 2.10 Hunted so many times that both Google and my internet browser suggest it as the first thing anytime I type "s" into the search bar or URL field ._.

Fun Fact #211: I have got to be on some pretty interesting government lists out there for my Google Search Results by now. Assault rifles, sniper rifles, hunting knives, hand guns, ammo, grenades, how to build grenades, how does a grenade explode, what does a grenade smell like when it explodes, various building blue prints, how are walls built, how thick are walls, can grenades explode through walls, how about handguns versus rifle rounds when it comes to piercing walls, and every possible way you can drive into Sioux Falls from every direction that exists on Earth. Oh yeah. My government must know I'm a Supernatural Writer or they think I'm planning a terrorist plot in South Dakota.

Chapter Warnings: Dean and Cas are falling through the Impala, then falling into the Impala (don't get your hopes up, Destiel Fans. We're still so deep in that river in Egypt). Dead Dean is a Forghorn-blowing, glowing corpse of impatience (I swear it'll make more sense below), Sam is pissed, then laughing, then pissed, and Gordon is really lucky he's not dead yet. Oh, and the author's pulling a parody on one of the most beloved lines of the show. It's reeeeal subtle, so keep an eye out for it and try not to laugh (the subtle bit was pure sarcasm)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 63

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Good god, Cas. You gotta lay off the fries, buddy."

Dean groaned as he pulled the angel up, his own body half into Baby's backseat, attempting to haul his passed out friend up and into the back of the black muscle car. It was proving way more difficult than he'd figured. First off, it hadn't occurred to Dean that he had to first figure out *how* to open Baby's back door as nothing more than a soul. He'd hauled Cas all the way over there, gone to prop the guy up against the rear tire well, only to have him go right through and take Dean down to the ground with him.

The hunter was never speaking of this to anyone *ever*.

First thing he'd done after landing on top of Cas, his vision going through the most screwed up tilt-a-whirl of his life as he passed *through* his car, was to straighten right back up and out of the side panel and look around to make sure no one had seen that. Step two was to scramble off the angel he was straddling so he could grab Cas's feet and haul the guy back out from under the car.

Dude, being dead sucked. Being dead and stuck with an unconscious angel sucked more.

Luckily, a soul and a ghost seemed to be about the same damn thing, and he knew how to be a ghost. Well, sort of. It had been a while since he'd played Swayze with a pretty cool ghost named Cole after Reapers had stopped picking souls up from his hometown. But Dean remembered the couple of lessons the kid had tried to teach him and Sam.

Weirdly enough, when his hand went right through the door handle on his first attempt, Dean could have sworn he heard Cas's voice in his head, telling him to stop trying to punch it. Presence, not force. Or… something like that. The hunter just shook his head, unable to place the memory, and tried again.

And again. And again. But eventually, his palm *did* wrapped around solid metal, and he yanked Baby's door open as fast as possible before his soul or his car changed either of their minds.

The second factor in *why-the-hell-is-this-so-much-harder-than-it-should-be* was that, apparently, Cas had not been leaning half his weight on Dean when the hunter hauled him all around that field and then the gas station. More like a tenth of it, given the guy now felt like three

hundred pounds of dead weight. Then again, Dean was apparently hauling around a wave of celestial intent the size of the Chrysler building and not the skinny tax twerp it currently looked like, so maybe that explained it.

That, or Jimmy Novak was way more jacked than Dean suspected under that rumpled shirt and askew tie.

…Not that he was thinking about that. At all. What the hell.

(Fucking *Andy*, man!)

"Jesus," Dean huffed out as he got half of the angel to stay, chest-down, on the back seat. He was pretty much just eternally thankful Cas hadn't dropped right through the car again. He so did not understand supernatural physics and he really, really didn't want to, either.

The hunter slumped onto the ground for a breather, leaning his head back against Baby's cool metal, thankful all over again for the single, solitary comfort of his Lady. When he could convince himself to move again, he'd have to go around to the other side and keep pulling the angel through that way. He felt like a friggin' child trying to haul their unconscious drunk of a parent into bed.

Not that Dean had any experience with that, or anything.

(That same child also had experience hauling two hundred and thirty pounds of a grown ass adult into the backseat of the Impala because John Winchester had taken a hit to the head, leaving Dean to finish the hunt and drive his dad back to the motel that night. So, yeah, this was all depressingly familiar when he thought about it. Which he wasn't.)

A shudder rippled through the hunter and Dean didn't bother biting back the groan that came with it. It wasn't like anyone was around the closed up gas station to hear (and even if there was, he was a friggin' spirit right now, so they wouldn't hear it *anyway*). The hunter pried open tired eyes, glaring at that glowing body two dozen feet away. Two dozen feet that were, apparently, two dozen too many.

That pull that Dean had felt – that gentle beckoning that had been wafting off his not-corpse ever since Cas brought it back to life – had grown *incessant* the further away he'd gotten from his body. What had once been a sweet siren's call was now a fucking fog horn in his ear, and every step he took further away from it had been twice as hard as

the one before.

Maybe that was why Cas felt like he weighed a couple hundred pounds more than he should. Dean certainly felt like he was dragging a dead body behind him in addition to the one he was hauling in front (not dead, just unconscious. Unconscious, injured, and permanently suffering from the worst case of bad timing on the *planet*!)

Another shudder encased him, followed by another groan that was getting dangerous close to a whine.

"Hold your horses, I'm coming," Dean grumbled at his still-glowing body (and he had not kept half an eye on it the entire time out of fear that whatever Cas had done had a time limit and that thing might stop glowing any minute now, ending his chances of ever waking back up. He totally hadn't fear that *at all*.) Dean rallied his energy for another round of his new favorite game: *Getting Your Unconscious Friend Into the Backseat*, complete with the new, limited edition *Elephant-Heavy-Angel-Friend* expansion pack!

Yay him.

(Games were for twelve year old nerds without girlfriends, damnit.)

Way back in the day, Dean had always thought getting Cas utterly smashed (like well and truly blackout drunk) would have been a sight to see. A happy Cas, that was. He'd seen the unhappy version the day Cas decided to crash a liquor store without Dean for company. But the human had been certain he could get his friend to happy drunk if given the opportunity and right timing. Not that those things had ever lined up. And once Cas lost most of his powers, the idea hadn't seemed like a good one anymore. Happy Cas hadn't really seemed an option after that, which was depressing as hell now that Dean was thinking about it.

Not that it mattered, considering the hunter was now making a new promise to himself. A commitment to never, ever, take this Cas out drinking. Not if he was the one who'd have to haul his inhumanly-heavy ass to the car.

(And he imagined flying under the influence was probably a no-no. Guy would likely go headfirst into a mountain halfway across the planet.)

Dean gave three good shoves to Cas's butt, totally ignoring where he was putting his hands as he did so (and *damnit,* Andy. This would not

be awkward if the damn kid – and *Heaven* – hadn't been filling his head with all sorts of details on male anatomy absolutely no one had ever asked for in the history of ever). It was a weak, last ditch attempt to get the guy further into the car without having to go to the other side to pull him through. That was going to be another seven feet more, at least, between him and the source of that incessant fog horn still screaming in his ear.

Those seven feet sounded *terrible*.

But eventually Dean had to call it; he ended up moving around the car to the passenger side. Every step felt like he was sinking in sludge and dragging half a bog with him. He was practically shaking by the time he made it, shudders running through him almost non-stop. Friggin' glowing body and its friggin' pushiness. (Dean did not poke his head above the roof of Baby's car to make sure the thing was still glowing. He didn't. He was just…making sure the gas station was still empty. Safe. Whatever, shaddup.)

Just like that shorter, weaker, but just as handsome version of Dean had done for his dad decades ago, the hunter grabbed a hold of Cas's wrists, planted his feet, and pulled. It took *ages* and a lot more effort and groaning than Dean would ever admit to later, but eventually he got Cas far enough into the car that he'd be able to close both doors (after a little creative leg-folding on the other end).

Dean slammed the passenger side shut and hurried back around to the other side, in part because he told himself he *was* in a hurry, but mostly because seven feet closer to his stupid body was seven feet less sludge and shudders and misery and '*Jesus fucking Christ, will you give me one damn minute, I'm* ***coming***!' The hunter eyed Cas's body, slumped face-down and motionless on the back seat. He took a minute to tuck the guy's legs in, sort of curled up beneath him and to the side, so that he'd be able to close the door when he woke back up in his body.

The older Winchester glanced over his shoulder at the thing, still glowing away, still fog-horning away.

"Okay, Cas…you better friggin' be here when I wake up."

And not, like, fall through the seat to the ground for Dean to later run over and then leave behind as invisible roadkill. Yeah. That was totally a thought he needed rattling around in his anxiety-riddled not-brain.

Awesome.

With that, Dean took a step back, away from the car and the unconscious angel. Cas didn't sink through the seat. Didn't move. Didn't wake up. The hunter swore internally, not knowing what he'd been expecting from his friend, who'd warned him this all might happen.

(Well, that wasn't true. Cas had said reanimating his body might be the last thing he was capable of doing, but Dean hadn't thought that meant *literally*. He really needed to teach this Cas how to be more friggin' specific. Particularly when he was seconds away from passing the fuck out.)

With an irritated noise in the back of his throat, Dean forced himself to turn away from that unconscious body he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to see once he was alive, and stomped over to his impatient not-corpse. Every step was like rainbows and butterflies and unicorn poop. It irritated the hunter to no end how damn good it felt in comparison to going the other direction.

"Friggin' impatient, demanding body," Dean growled lowly as he came to stand over his not-dead body. "Friggin' angels passing out on me. Friggin' mother effers *killing* me in the first place!"

The soul glanced around the gas station, eyes stopping once more on the roof. If he'd been planning on sniping someone, that's where he'd have done it from. So, step one: get his body back. Step two: get up on that roof.

The hunter couldn't quite help it. He cast one more quick look at Cas's half-curled, half-slumped form in the backseat of his Lady, and huffed. Step three: get back to the Impala and start driving, hopefully with an unconscious angel still in the backseat.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered under his breath before lifting his foot and nudging his own torso. He had no idea how to make this work other than *climb in*, which seemed to be the nonstop mantra coming off his not-corpse in waves.

Luckily, Mr. Insistent-Fucking-Fog-Horn knew plenty for the both of them. Like something out of *Jumanji*, Dean's foot straight up dissolved and swirled right into his body, sucking up the rest of him with it.

-o-o-o-

Sam stared at the gun in his hand and thought about shooting Gordon in the face with it.

That wasn't what the buzzing in his head – once in the back of his skull but now filling his entire cranium – wanted to do, though. Sam knew what it wanted. What *Azazel* wanted. Bloodshed. They wanted him to bathe in Gordon Walker's blood. To soak in it until Sam was painted red with his vengeance.

The picture alone should have sickened him. The fact that it didn't… well, that *was* enough to sicken Sam Winchester, to pull him away from the roaring of bees in his ears and the hot pulsing of angry, bubbling blood in his veins.

Sam kept black eyes locked on that gun and started counting off every memory he had of his brother calling him '*the boy with the demon blood.'* Not as an accusation – Sam knew it hadn't been that, not from Dean – but still, he counted them. Racked his brain for every story Dean had told him about his future brother who'd taken the wrong path. Who'd witlessly let his anger and his need to prove himself burn the whole world to the ground.

When Sam got to nine, he opened his fist, letting the gun balance in his palm. Both still shook, but they shook less. The buzz was still there, but he could hear past it. Could feel past it.

"It was a quick death." Gordon's voice was grating as Sam fought for enough control just to let it in. Smugness dripped in every word. Worse, the man actually thought he was being *sincere*.

Sam wished Dean had told him it would come to this. He no longer thought these events lined up with the world his brother came from (obviously, as Dean had lived in that timeline and Sam was pretty sure Gordon Walker killing him would have made the short version, regardless), but *this*. This monster wearing the clothes of a hunter. Sam would have let his brother kill Gordon that first night they'd met, with Sammy pinning the man to a wall and Dean holding a knife to his throat.

How did Dean pull away? Knowing he was letting this- this… *monster* go free? Sam would surely have killed him had he been in Dean's shoes.

The buzzing rose again. A crescendo of violence, begging for a finale. A horrendous, intoxicating itch just under his skin that Sam knew how to scratch. Knew how *good* it would feel. His fingers shook to make use of it. To- to *kill* the man who'd killed his brother.

"Why." Sam didn't know how he managed to speak when his jaw was

clenched so tight his entire face hurt from the tension of it. But he managed it.

Did it even matter why?

It really didn't, but Sam needed to know. He needed to make some sort of sense out of this, even when he knew there was nothing – *nothing* – that would ever make it better. No amount of explanation could excuse it, could make this right in the younger Winchester's mind.

Sam kept his eyes on his gun, still trembling in his open palm, and reminded himself that it would matter to Dean.

"You and your brother…" Gordon trailed off, and Sam heard his head thunk lightly against the wall between them. Once again, Sam eyes drifted to that rifle sitting a dozen feet away. "You're not like us, are you Sammy? You're not…human. Not where it counts."

His fist closed around that gun involuntarily and Sam had to shut his eyes to block it out. Gordon's voice. The buzzing. The need for blood so bad he could taste it in his mouth.

"Your brother was psychic."

Clear, brown eyes flashed open suddenly, a brilliant brain flaring to life and drowning out the emotion. The buzz was gone, buried beneath a new roaring, a cry against logic and law and common fucking decency.

That's what this was all about?

"He's still *human*," Sam countered, spitting the word out. This…this was *ridiculous!* The absurdity might have been hilarious, if it had been any other situation. If Dean wasn't *dead,* because Gordon had…. What? Had a problem with *psychics*?

Sam knew there were racist hunters out there. Hunters who weren't comfortable using the services of psychics and clairvoyants. Humans that were seen as *other.* The younger Winchester had never fit into that world like his family did, a world that operated in pure black and whites. No grey. Humans good, everything else bad. That had never made sense to Sam and it never would.

But *this?* Black and white was neither here nor there, right now. Dean being psychic – which he *wasn't* (and wasn't that the real kicker)– was

not an excuse to *kill* him. It wasn't an excuse to kill anyone. That was murder, plain and simple.

Sam heard fabric scuff against dilapidated wood and realized Gordon was shrugging. "He was dangerous, Sammy."

"It's *Sam*."

"A hunter should know better than to use an ability like that so openly. He was in my head, practically flaunted the fact." In the darkness of the living room, moonlight and a distant street light barely piercing through the motes of dust still hanging in the air, Gordon shook his head. "A hunter would know better. A psychic *should* know better. Your brother didn't."

"So this is personal?" Sam seethed from his side of the wall and for a time he forgot about the gun shaking in his fist, about his focus on it instead of what lay just beneath the skin. "A psychic caught some surface thought off you and your response is to *murder* them?"

"I'm not a killer, Sammy," Gordon scoffed and Sam wanted to *punch him*. "I'm a hunter and this isn't personal. Your brother was fair game."

-o-o-o-

Dean shot up with the gasp of a damn drowning man and *that* was familiar. That was what he'd been expecting, so despite the fact it hurt like a bitch and his lungs burned and his ribs had several complaints they'd like to register with the manager, it was mother effing *beautiful*. The hunter immediately groaned, curling up his shoulders and tilting his neck to either side to crack out the aches and pains and cramps. Damnit, waking up from the dead was never pleasant. Why couldn't, just once, it be a pleasant thing, with daisies or something.

No time for that, though.

The older Winchester scrambled to his feet, ignoring the protests of a body that had been lying in the beginnings of rigor mortis and congealed blood. Fun times. Dean ignored the cold, sticky wetness clinging to the back of his neck and head, and instead turned around to stare at the gas station roof. The hunter took a determined step forward – his intent to get up there as solid and pressing as stone – when he paused. Green eyes darted back to the Impala.

The rear driver's side door was open but the seat was empty. Dean's fingers curled into loosely-clenched fists and he told himself that

didn't mean anything. Cas was still there.

"You better be," he muttered, before setting his sights on that roof once more.

-o-o-o-

".223 caliber. Subsonic rounds." Dean stood up from his crouch on the edge of the building, dropping the bullet casing back to the gravel-topped roof. He'd seen this before. This exact damn setup. He remembered tackling the hunter who dared try and take out his brother just like this.

Gordon fucking Walker.

God *damn it*! He should have known. He should have *known*. Dean should have iced that hunter's ass the moment he walked back into their lives. Nothing good could ever come from letting that murdering psycho live.

"Son of a bitch," Dean swore viciously, turning and jogging back across the roof to the maintenance ladder he'd found on the far side. As he did, he hastily patted down his jacket and jeans, searching for his phone. He had to warn Sammy. He had no idea why Gordon decided to take him out first (or at all) this time. Hell, they hadn't even left him tied up in his own piss and blood for three days this go around! What the hell did Gordon have to be angry about *now?* But Dean knew one thing for sure. Time wanted to stay the same, and that meant Gordon Walker was going after Sam.

"Son of a *bitch*!" Dean screamed this time when his search came up empty. No phone. Gordon must have taken it. The hunter stopped on the edge of the building, one hand in a white-knuckled, angry grip around the pole of the ladder leading down. He tilted his head back, tension in his neck causing veins and tendons to bulge, eyes scrunched closed, as he resisted the urge to scream it a third time.

Of *course* Gordon had taken his phone. He'd laid a trap for Sam last time by making Dean call him up and deliver an address to meet him at. But the older Winchester had been able to tip him off with a code word. Now, with Dean dead in this version of events, Gordon would still probably use that same trap by sending a text instead, only Sam wouldn't have a clue he was walking into a trap.

'*Son of a bitch, son of a bitch, sonofabitch!*'

Dean was gonna kill him. He was gonna find him, then he was gonna *kill* him.

The hunter practically slid down the ladder rather than waste time scrambling down, and jumped off the top of the dumpster. He was bolting across the asphalt before he'd even hit it. Dean rounded the building and headed straight for the Impala. He didn't have time to hope Cas was still in the backseat, just slammed that door shut and ripped the driver's side open.

Baby was rumbling and peeling out of the gas station before his door was fully closed again.

"You better be okay, Sammy, or I'm gonna kill you myself," the hunter grumbled beneath his breath. Even as he said it, he couldn't help but check the rear view mirror, thinking the same damn thing about the invisible angel in his backseat.

-o-o-o-

The air around Sam started to vibrate in time with the bees in his ears and the pulse in his veins. The hunter didn't hear it through the buzz, but the wood around him began to groan and creak, the house physically shifting away from the promise of violence and destruction. In the living room, Gordon stilled, sharp hearing picking up on the noise but unable to identify its source. The hunter quickly rose to his feet, still keeping his back against the wall for the minimal protection it offered. The unknown now had him on edge. More on edge than their current standoff.

"What are you up to in there, Sammy?"

The kitchen groaned again and this time Gordon swore he felt the wall beneath him shudder. The hunter pushed off the wood, turning around to stare at the wall. Something between shock and trepidation started eating at his gut and chest as the wall shuddered and the wood started to warp, almost in slow motion, bulging out towards him.

This….this was…

"It's *Sam*," the other hunter roared from the kitchen and the house physically shook with the declaration. Enough so that Gordon took several steps away from the wall joining his room to the one the psychic – the *powerful* psychic – was currently in. "And you're *insane*."

Gordon watched the planks of wood tremble beneath bits of plaster,

sending dust and debris to the floor below. His dark eyes were wide as they slowly tracked across the wall towards that gap into the kitchen, where he knew Sam was. He had not been expecting *this*. That demon down in Louisiana had mentioned Sam Winchester was a psychic, had mentioned he was going to be a soldier in an upcoming war, fighting on the side of Hell. But that demon hadn't said anything about how strong he was. None of Gordon's Roadhouse connections had mentioned anything close to this level of power, for either of the Winchesters. This level of evil.

Gordon felt even better now knowing he'd put Dean down, and was more certain than ever that he needed to do the same to Sam. He needed to end it quickly, though, before the younger Winchester focused any of that power his way.

It might be too late for that, the hunter reasoned. He wasn't some reckless yahoo – he knew when he was in over his head. There was a sinking weight in his belly that always told Gordon when he was in trouble. But he was smart, too. He knew when to listen to it and when to put his head to work. His two handguns, sitting on the table only a dozen and a half feet away, were currently useless to him. That table was in direct line of sight of the gap in the kitchen wall. He'd be a turkey on a shooting range if he went for them. He still had his knife, at least, and Gordon was a damn good throw.

Against a psychic who could bend walls, though? Who knew.

Sam Winchester had been reasonable enough at the start of this – not even going for a kill shot when he definitely had the opening and the capability – before Gordon taunted him with his brother's death. Maybe he could distract the younger Winchester – snap him out of it or back him down – enough to get a shot in before the psychic turned truly deadly rather than just angry.

"I'm not unreasonable," he said, raising his voice above the creak and groan of the old house straining under the power of an upset psychic. "I understand the use of psychics, Sam. I do. But your brother crossed a line. He sided with *demons* over his own kind."

Inside the kitchen, Sam's eyes blinked, going once more from pure black to a confused, agitated, and impatient brown. The walls stopped fluctuating in an attempt to get away from the angry Winchester, but the power did not diminish completely. The tension left in the house, focused in the kitchen, was practically a presence unto itself. The buzzing in Sam's head barely diminished at all, the young hunter

going from angry to irritable but also perplexed.

"What are you talking about?"

"He wasn't one of us anymore, Sam. He wasn't a hunter." Gordon edged closer to the wall now that it had ceased its trembling, though he still got a distinct impression of danger wafting from the other side of it. Gordon pressed his hand against the wall, surprised to find the wood warmer than he thought it should be in an abandoned house in winter. That unfortunate sinking feeling in his gut got worse. No time to address it now; stick to the plan. "He was no better than the things we hunt."

"That's not true!" came the hissed reply, and Gordon pulled his hand off the wall when he *felt* it flux beneath his fingers. Wrong avenue, then.

"I saw it myself." The hunter took slow steps towards the doorway, eyes locked on the gap the entire time. He didn't think Sam was in a right enough state of mind to step through there, to attack him like a man rather than a psychic, but he'd been wrong before. "Your brother was with a woman when I took him down. A woman who disappeared in the blink of an eye, once their meet was done."

Gordon hadn't been expecting that, either. He'd pulled away from the scope, staring down at the solo Winchester, now alone in an empty gas station parking lot. And he'd known. He'd known killing Dean was the right choice. A hunter who associated with demons, did deals with demons, didn't start exorcising the thing right on the spot…well, that wasn't a hunter. That was fair game.

Laughter – cold, harsh, and bitter – erupted from the kitchen, stopping Gordon right on the threshold of the two rooms. He paused, glancing warily towards the other end of the room, towards where he knew Sam stood just on the other side of the flimsy wall. Laughter wasn't exactly what he'd been expecting, but as that feeling in his gut only got heavier, Gordon came to the realization that associating with demons was the norm for these two.

"You're a damn idiot, Gordon."

That, and the sudden rigid tension along his own spine, was the only warning Gordon got before Sam stepped into the living room, gun up and expression deadly. Gordon dove into the kitchen as a volley of shots rang out, some hitting the wall right where Gordon had been standing. He felt the stinging pain of a close call along the back of his

arm and shoulder blade, but it was a flesh wound at best.

Gordon hit the floor of the kitchen, close enough to his abandoned rifle to grab it. The hunter knew he had no time. Knew all Sam had to do was step back through the gap in the wall and keep on firing. Gordon rolled onto his back, rifle up and cocked, as Sam reappeared in that hole.

The Winchester got a shot off – Walker grunting through the flare of pain in his thigh – but so did Gordon, and he was aiming for a place a hell of a lot more permanent. Sam was spun around by the force of the bullet entering his upper chest, and he disappeared back into the living room.

-o-o-o-

His fingers were turning white around the steering wheel, his knuckles long past that color. Dean glanced at the dashboard clock again, though the dial had hardly moved a full dash mark since the last time he'd looked at it.

Four hours. It had been almost four hours since he'd left the Impala to pray to an angel. Angels, plural. Some of that time had surely been taken up waiting on Balthazar and talking with Rachel, so it might have only been something like three hours since he died. But Dean couldn't be sure, and it was eating at him.

Three hours for Gordon to get to Sam. More than enough time for any hunter. Damnit!

Dean struck the steering wheel with the heel of his hand, ignoring the flare of pain. He wrapped his fingers back around Baby's leather and looked at the clock again.

Gordon would have had to get back into town, probably back to that old house he'd set up last time. Because, damnit, this had all gone down in Lafayette the first go around, hadn't it? Fuck, how come Dean hadn't remembered that when it would have been *useful*?! That entire encounter with Gordon was fuzzy at best, really. The important shit – like Gordon trying to ice Sam with a sniper rifle and later a grenade – wasn't helpful when it came to dates and locations, damnit (because of course it wasn't).

In all that, Dean didn't remember a bust of a hunt, though. He remembered…. Shit, what case had they been working when Gordon tried to take them out? There'd been a guy…some dude stabbed in a…

a parking lot.

God damn it. This had gone down exactly the same as last time, Hadn't it? And he hadn't even noticed. Thanks for friggin' nothing, Timey Senses. God damn crap on a god damn cracker! What was the point of being from the future if it never *helped*?

Dean struck the steering wheel a couple more times, mentally apologizing to his Baby.

"Alright. Alright, damnit, *focus*." Dean ran a hand roughly across his skull, then checked the clock again, which really *wasn't helping.*

If he was Gordon, he'd have given himself an hour, at least, to get back to that crap house before messaging Sam. Maybe more, even, in order to set up the trap. Although, unfortunately, Dean also remembered Gordon laying the trip wires for his brother *after* forcing him to make the call to Sam, baiting that trap.

Fuck. Dean glanced at the clock again. He needed to get to a phone to warn Sam. A phone or a laptop to trace the kid's GPS and get a location. Dean didn't remember the damn address for that friggin' house, other than *bumfuck nowhere*. He needed a phone, goddammit.

So, of course, as par the course, there hadn't been a single lit building along the road he was on since he'd left the gas station. Because he'd been forced to drive to the mother effing outskirts because of the car tailing him. Which had been Gordon, as was now very obvious. Dean's grip on the steering wheel tightened. He was gonna kill that son of a bitch.

Soon as he got his hands on a friggin' phone.

As he passed yet another darkened building, the sides of the roads starting to populate with more of them and give him at least some hope, Dean scrunched his face up. There was a ringing in his ears which he hadn't noticed until now. It was the high pitch kind of ring – so high it was almost quiet –that happened from time to time (and more so with age). Some snot-nosed kid had once told him years ago, back when he actually went to school, that your ears ringing like that meant you were losing your hearing; one more frequency you could no longer pick up. Dean had no idea if that was true but ever since, he'd felt that sort of ringing like a personal attack. The hunter tried to pop his ears and shake his head to clear it, but the noise only got louder.

Then the radio suddenly turned on and Dean's gaze snapped to the volume dial as static filled the car.

"What the-"

His first, automatic concern as a hunter – ghosts or demons – didn't make much sense in a moving car going about seventy on surface streets. The static in the radio got so loud Dean could hear the speakers crackling with strain. Dean reached over, uselessly spinning the volume knob, trying futility to turn the whole radio off when that didn't work. Then the ringing increased, to the point where the human was hunching his shoulders instinctively, face scrunched up almost in pain, and Dean realized just what the hell that sound was.

It had been *years* since he'd heard it.

"Cas?" The hunter glanced over his shoulder at the empty back seat, green eyes scanning the leather-covered cushions for any sign of the angel. The ringing was still getting louder. "Cas!"

Dean swore as he was forced to pull over onto the side of the road, the noise threatening to take over his brain and crash the damn car. Jesus. Breaks squealed and smoked as the Impala came to as an abrupt a stop as physically possible. Dean hissed as the volume rose ever still and he clapped his hands over his ears, already knowing it was useless. An angel's true voice went straight to the brain, hands be damned.

Green eyes widened at the sight of the windshield glass, vibrating under the sustained pitch.

"Cas!"

The angel must be waking up, confused, probably pretty damn dazed, and likely in pain. Or possibly dying. Shit. Cas had said he wasn't that bad off, but Cas was also *horrible* at under exaggerating that sorta thing! Dean had never really *heard* an angel die, not with their true voice, at least. Most of the time they were in vessels when they went. He'd definitely never heard an un-vesseled angel bite the dust. Now Dean was kinda imaging it would sound exactly like this, actually.

God, let that not be what was happening right now.

Dean slammed his eyes shut, hands pressing almost painfully against his ears as the noise became a physical pain. All six glass panes in the Impala were humming dangerously.

"Damnit, Cas, if you blow out my windows I am gonna be so pissed at you!"

The ringing didn't stop, but it was like it skipped a beat on a record player. The sound picked up again, even louder, then faltered a second time. This time, it stayed a low background hum and Dean risked opening his eyes at the significant volume drop. The radio shut itself off, then suddenly the sound was swallowed up by a silence so complete it left Dean's ears still ringing from it. The hunter lowered his hands, shoulders still hunched up and starting to cramp.

Shit, that had worked?

Dean turned halfway around in his seat, eyes darting across the still empty back seat. "Cas? You with me?"

There was a low hum: a vibration running through the car and a short burst of static through the radio. It had the after ring of high frequency noise, but it was way more manageable than the shit show performance they'd just gone through.

"Crap," the older Winchester breathed out, shoulders finally sagging. "Are you okay?"

The static buzzed again, speakers crackling and Baby's frame humming with it. It was a long enough hum this time to be completely confusing as an answer. Dean frowned, racking his brain for a way to communicate with an un-vesseled, invisible, injured angel. Fun times, as always, in the Winchester household (carhold? They didn't actually have a house…)

"Okay, uh…one buzz for no, two for yes, yeah? You okay?"

He got two short bursts of static in response and the hunter let out a sigh of relief. Alright, some good news for once. Dean gripped the top of the front seat, still eyeing a completely empty rear seat that he was also talking to, and tired not to feel as strange about that as he did.

"Alright, look…I know that you probably feel like shit right now and you're in no condition to do anything, but Sam is in serious danger. Gordon Walker is the hunter who took me out and Sam is next on his list."

The low-key vibration started up again, building with something Dean could very much tell was anger. Whoa. He was totally able to read an angel through friggin' static and ringing. That was kinda cool and also

totally unimportant at the moment.

"We gotta find a phone so we can track Sammy's location. The bastard took mine. Bobby's is the closest I can think of. Any chance you can-"

Two rapid-fire vibrations shot off through the car before Dean could even finish talking, and then there was nothing but total silence. Not even the fuzz of the radio existed anymore. It was the kind of silence that was so complete, Dean knew instantly he was alone in the car on the side of the road in the middle of Indiana. He hadn't actually realized how full the Impala felt with Cas's presence until the angel was no longer there.

Huh. If he'd known that earlier he could have spent the last six and a half minutes in a hell of a lot less stress. Still tons of stress, of course, because Sam was in danger, Dean had no way of contacting him, and also because he was a friggin' Winchester, so stress was a goddamn lifestyle. But at least he wouldn't have also been worrying his best friend was dead in the backseat or not even in the damn car to begin with.

"Cas?"

Nothing but silence replied and Dean slowly turned back around in the front seat. Okay…well, shit. He couldn't leave until Cas got back; the angel wouldn't know where to find him or have any way of getting a hold of him to ask. Not to mention, Dean didn't actually have a useful destination except the motel, which wasn't useful in the slightest because Sam being there was a long shot at best. Nothing but a waste of time and gas that made Dean feel slightly better about not doing a damn thing to protect his brother at the moment.

Like sitting, useless, on the side of the road.

The hunter wrapped his hands back around the steering wheel, itching for action and cursing the fact that he was sidelined until Cas returned, even if the angel was their best shot at getting a phone and a location on the missing Winchester. Dean stared out the windshield at the stretch of dark road in front of him and tried not to break Baby's wheel in half.

"I'll just…uh…wait here, then." The Impala's leather creaked under his totally useless fingers. "Awesome."

-o-o-o-

Angela sat upright in a hospital bed on the second floor of Bobby Singer's house with a gasp that ripped at her lungs but went absolutely nowhere due to something blocking her throat. Not just blocking, shoved down. All the way down. Oh god, she couldn't breathe!

Tears leaked from her eyes as uncoordinated, weak hands scrambled for purchase on the ventilation tube. Pure adrenaline, fueled by fear and terror, allowed Angela to pull the entire length of ribbed plastic up and out of her esophagus. A horrible, *horrible* experience she never wanted to live through again. Usually Cas took care of all these things, but the angel was definitely not in the driver seat. Angela was in complete, terrifying control. She could feel him in there, still in her head and deep down in her chest, like a little blaring sun, but he was in pain.

A lot of pain.

Angela didn't really know much about what was going on, but it was clear something was really, really wrong. Getting herself upright was almost impossible. All she could manage with muscles that had spent far too long horizontal and unused – cramping, weak, useless– was to list to the side like a broken doll. The ventilation tube hit the floor with a clatter as her hand found purchase along the side table, which was about all she could manage.

Okay. Clearly getting out of this bed on her own wasn't an option. Angela took several deep breaths, trying to calm the panic raging inside. Cas was hurting. The usual steadfast voice in her head was nothing but a frantic murmur that relayed information. Dean was stuck in the middle of nowhere with no direction to go, Sam was in danger, and she needed to get a phone as soon as possible.

Which was calm and steady angel speak for *right this damn instant.*

Gripping the table beside the bed with a shaking hand, the other trying to peel back the thing sheet and heavier blanket draped over her, Angela sucked in a deep breath. Blue eyes locked on the open door leading to the hallway beyond and, she hoped, someone who could help her. As loud as she could, through a dry, disused, and ventilator-abused throat, Angela yelled for that help. It took her three tries before her voice carried enough to make it downstairs.

"Bobby!"

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I apparently put all the author notes at the start of this chapter, leaving me nothing much to say here...I'm sure I'm forgetting things...Oh! Hey! We passed 600,000 words two chapters ago! I'm using AO3's counter because it doesn't count my author notes in (70,000 plus words in author notes...that's an entire novel to itself...yup, I can believe that. Totally sounds 'bout right ._.) But back to that 600,000 word thing. Holy crap! :D

Review Replies: Still...so...far...behind...Still working on it, too. Just hang tight if you haven't heard from me. You will, eventually. I promise [insert silent but oh-so-dramatic weeping, open-mouthed babbling here] Just know that all of your comments, from the quick and simple to the novel-length and complex, have been so so so appreciated and loved.

Up Next: Sam's been shot, Dean gets a surprise guest in his backseat but she comes bearing gifts (and a conversation Dean wants no part of), Gordon's back to chatting like he didn't almost just kill Sam or all-the-way kill Sam's brother, and Ellen Harvelle gets a late-night phone call.

Chapter 97: Season 2: Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Guuuuuuuys. I'm having a slight crisis. Do you all remember when I fell down the stairs and sprained my hand last year? Whelp, I also broke my phone that day (in HALF. With my BUTT.) And do you know what was on that phone? Every idea for this story that I had while not within arm's reach of paper or computer for three years. So far, I've made do without those notes because most of them were broad thoughts I remember or written down elsewhere in more detail. However, I just hit a part of the story I've had planned out for months. Like, down-to-the-dialogue planned out. Guess where those plans are? That's right. On my butt-broken phone.

Now I'm sitting here like…Okay, you…you're a good writer, Silence. You can write this dream sequence without your notes. It doesn't matter that it's literally the dream sequence half your audience requested after you told them chest!Cas and present!Cas could talk to one another. It's- it's fine. It's totally fine. You- you don't need those notes. You got this.

In short: I so do (maybe) not got this. I have gone to a tech store and haven't yet decided if I'm going to give them money on the promise of 'we'll try but we might no be able to get you anything'. Right now I'm trying to convince myself that I got this. Anyway, if I announce a switch to two-week posting schedule several weeks from now, this mini-crisis will be why. (But I won't do that until after this arc and the last of cliffhanger row, so no stressing.)

Last time on TRSF… Gordon told Sam he'd seen Dean dealing with a demon, and that was why he needed to be taken out. Sam had laughed coldly, told Gordon he was an idiot, and then stepped into the room, shooting at him. Gordon took one in the thigh but got a return shot on Sam, somewhere in his chest. The hit spun Sam around and he fell back into the livingroom.

Chapter Warnings: We've got a whirlwind of a chapter ahead of us. Sam's having all the things thrown at him (bullets, knives, punches, bodies), Gordon's clearing some things up that no one asked for (rabid, drugged up raccoons), Dean's still stuck waiting but this time it's on a certain mulleted genius (who needs to get a new clock), and Angela shows up with relationship advice (no

time like the present crisis!) Oh, and it's another cliffhanger, but for once it's on a positive note! ;)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 64

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean was dead. His brother was dead.

Sam didn't want to believe it, but the truth was, outside of Dean's promise of a future that required both of them alive, Sam had no real reason to think Gordon was lying. The proof was on the phone he held in his hand, his brother's sightless eyes staring up at him from a grainy photograph. Dean was dead, Gordon had killed him, and now, standing a room away from the murdering bastard, Sam was going to murder the hunter that had taken his brother from him.

Dust was still settling in the air from shaking walls and distressed wood. Sam's eyes were dark in the dimly lit kitchen, so indiscernible from the pure black they'd been only minutes before.

"I saw it myself," Gordon said from the other room. "He was with a woman. A woman who disappeared in the blink of an eye."

Sam thumbed the menu button on the phone again, re-awakening the dimmed screen before it could go dark and the phone permanently lock. He stared at the picture as it lit fully once more. His brother's bloody face and dead eyes. Dean said he was going to call an angel, but he'd used male pronouns (for what that was worth).

Had his brother lied to him? Could he have gone to summon a demon instead? Is that why he'd left Sammy behind, chickened out of their deal with a half-assed note and snuck away in the middle of the night?

No. It didn't make any sense. Not only had the two of them been making some progress on the trusting-one-another and not-lying fronts (to the point where Sam felt fairly confident his brother hadn't lied about this), but summoning a demon to help them get Cas back didn't make sense. What could a demon do? Summoning an angel, however, did. And that's what Dean wanted: Cas back, safe. Sam had no doubt about that. Angels took whatever gender their vessel happened to be, so it wasn't like the fact that it was a woman who met with Dean meant much. And angels disappeared in

the blink of an eye just like demons.

Dean had found something willing to help: an angel. And Gordon had killed him because he was so damn sure Dean, a psychic, an 'other', must be evil because he wasn't purely human.

The close-minded, racist, thoughtless bastard.

Sam laughed aloud, the sound bitter and cold. Gordon killed his brother over meeting with an angel. The 'good guys', or what should have been considered a good guy to anyone not up to speed with the coming Apocalypse. But Gordon Walker was one of those types of hunters. A black and white, human and other, son of a bitch hunter.

Who had just killed Dean Winchester, the Righteous Man, for meeting with an angel.

The young hunter's overwhelming, uncontrollable anger was taking second place. He was still filled with rage, but it was a hard thing. Cold and sharp. Gordon's words were helping to ground him of all things. Sam looked down at the gun in his hand. The grip was hot – unnaturally hot – from his terrifying tight hold and he released his fist with a breath. The gun sat, steady, in his open palm.

If he was going to kill Gordon – which Sam told himself he wouldn't – he was going to do it with a gun. Not with Azazel's power. Not with demon blood. That was what the Yellow Eyed Demon wanted. To build up those powers, to deplete his supply, to leave him in withdrawal and desperate for more. To be a slave to what Azazel could (and happily would) give him.

No. Sam wouldn't give that bastard the satisfaction. He wouldn't give Gordon what he wanted, either. He would not prove the son of a bitch right about psychics or Winchesters.

And maybe, just maybe, Dean would come back. Sam was less than comfortable with the concept of returning from the dead, but his brother had told him of enough instances of it happening that Sam had the distinct feeling it could. It might. Maybe it would. When Cas came back, maybe the angel could bring his brother back.

Sam just had to be patient and have faith.

Dean wouldn't want him to kill Gordon. Oh, the older Winchester would probably kill the man himself happily, but he wouldn't want his little brother doing it. Especially not with that buzz beneath his skin. No, if Sam was going to do this, if he was going to take care of Gordon, it would be his

way. The younger Winchester way.

He pressed the menu button on Gordon Walker's phone again, this time closing the photo gallery application and pulling up the device's settings, gun tight in his other hand and ready to fire one last time.

-o-o-o-

Sam sat up in the living room with a grunt and gritted teeth, that same gun still in hand now three bullets lighter, and free hand pressed to his bleeding chest. Shit. That hadn't been part of the plan. He knew he'd probably take a bullet, he'd factored that much into his gamble, but the hit had been way too close. And on his dominant side too.

The younger Winchester left his gun in his lap, eyes on the kitchen doorway in case Gordon got any quick ideas, and reached up to the right breast pocket of his flannel. He winced, biting down to keep from making any noise as he removed his phone and the folded note from Dean, bits of plastic and paper left behind in bruised and bleeding skin. Sam stared at the device, which had taken the brunt of Gordon's shot, thank God.

Of course, a .308 bullet from a hunting rifle at close range meant that thing had kept right on going.

Sam was damn lucky. Without that phone, he'd be as dead as his brother. The bullet had been slowed by the thick plastic, enough so that its trajectory skewed. It kept going, right into Sam, but through his side – in and out between his ribs, maybe clipping one on the way – rather than his lungs or the more movement-deterring collarbone or shoulder blade.

Still hurt like hell, though. His chest was on fire and lifting his arm to aim was going to hurt more still. Enough to compromise his shot, maybe. Sam slipped the now-useless phone into the pocket on his left side instead, bloody note tucked right along with it. Left-handed, he picked his gun back up, splitting his gaze between the hole in the wall to his right and the kitchen entrance to his left. But Gordon hadn't followed him through and Sam didn't think he would.

He knew his shot had landed as well, somewhere in the hunter's leg. He could hear Gordon huffing on the other side of the wall. So Sam took the time to climb to his feet – quietly and carefully – so he could reposition himself more securely in the larger room. He was low on ammo; he knew his count and only had a single bullet left. With his right arm tucked tight to his chest, Sam reconned the room with a

quick scan. There were two handguns sitting on the table and the young hunter moved over to them, keeping an eye as his line of sight into the kitchen changed. But he couldn't see Gordon, so he grabbed one of the guns and checked its clip.

He didn't like using someone else's guns – much preferred the weapons he was familiar with and trusted – but desperate times called for desperate measures. It hurt like hell, but Sam managed to tuck his own gun into his waistline along his back, the first of Gordon's tucked to the side, and cocked the second. The hammer hadn't finished sliding into place when its owner let out a low, rolling chuckle from the kitchen.

"Got me in the leg, Sammy," Gordon said, the grin obvious in his words as well as the pain. Sam knew a thing or two about the latter, but there wasn't shit about this that was remotely funny to him. "Don't suppose you want to call it a draw?"

As if Sam couldn't tell from the tone alone that Gordon Walker was anything but ready to walk away from this. Hunters didn't walk away and Sam was getting the feeling this particular hunter didn't even know the meaning of the word.

Or other words. Honor, decency, family. Sanity. Just to name a few.

"Sure," Sam answered, voice cold. He might be keeping that buzzing back by a dam made of pure will and moral resilience, but that didn't make him any less angry. Any less murderous, even while promising himself he wouldn't murder anyone that night. Sam eyed both entrances to the kitchen, fingers curling again and again around the grip of Gordon's gun. "Just throw that rifle out here, first."

He got another chuckle for that one and Sam ground his teeth against the sound.

"Yeah…don't think that's gonna work out for me, Sammy."

Sam closed his eyes, jaw clenched so tight it hurt, and told himself he would not kill Gordon Walker just for calling him Sammy. He would not kill Gordon Walker for a stupid nickname. He said it again and again, like writing lines on a school chalkboard in after-school detention until it stuck. Not that he was actually old enough to have suffered that form of punishment, but cartoons used it often enough still.

"What guarantee do I have that you won't just shoot me first chance

you get?" In the kitchen, Gordon leaned his head back against the cabinet, a dark smile playing on his lips. "And after I killed your brother. Yeah. Somehow I don't see us walking out of here hand-in-hand, Sammy. Singing 'Kumbaya.'"

This was all entirely a game to the man, the younger Winchester knew. Gordon had no intention of laying down arms, so all of this? Nothing but fun for the sick bastard. Sam shouldn't answer him. Sam should be the better man, the stronger man.

Except he'd never been all that good at being good. There was demon blood in his veins as proof enough of that.

"I can guarantee that you're wrong about me. And my brother." Sam eyes locked on the gun in his hand and he repeated his mantra. *I will not kill Gordon Walker*. The itch beneath his skin grew like a flurry of bees, but Sam did his best to ignore it. He would not kill Gordon Walker. Not with those powers, not with the man's own gun. He wouldn't. "And I'm going to prove it to you."

Those deep brown eyes locked on the kitchen, dangerous and absolutely deadly despite any mantra in his head. He had a plan, Sam reminded himself, the first steps of which were already in action. Now he just had to stick to it.

-o-o-o-

Dean was just beginning to worry when Cas finally came back. It had been eight minutes. *Eight.* Cas was usually gone and back in under one. The hunter managed not to jump when the angel – back in Angela Garrett's trench-coated body – popped into existence in the backseat. The sudden breathing, moving presence of another living being coming out of nowhere was always somewhat of a surprise, no matter how used to the phenomena you got. A cell phone – Bobby's, he would put good money on – popped up in his peripheral vision and Dean grabbed it without even looking, already putting the car back into drive and peeling out.

"Thanks, Cas," the hunter muttered, flipping the device open and dialing Sam. He pressed the phone to his ear, eyes catching Cas's in the rear view mirror. Dean had to split his attention between the road and those blue eyes as his gut flared, instincts immediately set on red alert.

Something was different.

Cas was breathing raggedly, like a human who'd run a marathon. And her face was a myriad of emotion – exhaustion, fear, pain, confusion, terror – so much so that she looked…human. Incredibly human. And not at all like the angel he knew.

"Hi, Dean," Cas said and the hunter realized immediately that was not his angel in the backseat. Even before she offered a weak, trembling smile. "Nice to officially meet you."

The Impala screeched to a halt in the middle of the road as Dean did a double take, then spun around to stare at the woman in the back of his car. "Angela!?"

"In the flesh," the woman joked, or at least attempted to. She winced, a hand curled around her torso. Everything about her posture screamed uncomfortable. "Sorry. Terrible joke."

Still pressed to his ear, Bobby's phone abruptly switched directly from a dialing tone to Sam's voicemail. The automated messaging system was audible in the quiet car and Dean distractedly ended the call, snapping the flip phone shut. His brother's phone hadn't even rung. Just straight to voicemail. Shit, that was so not good. If Sam's phone wasn't on, Dean couldn't even use the phone company to track it, which had been his Plan B if Sammy didn't pick up.

Shit!

"Are you…" Dean physically shook his head, trying to rattle his brain back into gear. He glanced at the road over his shoulder, then Bobby's phone, then the angel – not angel? – in his backseat. Crap, he so did not have time for this right now. "Are you hurt? Is Cas okay? What-"

"He's okay," Angela interrupted, realizing the man in front of her was about as frantic as he was confused. Given the bits and pieces Castiel had managed to relay, Angela could understand why. "Just hurting and needs to…uh…rest. Guess I'm in the driver's seat till then."

Dean looked down at the phone again, fingers white around the plastic casing. Damnit…Sam's phone was dead, which meant getting a GPS lock on it was out. And now it looked like their immediate ride to that location he didn't have a chance of getting anymore was also out.

Shit. Shit!

"Cas says…he can get us to Sam if he has a location." Angela said, like she'd read his mind. Doubtful, given Cas's condition. At least Angela

seemed okay. Well, -ish. The woman's breathing was labored but at least it was steady. Even. Probably not gonna give out anytime soon, which Dean hadn't even realized was a concern until the damn thought popped into his head. "Might have to leave B-baby behind, though."

Okay… Okay, okay, okay. Dean slammed his eyes shut, forcing his brain to focus on one thing at a time. If Cas was offering transport, than he was going to be fine. Hurting, yes, out of the game for the foreseeable future, (coughing up blood for three days, maybe), but *fine*. Angela was probably freaking the hell out about all this and Dean was sure she'd need some serious trauma therapy by the end of it, but she seemed to be holding her own as well. Which meant Sam was the one he needed to focus on. Find Sam.

How?

Dean flipped the phone back open and started searching through Bobby's contacts, knowing Ellen Harvelle wouldn't be far down the list.

-o-o-o-

Ellen made it to the phone – an old landline hanging off one of the support pillars behind the bar – by the second ring. It was late, 'bout a half-hour passed closing time, and she'd been just about ready to call it a night. But the only people who called that number this late were hunters who needed help.

"Yeah, who is this and what do you need?"

"Ellen."

The bar owner straightened, back going rigid at Dean Winchester's voice. He sounded like shit. She gripped the phone with her other hand, eyes darting back and forth as her mind raced with possible scenarios. "Dean. Honey, what's wrong?"

"Get Ash. I need him to run a trace on Gordon Walker's number."

"Whoa, Dean…" Ellen was speechless. Far as she knew, Dean Winchester was a good kid, and a damn fine hunter. Which meant he should know better than to ask that. "Look, I'm happy to help however I can and I'm no fan of Gordon's, but we don't do that to fellow hunters, Dean. You know that-"

"He tried to take me out, Ellen!" Dean snapped down the line and Ellen froze, widening in disbelief. "Now he's after Sam, and I gotta get there first."

"He *what*?" The barkeep turned around, phone pressed hard enough to her ear to hurt. Gordon Walker was bad news – always had been – but Ellen never thought he'd go that far. She hadn't even known the boys knew him. What the hell could have possibly possessed Gordon to go after two of their own?

"Ellen, if he kills my brother, I swear to god-"

She spun towards the pool tables, searching the darkened back of the bar for a passed out figure atop one of them. "Ash! Get your ass over here *now!*"

-o-o-o-

Four and a half minutes. That's how long Ash said he'd need to hack Gordon's phone company and turn the GPS in his device on.

"That creep?" Ash scoffed when Dean asked if he could trace Gordon Walker's location through his phone. "Hell's yes, my man, I can do that for ya. There's something seriously off about that dude. Oh, by the way, I had some major breakthroughs with your father's research, amigo. You're not gonna believe this-"

"Yeah, later, Ash," Dean all but snapped, lucky he hadn't broken Bobby's phone in two with the death grip he had on it.

"'Course, my friend, of course."

Ellen took the phone back by that point, realizing the Winchester was as likely to turn his murderous sights on Ash if he couldn't turn them on Gordon. And Ash wasn't the best with social cues or hints.

"We'll call you back as soon as we have something, hun."

That had been one whole minute ago, according to Baby's dash clock. A whole minute of aimless driving, quite literally spinning his wheels. Dean was heading towards the motel for lack of anywhere better to go, but it irked him. His fingers were wrapped so tightly around the steering wheel his joints ached. With nothing more he could actually do and hating feeling so damn useless, Dean kept glancing in the rear view mirror at his back passenger, who wasn't looking so hot.

"You okay?"

"Oh, you know. Peachy." Angela's eyebrows waggled and Dean huffed, shaking his head. She was pale and winced on occasion with some unseen, internal distress, but Dean didn't push. It was clear the woman wasn't interested in chatting about it. Instead, she inched forward on the seat, taking her time to avoid falling over completely. Her muscles weren't in *complete* atrophy, but it turned out that, without Cas's usual healing of her body, she was pretty much at newborn-faun status over here. It sucked big time. The pins and needles alone.

"So…I gotta ask." Angela curled weak fingers along the top of the front seat. The leather was cool beneath her trembling touch and she took a moment just to appreciate the feel of something again. "Because, honestly, I didn't think I'd ever get to talk to you face to face."

Green irises eyed her in the mirror, one eyebrow raised in question. Angela slapped on her best smile. The one that always had Mark insinuating cat-related, canary-eating analogies.

"You gonna tap that, or what?"

The Impala definitely swerved for a second and Angela was completely torn between holding on for dear life and bursting out laughing. Since she was kind of too weak for either, what came out was a pathetic conglomeration of both.

Dean spun his head to look at her, then corrected the car, then tried to turn again, thought better of it, gripped the steering wheel, and glanced between the road and rear view mirror a number of times at a truly epilepsy-inducing speed. Angela was rather enjoying the performance.

"What? *What?*"

Righting herself took more strength than she really had, and the muscles in Angela's arms twitched and spasmed with the effort, but she did manage to remain upright. She shrugged in response to Dean's bafflement, in part to flex and stretch those attention-starved muscles. It was a terrible idea, resulting in one hell of a heinous neck cramp on her left sie. She worked through it with a grimace, distracting herself with Dean's adorable cluelessness. "I know, I know: not really the right time. But, like I said, I probably won't get another chance and I've been dying to ask you since, like, day three."

Silence reigned in the car, then Angela let out a little huff of air that

was too close to a laugh for Dean to ever be comfortable with it. She smiled to herself. "'Dying'. Heh."

"I- what...what are you *talking* about?"

The Dragon Lady in his rear view mirror shrugged again. "You and Cas."

"Me and Cas…what?"

Piercing blue eyes narrowed under a furrowed brow and Dean got the distinct impression that Angela Garrett would have made a fantastical mom. She had the look down *pat*. Dragon Lady Mom. Beats out Mama Bear every damn time (roasts mama bear on a spit, more like).

"You know."

"No," Dean argued, shaking his head with one big, exaggerated sweep. "No, I most definitely do not know."

Despite the fact that Sam was in danger, Dean was stuck driving to a motel he knew was empty, Gordon Walker had successfully murdered him, and there was an injured angel riding shotgun inside a mother effing Dragon Lady Chatty Kathy in his backseat, it was the look Angela pinned him with that sparked the most fear in Dean yet. Which was utterly ridiculous. So ridiculous Dean wanted to pull over, call it quits, and tell whoever had concocted this god damn charade: congrats, they won, they could just kill him now.

"You're being stupid on purpose and, despite what Sam says, it's doesn't really suit you."

"Okay, you know what-"

"Is it the guy thing? Cuz…I mean, right now he's not really a 'guy'," the woman said with exaggerated air quotes, and oh yeah, that's *definitely* where Cas had learned them from. "Pretty sure he's never *actually* a guy, but, you know. Details." Angela flapped her hand dismissively like being a genderless Angel of the friggin' Lord was *unimportant* and instead gestured to herself. "Right now he's a pretty hot chick. Not that I'm bragging. Okay, I'm bragging a little bit. I know I'm a catch. So what's the holdup? It's obvious you're interested."

Between the flapping of her hand, the pinched fingers to demonstrate *just* how much she wasn't bragging, and the rapid-fire

speech, Dean's head was spinning. And most of that was still just from the damn topic.

"I'm not having this conversation with you." Dean faced the front stoically, keeping his eyes determinedly on the road, not matter how difficult a task that actually was. It lasted all of about fourteen seconds. "And really? *Now?* You're bringing this up *now*? *That's* your go-to?"

Angela shrugged again, this time more cautiously. She had her right foot in the grave and about six of the eight inches of her left alongside it. There were no regrets to be had here. Dean, on the other hand, seemed to be having plenty. Like opening up a line of conversation at all with the Dragon Lady in his backseat. There was another beat of defensive, frustrated silence in which knowing blue eyes just stared patiently (evil, not patient. *Evil.*) and Dean avoided meeting them at all costs. He was not having this conversation.

"I am *not* interested, damnit. What is it with everyone and me and Cas, huh?"

Okay, apparently he was.

Green eyes flashed to his passenger completely against his will and Angela, who was quite smug with the very short time she'd had to wait for him to break down, seemed genuinely surprised by the question. Her shoulders went up and down in a little, innocent shrug yet again. (Nothing about this woman was innocent, Dean thought. *Nothing.*)

"It's the way you look at him. Her. I mean me. Us?"

Once more – despite the ridiculous stress in the car, the tension of a situation that could likely end in his brother's death and *had* ended in his death, along with *this mother effing conversation* – Dean was oddly relieved to know he wasn't the only one struggling with the pronouns.

"I don't look at him- her- *you*-" Damnit, he hadn't even meant to do it that time- "in any way."

"Oh, yes you do!" Angela laughed, then immediately stopped laughing when she realized Dean wasn't. He was serious. Oh dear lord, he was serious. Big, blue eyes stared at him in shock. "Wait, you really don't know?"

Oh shit. She hadn't meant to- Okay…well, this conversation just

got *awkward*.

"Um…oh…well, you really should know, because if you don't meant to be doing it-"

"Doing *what*?" the hunter barked from the front seat even as he pulled off the main highway back into town. They were only about two minutes from the motel. And where the hell was Ash with a location and the blessed end to this conversation?!

"Let me ask you something first," Angela said, her tone much quieter now and (if Dean was one to even consider something so feely where this woman was concerned) more respectful. "You and the Cas from the other time- your time. Did you…ever…?"

Her eyebrows were suggestive enough that Dean's forehead smoothed out and he got that really scary look usually reserved for ghosts and vamps and Gordon Fucking Walker.

"*No!*"

"Okay, but was it the guy thing?"

He was gonna kill the woman in his backseat. It wouldn't even be murder, because he was a hunter and she was the *god damn devil*.

"It was the *Cas* thing!" he yelled, way above indoor voice level. Dean could feel his entire face growing red. From embarrassment, sure, but more so from anger and barely contained murder rage. Of course, he probably couldn't murder Angela without hurting Cas at this point, or at least making the guy go find another vessel…. Dean went rigid as that thought – more of a dalliance than anything serious – made him realize something entirely else. Something that definitely made his face go red with embarrassment. "Can he hear this?"

Shit. This conversation was *ridiculous.* So much so that Dean was contemplating eating his own gun just to get out of it. But he also didn't need his best friend hearing it. Not only for the pure mortification factor, but more so because Dean had never been good at policing his words when he was angry or, even worse, emotional. He didn't need Cas hearing something that might sound…wrong out of context. Hurtful.

Angela paused, turning her head to the side and eyes darting back and forth as she obviously talked with someone Dean couldn't hear. She righted her head soon enough, shaking it instead, waves of dark hair

tossing back and forth and being so stupidly distracting that Dean was able to cling right back onto the anger over the embarrassment.

"He isn't answering, so I don't think so."

Yeah…alright, this timeline's Cas wasn't comfortable enough with deceit yet (never, Dean corrected harshly) to be faking. The human wrung his hands along the steering wheel, his breathing speeding up for completely and utterly ridiculous reasons. Even so, some of the tension eased out of his shoulders, which had been stiff and climbing up, up, up around his ears the longer this conversation went on.

"Look…" Dean cut himself off, shaking his head again. He couldn't believe he was having this conversation. "Cas is my best friend, alright? I love him, I do. But it's a brother thing. Sister, in this case."

Green eyes darted to the mirror, but couldn't hold Angela's gaze for long.

In the back, Angela bit her lip to keep back the automatic laugh. She was starting to know the man in front of her pretty well, from lots of observation and internal chatter with her angel. Laughing at him when he was attempting to open up – however poorly he was succeeding at doing that – would only shut him down faster.

Plus (and she really was shocked by this) Dean honestly didn't seem to know.

"The way you look at me, at Cas, is definitely not *sisterly*."

Oh, but the way the tips of his ears turned red, so much so that she could tell even in the dark car, was *adorable*. Those shoulders inched back up towards covering those ears and it made Angela want to laugh even more because, yeah, what a horn dog. He'd been so laughably bad for those first couple days.

Angela stifled her amusement and kept her tone far more serious – far more gentle, too – as she continued, "It's not the way a guy looks a girl because he's got the hots for her, either, you know."

Dean glanced her way almost hesitantly, but once again couldn't hold her gaze. She didn't insist he try, instead looking at the back of his head and hoping it might help him, at the very least, listen to her words. "You look at me like Mark does. You look at me like you know me, Dean. Like…*everything* about me, and expect…just, everything from me, too. It's…"

Angela blew out a breath, eyebrows going up in that expectant way all girls seemed to have.

"It's intense. And terrifying. If I were not a happily taken woman and also about one step shy of being completely dead-" In the front seat, Dean made a choking noise and Angela had to bite her lip again- "I'd have fallen for that look by day two."

The woman allowed a genuine smile – soft and sweet and maybe even a little sad, like she could be when she wanted – and knew Dean was watching her in the mirror. She chanced a glance up and the hunter held her gaze this time for as long as he could while driving.

"I'm not saying you don't know how you feel, Dean. You know that way better than me. If you say you don't like Cas that way, then okay. You don't." Angela shrugged, eyes going from the mirror to the black asphalt and yellow lines stretching out into the night. "But maybe you should know what Cas sees when you look at him. What everyone else sees, too, cuz that look is *not* subtle."

In the front, Dean swallowed past the giant-est damn frog on the friggin' planet stuck in his throat and cursed Ash's name with every cuss word he knew. Four minutes his *ass*. "I don't *mean* to look at him…like…*that*…okay?"

He was looking at the mirror again before he could stop himself, but Dragon Lady didn't look particularly judgmental. Dean didn't want to be having this conversation, damnit, but even he could admit it helped that she was…just trying to help, he supposed. She wasn't teasing him anymore, not since she'd realized…shit. Did he really put off some kind of gay-for-an-angel vibe that badly? Sure, there'd been the couple of assholes over the years who liked to comment on it (Crowley and Balthazar, for starters) but Dean had always thought they were just…you know. Assholes.

Baby's leather creaked beneath his tightening grip. He didn't mean to. He *didn't*. Better yet, he *wasn't*. It wasn't like that between him and Cas. But if that 'look' really was a thing he did…if the way he looked at Cas really was, somehow…uh…misleading certain people (assholes and Dragon Ladies), then….

Shit. *Shit*. How long had *that* been going on for? And how the hell did he not do it going forward? He supposed he could just not look at Cas ever again. Bigger sacrifices had been made in the name of manliness.

Dean shook his head and tried to focus. They had so many other

world-ending crises to deal with, here, goddamnit.

"We've been through a lot together, alright? Cas knows me better than anyone else. Maybe even better than Sam. But that doesn't mean we're…in…that I- and *this* Cas-"

Angela raised a sardonic eyebrow in the rear view mirror as Dean went on stuttering and stumbling. The corner of her lips twitched up and it looked like the nice, helpful, and (dare-he-say) friend sitting in his backseat had been gobbled back up by the Dragon Lady.

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Shut up." There wasn't even heat in it and for that Dean cursed himself. Then Ash again just because he fucking could.

It was right at that moment that Bobby's phone started ringing and thank *Christ*. Dean grabbed it off the seat like a friggin' lifeline and answered just a little too desperately. Luckily, Ellen didn't think twice about the squeak in his voice. Pure worry for Sam, she probably thought, and Dean was more than happy to let her keep right on thinking that.

"You got something for me?"

It was Ash, yelling in the background on what was clearly a speakerphone call, who answered. "5637 Monroe Street!"

"Thanks." Dean was about to hang up and flip the car back around for the highway when Ellen's voice stopped him. He still put on his blinker and spun the car, but he kept the line open.

"Bring him home, Dean."

If that frog was back in his throat, choking him up for entirely different reasons, well…Dean blinked through it, telling the damn amphibian to fuck off. "Yeah. Sure thing, Ellen."

He snapped Bobby's phone shut and met Angela's eyes in the rear view mirror. "You ready to go?"

Angela nodded even as she closed her eyes. "I'll wake Cas up."

-o-o-o-

Gordon kept his rifle trained on the entrance to the kitchen. It was hard not to keep glancing to his left, to the hole in the wall that led to

the same room on the other side. But if he split his focus like that, he was going to wind up dead. Sam was a good shot; he only needed a fraction of a second to fire first.

Question was, why hadn't he?

He knew Sam's count; the kid should have one more bullet in the chamber. Not to mention Gordon's two hand guns he'd left in that room. Given the amount of time Sam had been quiet while Gordon had tied a makeshift tourniquet around his thigh, the other hunter had surely reconned the space and found both weapons.

So what was he waiting for?

Gordon supposed he could ask himself the same question. He had the firepower to shoot clean through the wall separating him and Sammy. But he didn't have the kid's location on the other side of that wall, and unlike the Heckler and Koch SL8 that he'd killed Dean with, this rifle wasn't semi-automatic. He could definitely lay down some cover fire and hope to kill the kid with luck, but Gordon had always preferred to make his kills more…personal.

Which was why he was waiting on Sammy to give him an opening.

Maybe the baby Winchester needed a little extra incentive, was all. 'Course, the last time he'd done that, the kid had made the whole house shake. Still…Gordon had never exactly prided himself on been the overly-cautious type.

"You know…given all the things I'd heard about Dean Winchester being this…amazing hunter, just like his old man…" Gordon settled back against the far cabinets, knees up, rifle poised, yet the picture of relaxed. "He didn't really live up to the hype."

Last time Sammy had done…whatever it was he'd done to the walls, Gordon could have pinpointed his location down to an inch. The way the surface had bent wasn't unlike an explosion in extreme slow motion. The focal point had been obvious. Gordon tightened his grip on the rifle, eyeing the length of wood that would tell the same story a second time. He just had to get Sammy to use those powers.

"My brother was a good hunter," Sam barked back, and Gordon grinned at the anger in his voice. And the past tense.

"Yeah, maybe he was. But he had a leg up on the rest of us, didn't he? He was a psychic."

In the living room, Sam clenched his teeth, eyes sliding shut against every instinct. Gordon threw the word out like it ought to have saved Dean, when he was the one who killed him with a cowardly sniper shot in the dark. It made Sam's blood boil.

"You know, I almost thought setting up that bogus hunt to get you two here wouldn't work? If Dean was psychic and all that, I thought…for sure he'll figure it out right outta the gate. But he didn't have a clue."

On the other side of the wall, Sam straightened, back rigid from the new information. What? The case they'd come here on… A man stabbed with a silver tipped blade and a lot of coincidences to make it look like he was a werewolf.

"The guy in the parking lot…. That was you?" Sam asked, voice hollow with a second death, more blood, on this hunter's hands. But how could Gordon have set up the animal attacks? Sam remembered – vividly, thank you very much – being chased by a damn rabid raccoon.

"Yeah. I came to this town looking for someone else. One of you psychics," Gordon drawled with a dark, humorless chuckle. "Kid by the name of Scott Carey. Could fry a person from the inside out with just a touch. Imagine that."

Sam's breath caught at the name. The young hunter found himself rigid in the other room. Frozen. Oh, his gun was still trained and ready to fire, but his brain was a couple hundred miles away, with Andy Gallagher.

"He was 'bout your age, actually, Sammy." Gordon was still talking, but Sam wasn't listening. "'Course, he was already gone by the time I got here. His old man was real torn up about it, thought the boy skipped town. Depression, or some shit like that. But if you ask me? Someone got to him before I could."

Scott Carey was from Lafayette? Sam closed his eyes again, something he knew he shouldn't do, but God. Suddenly, the younger Winchester was a million times more grateful that they hadn't brought Andy with them on this case.

"How do you even know any of that?" Sam asked through clenched teeth, brown eyes flashing back open angrily.

"Same way I know about you, Sammy."

The younger hunter clenched his fist around the grip of his borrowed gun and reminded himself he wasn't going to kill this man just for calling Sammy. At this point, he might kill him for plenty of other reasons, but it wouldn't be just that one. Slowly, Sam started moving towards the hole on the far end of the wall. He was pretty sure Gordon was closer to the kitchen entrance.

"I was doing this exorcism down in Louisiana. Teenage girl, seemed routine, some low-level demon." Gordon remembered the way the thing had hissed and seethed and burned. The human shell it was wearing had once been pretty. Bright future, Gordon was sure. But by then she was nothing but a used up demon condom. Death was 'bout the only thing he could offer her. "Between all the jabbering and the head-spinning, the damn thing muttered something. About a coming war."

In the living room, Sam stopped in his silent shuffling, eyes locked on that door into the kitchen. Gordon knew about the Apocalypse? That…might actually explain why he'd taken out Dean and tried to take out Sam. But everything he'd spewed so far…it didn't make any damn sense. Why not just say that? Why not just say he'd killed Dean to stop the damn Apocalypse?

(Not that it would make Sam any less willing to kill him, of course, but at least then Dean's death wouldn't be because of a damn lie and Gordon's racist paranoia.)

"I don't think it meant to," Gordon continued and Sam quietly resumed his movements towards the far wall, telling himself to stay focused. "It just kind of…slipped out. But it was too late. Piqued my interest. And you know…you can really make a demon talk, you got the right tools."

Sam had to draw in a calming breath, then about six more just to keep his voice steady. *I will not kill Gordon Walker. I will not kill Gordon Walker.*

"What happened to the girl?"

"Hm?"

"The girl," Sam repeated through gritted teeth, loathing every falsely nonchalant bone in that asshole's body. "The one the demon was possessing."

"Oh…she didn't make it."

Sam let that breath right back out. *I will not kill Gordon Walker… quickly. I will kill him slowly, and painfully, and-*

"Anyway. This demon tells me there are soldiers to fight in this coming war. Even said I knew one." From the kitchen, Gordon laughed again and Sam took the opportunity to press his back against the wall separating them, confident Gordon couldn't pinpoint his location over the sound of his own voice. "I figured Dean's name was the one it would drop, but no. It was yours. Our very own, Samuel Winchester."

Yeah, that sounded about right from Dean's recount of events. His brother hadn't gone into detail about Gordon's vendetta against Sam, but what he was hearing now made more sense than the hunter going after Dean. Sam could see this chain of events going down in the timeline Dean came from. Dean's lie about being psychic in this one seemed to be the root of Gordon's changed behavior.

"With a little more…incentive, I got a couple other names, too. Still nothing 'bout Dean, but…I did my research. So I figured when the one the demon named here didn't pan out…" Gordon shrugged against the cabinets, finger tapping a repetitive rhythm against the rifle's trigger. "I knew it wouldn't take much to get you two here. Set up what looked like a hunt, place the right calls. See, I got friends at the Roadhouse, too, Sammy. Turns out, it's not too hard to get a hold of Bobby Singer."

The younger Winchester's entire left side of his face ached from the tension in his jaw, but he held it all in. There was still dust in the air from his last temper tantrum; he couldn't afford another. Reminded of that, Sam reached up, clamping his hand around that damn injection site in his trapezius. The buzz was strongest there and, he was pretty sure, entirely psychosomatic. He just had to get his brain – and his temper – to remember that.

"You killed someone just to get us here?" Sam said instead, forcing the change in topic, original goal back in mind. At least, as firmly as he could make it stick past the buzzing and rage. He just needed to stall long enough to incapacitate Gordon and get out. Before he did something he'd regret later.

Inside the kitchen, his adversary audibly scoffed. "A low-life drug dealer. Not worth the air he breathed."

Well, that was just wonderful. Sam flexed his fingers around the gun, closing his eyes. Gordon wasn't just 'Human and Other', he was flat out

playing God. Another person – good or bad, which wasn't their right to judge – dead and gone. Sam was so damn tired of being the reason people kept dying.

"You son of a bitch. You-"

Bullets ripped through the wall between him and the kitchen, way too damn close for Gordon not having a lock on his location. Sam had to hit the floor to avoid getting ventilated. The rifle Gordon had wasn't automatic, Sam knew that from sighting it in the kitchen, but that didn't mean the other hunter couldn't fire off a round as fast as the gun could reload and his finger could pull the trigger.

"Shit," Sam muttered, scrambling in an army crawl further down the length of wall. He'd taken one to the arm in that barrage. Luckily, it was only a flesh wound, cut through fabric and enough layers of skin to bleed pretty decently, but that was about it.

"That's my mama you're talking about," Gordon called from the kitchen before he came charging through the gap in the wall, which Sam had unfortunately army crawled right towards to get away from the hail of bullets coming through the wood. Gordon's plan, no doubt.

Sam managed to clamber to his feet in time to block the butt of the rifle coming right at his jaw, but he had to drop his gun to do it. The block saved his face and probably one hell of a headache, but it cost him a brutal hit to his collarbone instead as the rifle landed at the junction of neck and shoulder. Sam cried out, hitting the ground hard, pain flaring up his neck.

At least his collarbone was still intact, the muscles taking the brunt of the hit.

The younger hunter rolled to the side, just in time to miss Gordon's rifle again as it slammed into the floorboards hard enough to crack the old wood. Desperate and only slightly disoriented, Sam swept his leg out, kicking at the base of that gun. His food landed solidly, knocking the rifle out of Gordon's grip and taking it to the floor. Another frantic kick knocked it out of reach.

Unfortunately, Gordon was a decent hunter, and any hunter worth their salt was quick to adapt. He drew his knife from his hip, the Buck 119 Cocobola a good six inches of promised death as Sam got one knee under him. The younger Winchester grunted with the force of Gordon's tackle, tumbling over backwards. Dust scattered back into the air with their landing, long arms and Sasquatch strength the only

thing keeping Gordon's knife from sinking into his chest.

With gritted teeth and a straining grip on Gordon's wrists, Sam brought his knee up as much as he could between the man half-straddling his side, and slammed the side of his foot into Gordon's bleeding thigh, right below the tourniquet. The hunter cried out involuntarily, strength temporarily failing him as he doubled over the intense flare of pain up and down his thigh. Sam rolled out from under the knife, throwing Gordon to the side as much as he could with the move, and scrambled back to his feet a half dozen feet away.

"Damnit," Gordon hissed, kneeling on his good leg, one hand clamped down on the bad thigh, the other still holding the knife. He got back to his feet, keeping most of his weight off of his bleeding leg. He grinned at the other hunter, who so far hadn't gone for that gun he knew was tucked in his waistline. "Low blow. What's wrong, Sam? Don't got it in you to shoot me?"

A real hunter – a real *man* – wouldn't have hesitated.

Dark brown eyes, so dark they almost seemed all pupil, no iris, regarded Gordon coldly. With a grin, the hunter tossed his knife from hand to hand, an open invitation for Sam to come and take it from him if he was too good for a gun.

"What are you waiting for, Sammy?"

"I told you," the younger Winchester panted angrily, breaths coming in big, deep huffs. "It's *Sam*."

Gordon didn't wait for the hunter to finish. He threw the knife while Sam was busy correcting him. The Winchester's eyes widened, body turning to the side instinctually to avoid the hit. But Gordon had lied (well, sort of) when he told Sammy all he had on him was a knife. He actually had two knives. The hunter drew a smaller blade – a thing, delicate thing built into his belt-buckle – even as he flung the first. Gordon immediately followed the first attack with a second he knew the Winchester wouldn't have the time or speed to dodge.

"No!" Sam yelled out on pure instinct, flinging his hand out, body still turned, shoulder dropped and no other way to defend himself. The first blade flew past him, so close Gordon wouldn't be surprise if he managed to snip a button off the Winchester's jacket. But the second was a golden hit, straight for the chest.

It never made it. Gordon stared, eyes intense and murderous, at the

blade as it hovered in midair, inches from its target. Sam's hand was still raised, just beyond the tip of the blade, fingers spread wide and trembling with strain. Gordon's eyes left the knife, tracking to the hunter's pain-crinkled features and the trail of blood, dark and thick, pouring from Sam Winchester's nose.

"I knew it," Gordon sneered.

The knife clattered to the ground and Sam joined it a second later. He managed to catch himself on all fours, but the young hunter's breath came in labored heaves. His head was pounding so fiercely he couldn't hear past the buzzing in his ears.

Shit. He should have known he didn't have the supply to *do* that, no matter what that itch beneath his skin thought. All he'd gotten this time was an injection and some spilled blood. He wasn't at his peak, like he'd been after that first jar. If only he'd had more. He needed more.

Realizing what he was thinking – how annoyed he was at his own weakness and the lack of *demon blood* in his system – Sam's stomach clenched in disgust and fear. He shook his head with a jolt, and, with it, tried to shake free those thoughts. Thoughts that he needed it. That he wanted it. If only he had it, he could do this. Could do anything.

That was exactly what Azazel wanted, damnit. Sam's skin crawled with that buzz, weak and feeble, and his head pounded dangerously, in a way it hadn't since last year. Since he'd passed out in a bathroom and woken up in a hospital. Damnit, if Dean wasn't dead – or he somehow came back – the older Winchester was going to be so pissed at him.

"You're not human, Sam."

The younger Winchester lifted his head to glare at the other hunter standing a half dozen feet away. Gordon was looking at him like something in need of extermination. The sad part was, Sam couldn't even really blame him for that. He didn't agree with it – screw that and screw this bastard – but he knew what he looked like. Blood pouring down his face, pushing himself hard enough to cause internal damage. And unlike Gordon Walker, he knew the source of that power.

Damnit, he was *better* that this. He had to be.

Sam grabbed the knife with a clumsy hand. He was just getting his

legs back under him, Gordon apparently waiting (the man seemed to have a weird, macho desire to fight him hand-to-hand like a hopped up *idiot*), when a vibration and a ping broke the tense silence and labored breaths.

Both hunters looked over to a phone – Gordon's phone – laying on the ground just a couple feet away. It must have fallen out of Sam's pocket when he'd dove to the floor or when Gordon had tackled him. The screen was lit with an alert and from his kneeling position on the ground, Sam was able to read it.

Someone had just activated the GPS on Gordon's cell phone.

Huh.

A grin, exhausted and silly with relief, lit Sam's face as he realized what that meant.

There was only one person in the world who'd go to any length to find him, wherever he was. Sam's phone was shot, Gordon had taken Dean's, which meant there was only one place his older brother could possibly turn to in order to do that. Gordon Walker's phone. If that photo the murdering hunter had shown him was authentic – which Sam was pretty sure it was and Dean really had been dead – than there was only one way his big brother could be back. And she came with a pair of wings.

The younger Winchester started to laugh.

"What the hell's so funny?" Gordon asked, both angry and wary. He couldn't read the message on his phone from where he was standing, but he couldn't imagine what would cause that reaction. Especially in Sam's current state.

"Nothing," the younger hunter replied, grin still wide and white teeth shining in contrast to the dark blood staining his upper lip. He lifted his hand, wiping the edge of his jacket sleeve across his face. "Just your face in about…thirty seconds, I'm guessing."

It didn't even take that long.

Gordon charged, a basic wariness of the unknown driving him into action (was it possible Sam Winchester had a trick up his sleeve after all?). Sam blocked his first punch, not even using the knife clenched in his hand. Gordon didn't have a chance to land a second hit or Sam to block it before there was a displacement of air, a sound like

wingbeats, and then two more bodies joined the fray.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A/N's: *Uggggghghghghghgh guys. Sam and Gordon could not have cooperated with me less this chapter. Like pulling teeth getting those boys to face off against one another. At first they wouldn't talk, then they wouldn't shut up, and all I needed them to do was friggin' fight. Good God Gertrude! (Part of it was that, in all my note taking and planning for this arc, which was particularly detailed and heavy, I boiled this scene down to, and I quote, "then they fight" ._. Planning-Me kinda dropped the ball on this one.)*

Drugged-Up Raccoons*: I had to cut it from the story due to flow, but there was originally a part where Sam realized Gordon used the drug dealer's stash to drug the wildlife and make them go crazy enough to attack humans. Which would have given us this golden line:*

"New plan: Sam was going to not-murder Gordon Walker slowly, then hand him over to his brother when Dean came back (because he was coming back), and together they were going to hand his ass over to PETA."

XD

Destiel: *You all may have noticed from Angela's choice of conversation, that we are finally starting to pick up pace in the Destiel category (in case Andy and gay Heaven orgies weren't hint enough). Lolz, not that this can be described as anything speedy in the slightest (wouldn't want to let Jane down), but we are officially in the 'hints/hinting' stage. From here on out, I'll begin picking out things from the canon timeline that could go either way on Destiel, like the way Dean looks at Cas, and start pushing them towards the realization/revelation of a potential relationship while attempting not to break character or canon (meaning, Dean just generally freaking out with no idea why this keeps happening, and Cas oblivious that anything is actually happening at all).*

For those of you who are not Destiel Fans but have made it this far, I sure hope you can continue on this journey with the rest of us. If nothing else, I do try to keep such moments amusing as possible (poor Dean :D) and never the main point of the story. I like romance as a natural part of stories, but never the plot or driving factor of where the story goes (if I did, I think these two would have gotten together already, GOOD GRIEF).

Reviews: *I've been so busy lately that I'm slacking on review responses something major. Not just individual responses, but acknowledging big ideas that keep popping up in reviews! I meant to do it last chapter, so I*

wanna take a minute to do that now :) Feel free to skip if you're not into behind the scenes stuff.

*Also, on that note, you guys have AMAZING IDEAS. More than once I got tripped up, thinking 'gosh, maybe *that* idea is better than the route I chose…* XD There were several late-night, emergency meetings with the Muse.*

This also pushed the 'end notes' over the character limit on A03, so we're just posting at the end of the chapter instead :)

Dean Serving as a Vessel to Cas: *Several people thought that Dean would offer himself as a vessel to Cas back at the gas station when the angel was unconscious. That is an awesome idea, but obviously not the route I went with, and here are two reasons why: One, Cas has been in danger several times on the show before where one of the boys offering to be a vessel might have helped, and neither have. I think this is two fold. One, it is ingrained in their brains that being vessel = bad! Two, I don't think it's something that occurs to them as an out. Let's be honest; neither Winchester is particularly good at actually remembering Cas is an angel. They treat him more like a super strong human (Which I think can be pretty tough on our angel, who's like…but I'm not human. Why do the boys only remember that when it's a bad thing? Poor Cas). The second reason, Numero B, is that Cas was unconscious so I don't think Dean saying yes would have made a difference. Pretty sure Cas has to be awake to possess a human. But, cool idea, guys!*

How Did Sam Survive that Grenade?! *I don't know, either! Hahah, probably not the answer you wanted but honestly, I borrowed from the show on this one. We don't get to see how Sam deals with either of the trip wires. Whether he found the second and triggered it on purpose, or whether he tripped it and managed to survive. Grenades have a four second delay on average, which actually makes them pretty crappy traps for a hunter trained by John Winchester :P Sam had plenty of time to dive as far away from that thing as possible, and the cricket-long legs to make that a pretty long distance :P Anyway, I liked keeping the vibe of the show, where sometimes the Winchesters pull miracles out of their asses and we don't get to know how XD Keeps them mysterious badasses.*

Up Next: *Uh, let's see. Dean has some choice words for Gordon, Cas is back for as long as he can stay not-passed out (and he's a little testy at being mistaken for a demon), Sam's a clever one who sticks to the timeline, and the boys wrap the night up with an Uber. (I'm just kidding. It's a taxi. Uber doesn't exist yet!)*

Chapter 98: Season 2: Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Sorry for the delay from the usual posting schedule. I didn't get any editing done this week and struggled with some major procrastination this weekend (work is draining and all I wanted to do was watch movies on the couch which is actually quite rare for me XD) On that note, this chapter only got one read through, so it maybe be heavy on the bloopers…

Previously on TRSF… Ava found Sam at his motel in Lafayette, Indiana to warm him that he was in danger. After listening to her vision about his death via trip-wire and grenade, Sam convinced her to head home to her fiancé. She left him her number and made him promise to call her after he found his brother. He gave her his hunting knife, telling her to keep it with her in case Azazel came for her. Then he went to meet Gordon. Meanwhile, Cas and Dean fled Heaven with Uriel and Rachel in tow. Rachel was stopped from passing through the gate and taken to Zachariah as a witness as to what happened.

(BTW, I've been using these "previously on…" as reminders of things that happened more than one chapter ago but in the same arc. I haven't been including what happened last chapter, so if you guys need a refresher I recommend just scanning quickly through the previous chapter. Otherwise these A/N notes are going to get soooo long. They're already long :P)

Chapter Reference – Cas's Demotion: Quick reminder that after Balthazar's (faked) death on earth, Cas was demoted to second in command of his Flight, with Uriel taking charge in his stead. See **Chapter 32: Season 1 Interlude 1** for a refresher.

Chapter Reference – Tom: Last time we saw Tom the demon, he was talking with Azazel via blood cup (because Azazel had been exorcised by Cas in Rivergrove) about their next steps. Azazel filled him in on the whole plan finally and told him he needed to move up the schedule: grab the next round of kids. Tom promised he'd get it done by the end of the week. See **Chapter 87: Season 2, Chapter 54** for a refresher.

IMPORTANT TIMELINE NOTE: That ^ happened *__FIVE__* days ago in story-time. I know it's been at least ten weeks real time

[insert sweat drop here and standard rant about verbosity here] but that week hasn't wrapped up yet in the story (a *lot* has been happening in these chapters :P)

Chapter Warnings: Dean and Cas show up to handle Gordon who doesn't need handling because Sam already had it handled on his own (isn't verb conjugation fun?!) and we wrap this arc up with a taxi ride, a meeting with the boss, handcuffs and an evidence bag, and a diamond ring.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 65

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

When Dean and Angela landed (was it Dean and Cas at that point? Hard to say what with all the switching and the jumping), it wasn't graceful. They didn't disappear from the car – after Dean pulled Baby safely over to the side of the road, of course – and then reappear instantly in another location like usual. There was a definite delay Dean could almost feel, like when you blink and your eyes stay closed longer than you think they will. When the two of them did finally show back up on the other end of the trip – which turned out to be the exact same decrepit, falling apart, piece of shit house Dean remembered – the world (which had previously been up, down, left, and right) decided to rotate about forty-five degrees forward.

Dean tried to counter-balance the sudden change in orientation, only to find himself diving head first into something tall and hard, but also soft, and squishy in places. It grunted a familiar grunt as they hit the ground together. Whatever it was he'd taken to the floor, it had girly hair that Dean had to spit out of his mouth after several failed attempts.

Beside him, Cas landed about as well. Sure, the angel might not have miscalculated her positioning quite as spectacularly as the fallible human she'd carried, but the flight had taken a hell of a lot of energy out of an already very limited supply. Her feet touched down, Dean keeled forward and Cas, hand still curled around his right shoulder, went with him at the same time as her legs gave out from beneath. She both tumbled forward and crumpled to the ground, colliding with

– and taking down – another body that had the misfortune of being in front of her when they landed.

Dean tried to extricate himself from the pile of gangly limbs, body parts, and floor. He was both disoriented and trying to figure out who the hell he'd used as a landing pad (friend, foe, an unaccounted for third party, or possibly a complete and utter stranger because Cas had shortchanged her power supply and flown them into some other abandoned house?). He hadn't quite managed it (his head was still spinning from the landing and trying to decide which way was 'up') when two large, familiar hands wrapped around his upper arms.

"Dean?!"

Beside them, Castiel found herself rolled and straddled, with the forearm of a human male pressed to her throat. The force of his arm tilted her chin up and head back against the hard floor of the house she had flown them to. The man above her – a hunter – was not one she recognized. He had dark skin, fierce eyes, and blood running down the side of his face from a cut just above his temple. Castiel assumed this to be Gordon Walker, the hunter who was after Sam. She immediately disliked him.

Sam, who'd realized what was happening only seconds after it happened, stared at his brother with wide, disbelieving eyes. Even though he'd thought- well, he'd been pretty sure- about that ping on Gordon's phone…. It was still hard to take in. His brother was alive and had landed, literally, right in his lap. He gripped Dean's arms as very not-dead brother finally managed to right himself. The older Winchester stared right back. It was clear it took the man a moment to focus on Sammy's face, before his gaze hardened into something dark and dangerous.

He reached up, grabbing either side of his younger brother's head, tilting him this way and that. Sam, exhausted and just damn happy Dean was alive, let his mother-hen brother check him over. That look only got darker as he took in the scatter of cuts and bruises, the still-wet blood on his upper lip and nostrils. When he turned to confront Gordon and found the hunter on top of his angel, that rage boiled over into something scary.

"Gordon, you son of a bitch!"

Castiel barely batted an eye as the man above her was tackled clean off by her charge. Dean collided with the other hunter, landing a

solid punch to his face as he took him to the floor.

“Really, man?” Dean screamed as he clobbered Gordon in the face.

“Dean!” Sam scrambled to his feet but didn’t try to get between the two rolling, scrapping men.

"You sniped me? *Me?!*"

Instead, the younger Winchester offered a hand down to Castiel, the angel still laid out on the floor. She took it with a grimace and Sam pulled to her feet, both of them grunting with the effort.

“You okay?” Sam mumbled lowly to the angel, eyes locked on his brother as Cas found her balance beside him. He knew there was no real reason to worry. Gordon was unarmed and with the odds now three-to-one, it was only a matter of time before Gordon was forced to give up the fight. Still, Sam kept his eyes on his brother. Because only a handful of minutes ago he’d thought he’d lost him, possibly forever, and he didn’t feel like a repeat experience.

“Couldn’t even do it to my face, huh? You had to shoot me from fucking *behind*?”

"I have been better,” the angel answered honestly, eyes also on the fight. Dean, having taken a fair few hits himself, landed another shot to Gordon’s jaw and the hunter’s head cracked back against the floor. The older Winchester didn’t stop there, though. He delivered punch after punch, splitting the other man’s cheek, the bridge of his nose, and blackening his eye. Sam took a step forward to intervene, but Castiel halted him with a raised arm, directed at the pair.

“Enough.”

Dean didn’t back off right away, but he wasn’t given the option twice. Gordon flew out of his grasp, sliding along the wooden floor all five and a half feet to the nearest wall, where he was up-righted and pinned. Dean, still kneeling on the floor, looked furiously over his shoulder at his angel, hand held out and power emanating from every inch of her Warrior-of-God stance. The *‘deal with it’* glare she leveled his way was so reminiscent of Cas in Jimmy’s vessel that the anger all but drained out of Dean. Instead, he found himself rolling his eyes as he climbed to his feet.

“I don’t believe it,” Gordon said, face weirdly blank as he spit out a gob of blood. His eyes were wide, even with the left one starting to

swell shut. He stared at the dead man standing right in front of him. "Dean Winchester. In the flesh. Thought I killed you."

Didn't just think, actually. Gordon *knew* he'd killed him.

"Yeah, no shit," Dean snapped right back, looking about half a second from resuming his beat down on the man now stuck against the wall. Sam grabbed him by the bicep, to keep him in check if nothing else.

"Dean, no," he muttered low, too low for the other hunter to overhear them. Dean looked over and up at his brother like the younger Winchester was crazy. "Leave it. He's taken care of."

"Leave it? No, Sammy, I left it once before and look what happened!" Dean gestured to Sam's face, his dust and debris covered clothes, the blood spreading from wound somewhere in his chest (which couldn't be too bad, since the kid was still breathing), and his missing shoes. Missing. Shoes. His baby brother was friggin' sock-footed in a war zone, and that didn't even begin to cover multitude of reasons Dean was going to murder Gordon Walker. He was so busy putting together a list that he didn't even notice the little niggle of Déjà vu caused by his brother's words. "I'm killing this son of a bitch. Screw the damn timeline."

"Dean-" Sam's voice was full of warning, but the older Winchester was already pulling out of his grip. "We need to leave."

"You call me a son of a bitch?" Gordon bit out at the same time, licking at the blood crusted in the corner of his mouth. He spat out another glob of red to the side, eyes never leaving the older Winchester. "You looked in a mirror lately, Dean? What kind of hunter works with demons, huh? Makes deals with demons."

Those dark brown eyes shifted to the woman standing beside the pair of hunters, hand still held out and ethereal blue gaze dangerous. The only way Dean Winchester could have come back from the dead. Gordon knew he was a dead man – knew the Winchesters' pet demon could take him out easy, like snapping a toothpick – but he wasn't going down without a fight. Hell, if he could he'd find a way to warn every damn hunter out there about these two. Traitors to their own kind.

"I am no demon," the woman growled, voice like stone. She straightened, those eyes suddenly lighting up with an icy white glow. Lightning flashed inside the house, making Gordon jump in surprise, pinned to the wall as he was. The flash of light lit the three figures in

front of him, and the vamp hunter stared with wide, disbelieving eyes as their shadows stretched, long and distorted, against the walls of the building. The demon's shadow grew, splitting with a pair of wings stretching out, long and feathered. The walls seemed to bend out and loom inward with an intense power – a presence – that hadn't been there before.

That…wasn't possible. They didn't exist.

Gordon licked his lips as the light faded and those shadowy wings disappeared. The woman remained, cold marble and frosty eyes. The pinned hunter eyed her warily, eyes flickering to the Winchesters on either side of her.

This was a trick. It had to be.

Dean allowed himself a second to smirk at Gordon's reaction. That was an angel standing in front of him – *Dean's* angel – pinning him to the wall and scolding him like a child. Served the jackass right. Gordon was on the wrong damn side of this war.

Then he turned his attention back to his brother, poking the gargantuan man in the shoulder. The unwounded shoulder, because Dean sure as hell noticed the mother effing *bullet* wound in the other one. Gordon was lucky he wasn't a god damn smear on the wall right now. "We don't need to go anywhere. What we *need* to do is kill this son of a bitch before he comes after you again. And apparently me too!"

At this, the hunter spun again, anger reignited. Sam reached out and grabbed his arm *again*, but Dean wasn't going anywhere. Apparently he just needed to get some yelling off his chest. "Really, Gordon? *Me*?! Stick to the damn timeline, asshole!"

"Dean!" This time Sam shook his arm enough to get his brother to turn to him. "We have to *go*. I already called the cops!"

Sudden silence reigned in the small house, Dean blinking up at his younger brother, Gordon going rigid with realization of just why Sam Winchester had been stalling rather than attacking, and Castiel…well, she was often the silent type, so no change there. The angel merely glanced over her shoulder at the brothers, waiting for direction. She had already warned Dean this would likely be a one-way trip. While not completely depleted – and more than a match for one human hunter who wasn't even armed – a flight with two passengers in tow right now would be…unwise.

Just then, the sound of sirens that Castiel had been able to hear for the past thirty seven seconds (unaware it was something she should be informing her charges of) became an audible thing to the three humans in the house with her.

"Oh…" Dean blinked again, head turning towards the front of the house and those sirens. Well, shit. They couldn't kill Gordon now. But…Dean broke into a grin, realizing what that twinge of déjà vu in his stomach was about now. He hit the Samsquatch on his good arm, causing the younger Winchester to finally release his brother and wince all in one go. "That's the same move you pulled last time, Sammy. Alright, let's get the hell out of here."

Sam expected Cas to turn and zap them out of there. So he was surprised when Dean crossed the room to pick the younger Winchester's gun off the ground instead and Cas walked up to Gordon. She reached into partially intact wall beside him, bending and breaking loose a half exposed pipe in order to wrap it around the pinned hunter like it was made of rubber, essentially trapping him to the wall. Gordon glared at her the entire time but Cas was hardly intimidated, stepping back to check her work before turning to the brothers.

"We walking out of here?" Dean asked almost offhandedly as he tucked Sammy's gun into his waistline (he didn't want to see the Samsquatch attempt that with his injuries). Dean already knew the answer, of course. Cas had pretty much warned him this time (with greater specifics than *'I will be weakened.*' Yup, sitting in the Impala on the side of the road, Cas had grabbed his shoulder and this time said, *'I will be weakened. Perhaps too much to fly us out again.'* Whoot, score one for specificity and baby steps). He glanced over at the angel, who nodded.

"Yes. I am very nearly out of…mojo?" The head tilt to finish off the question was a cherry on top of the sundae that was their angel, back with them, alive and (mostly) well. Dean grinned, not even caring that they were hoofing it. At least Cas was there with them.

Sam, startled by the answer, gave the angel a longer look than he'd been able to spare her yet. He realized she looked as exhausted as he felt. She didn't appear much better than the last time he'd seen her, actually, back in Rivergrove and then Bobby's house, hurting from a demon trap and frantic to return to Heaven before it was too late. Sam swallowed, hoping his promises to his brother that she would be alright – that Uriel would have healed her – hadn't been completely

empty after all.

“You okay?” he asked the angel again quietly, even as the three headed into the kitchen. The sirens were getting louder and the backdoor would be a lot less risky for escape than the front at this point.

“That is a long story,” Castiel answered with a sad smile up at him as he gestured for her to enter the kitchen first. “But I will be.”

Sam understood perfectly, his own trembling fingers – an onset of what was surely to be another withdrawal – hidden in loosely clenched fists.

“Don’t you leave me here!” Gordon yelled from the living room, his voice clear in the kitchen as the three headed for the back door Sam had first entered through less than an hour ago. It was hanging on only one hinge after both grenade explosions, but they weren’t exactly worried about closing it behind them. “You better kill me now, Dean! You leave me here, and I *will* come after you and your brother!”

Sam glanced at the older Winchester, worried he would have to pull him out of the house himself. His brother just charged on ahead, though, out the back door and into the woods surrounding the abandoned house. His jaw was clenched, a vein in his temple pulsing, but he kept moving, and Sam and Cas followed. They left Gordon to holler and rage fruitlessly after them.

Less than a minute from the door and into the woods, cop cars came screeching into view, blocking the road and drive, surrounding the front of the house. Police flooded the house, guns out. The Winchesters didn’t stay to see the end result. Gordon would have unregistered weapons on him, recently fired, just like last time. Even with the changes – Gordon trapped inside the house by a metal pipe bent like a Twizzler – the cops would still put him away for the weapons alone.

Time oughta be a happy ‘bout that, for friggin’ once.

In the meantime, they had two injured parties, a recently revived third, and it was fucking cold out. Despite the shitty circumstances, Dean was still grinning as the three disappeared deeper into the woods and away from the flashing blue and red lights.

-o-o-o-

Sam made it about five hundred feet before he started to noticeably drag. Which was about four hundred feet farther than he should have pushed himself. He tripped on a tree root and went down to one knee, jarring the still bleeding hole in his shoulder among various other aches and pains.

"Come on, Sammy," Dean muttered, immediately bending down to curl an arm around his brother and pull him back up. He'd been sticking close to him as they hurried through the trees, having gotten a good look at those wounds and knowing Sam was running on adrenaline alone. "Couple more minutes to the road."

And then another thirty, at least, to where he had left the Impala. But Dean wasn't gonna mention that part. Baby steps. Step one: get far enough away from the house, through the woods where there was cover, to emerge back out onto the road where cops wouldn't see them or be looking in the first place. Step two was get back to Baby. Dean hadn't actually figured step two out yet. So he was just gonna focus on step one.

An arm came out of nowhere in front of both Winchesters, two fingers pressing to Sam's forehead before Dean could stop them. Sam's knees almost gave out as the familiar warmth and cleansing of Castiel's healing power washed over him. It didn't reach everything – the wound in his shoulder remained, even though the pain lessened and the bleeding stopped – but the bone-deep ache, the cranky buzzing that had moved from his skin to the back of his head, and the terrifying, telling shake of an oncoming withdrawal was gone.

Sam almost collapsed a second time, this one from sheer relief. He'd known what pushing those powers had meant; he had known what it would cost him. Even if accessing them had been pure survival instinct, the hunter had known where it would lead. What would inevitably come next. Sam hadn't been sure he'd survive it a second time. Worse, he hadn't been sure he *wanted* to.

"Damnit, Cas," Dean growled, causing Sam to open his eyes in time to see the angel collapse in front of him.

The younger Winchester shot back to his feet, immediately grabbing at Cas before she could hit the ground. Between him and his brother, who'd obviously known this was coming and already had half a grip on the angel, they were able to keep her upright. Sam's shoulder was still busted – enough so that the two of them ended up exchanging sides so Sam could support Cas with his good arm – but he felt better.

Less exhausted and on-the-brink than he had a moment ago.

"Okay, *now* he's out of mojo," the woman between them muttered, voice several octaves higher and riding labored breaths.

Sam almost dropped her, realizing the person he was holding was entirely different than the angel he'd reached out to catch. "Angela!?"

The very human woman smiled up at him. It was a weak grin, but a grin all the same. "Hi, Sam. Nice to meet you. Damn, you're even taller when I'm in control. How does that make sense?"

The younger Winchester, lost for words at the end of a really long, emotional, bewildering night, looked up at his brother, then back down at Angela again. Dean didn't seem surprised by this development at all. Sam had so many questions and no bandwidth left to ask them.

"Dragon Lady, Sam. Sam, Dragon Lady." Dean nodded his head between the two of them with a look to Sam that said, *'Later.'* Angela snorted at the introductions and the younger Winchester actually jumped at the noise. The physical change of presence in the woman he was half supporting was astonishing. And also a conversation – and consideration – for another time. Dean was right about that; Sam wasn't sure he had the emotional reserve left to have that discussion anyway.

The three of them were alive and moderately safe (if not various degrees of beat up and exhausted) and that was enough for now. Honestly, the last Sam had seen or thought of Angela, he hadn't even known if the woman's soul was still attached to her body. The younger Winchester settled for simply being glad the woman was alive at all.

"Over here," Dean spoke lowly, pulling them back in the direction of the road. They'd probably gone far enough from the house for the street to be safe from cops. It wasn't like they were gonna get much further with a half-injured hunter, a recently un-deceased human, and a crippled angel between them. Dean would chance the road at this point.

They came out of the woods onto winding, black asphalt stretching out on either side of them. There were still flashing lights in the distance back towards the house beyond a bend in the road and what they could see. The trunks of the trees along the curve were bathed in blinking red and blue, turning the bark a flashy purple.

Dean looked at his brother, then Cas and Angela, then down the road in the direction of his Baby, which was some three, maybe four miles away. Angela looked like she had about a five minute walk in her before one of them would be carrying her completely, and Sam had been *shot*.

Damnit.

The older Winchester caught his brother's eye, Sam having not missed the current lack of a step two to this plan. "So…Uber a thing yet?"

-o-o-o-

Uber was not a thing, yet, considering the look Sam gave him. Dean made a mental note to invest whenever it did turn up.

A taxi driver showed up about twenty minutes later at the random-ass location they managed to give the company when they called on Bobby's phone. It was the address of the first house they'd found after venturing down the side of the road for another ten minutes. The two brothers had carried Angela between them until she'd tripped and almost taken Sam down with her, causing his sluggishly bleeding shoulder to become an enthusiastically bleeding shoulder. At which point Dean was forced to pick her up, bridal style, and tell her to shut the hell up when she called him 'her hero' with batted eyelashes that coulda taken out a bystander.

The driver gave the rag tag group one hell of a weird look when he picked them up, but at least he picked them up.

-o-o-o-

As the Winchesters drove out of Lafayette, Angela slept in the back seat. They'd gotten to Baby via the Taxi, then back to the motel as fast as Dean could drive. There, he field-dressed Sam's shoulder wound – the speed version – while Angela started packing for them. She only managed a couple minutes before ultimately ending up on the edge of one of the beds trying not to fall asleep on her feet or pass out (Dean told her from personal experience that the first would be better than the second, so don't push it). Despite her best efforts, she failed and Dean ended up carrying the unconscious woman out to the car once he'd finished patching up Sam and finishing the packing, all as quickly as possible.

Weirdly enough, Angela Anne Garrett weighed exactly as much as Dean expected of a woman her size and build. So what had made Cas

so damn heavy back at that gas station? Had it been Cas in the driver's seat? Or Cas without a vessel? Maybe Dead-Dean's glowing foghorn of impatience or the hunter's underappreciation of how much muscle even an illusion of Jimmy Novak must have? Oh well. A mystery for another day (aka: never. Because they had so much more important shit to worry about than how much an angel friggin' weighed and Dean was blaming his recent death experience for the weirdness of his thoughts lately).

Dean didn't trust Gordon not to know where they'd been staying in town and tell the cops once they got him talking. The fact that they hadn't pulled into the motel parking lot to police cars and flashing lights probably meant the hunter had kept his mouth shut, but Dean didn't trust it either way. The Winchesters (and angel) wouldn't run far. Dean may be in the best shape of the three of them, but he *had* just come back from the dead. So they'd make it to the next town over, at least.

They were about fifteen minutes outside of Lafayette, heading West when Dean noticed Sam staring at a piece of paper he was holding, practically in his lap. It looked like the note Dean had left back in the motel, and Dean's gut tightened for a minute, thinking his brother might bring that up (of all the crap that had happened tonight, Dean had almost forgotten about it). But Sam was staring at the back of the sheet, a bullet hole smack dab in the middle of it, with a ring of drying, brown blood soaking up half of the white space.

Dean raised an eyebrow at it. "What's with the blood note? You're not gonna go *Memento* on me, are you?"

Sam glanced over at his brother, having been off in his own thoughts as he stared at what was left of Ava Wilson's phone number. Back when he'd first approached the house, Sam had tucked the note into his breast pocket, along with his phone. Right where Gordon had nailed him with that rifle shot. The phone had been toast and so was the note, it turned out. Taking Ava's number with it.

"Nothing," Sam sighed, folding the piece of paper back up and tossing it onto the dash in front of him.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Dean noted, carefully keeping his voice level rather than the accusation it most definitely was. Sam's pouty-McPouting face was the troubled edition, and Dean knew that even if Sam verbally dismissed it, whatever was bugging him would keep at it for days to come.

“Did you ever get my voicemail?”

Dean pulled his head back at the tone – something caught between little-brother-pissyness and actually wanting or needing to know – then glanced at Sam. He kinda remembered getting a voicemail – remembered it was the last thing he could remember, at least – but Dean hadn’t thought about it in the last oh-so-many-hours he’d been dead-then-not-dead.

“You mean before Gordon Fucking Walker shot me in the head and took my phone?” The words, still angry, left his mouth before he thought about their consequences. Dean winced when he noticed Sam visibly stiffened beside him. Shit. He hadn’t actually told his brother he’d bit the dust in so many words. And this wasn’t the Sam that viewed death as a more-than-likely temporary thing.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Uh…sorry, Sammy.”

His brother was quiet for a long, *long,* minute before he sucked in a breath, his whole chest moving with it. “You were really dead?”

Sam glanced at Dean, who mirrored the solemn look with a frown of his own. The older Winchester had been expecting…he didn’t know. More surprise? Especially from his never-been-dead-and-not-used-to-popping-back-up-like-a-daisy little brother.

Sometimes Dean missed the Sam he’d had in 2016, the one who knew what they’d been through together, had fought and died, so many times, right alongside him. But most of the time Dean caught that innocent light still in his kid brother’s eyes – the light he’d watched die during an Apocalypse – and swore he wouldn’t let it go out this time. Wouldn’t let that other Sam come into existence, even if it hurt like hell to think it. To know he’d permanently lost that brother.

Sam shrugged his good shoulder, both quiet and morose, in a way that upset Dean way more than the conversation. “Gordon showed me a picture.”

“He- What?! That- That *son of a bitch*!” Dean swore viciously, wringing his fingers around Baby’s wheel and kind of wishing it was Gordon’s throat instead. They shoulda killed him and risked a city-wide manhunt, damnit. It woulda been *worth it.* “He took a fucking photo?”

Sam nodded, ignoring the way his stomach twisted and churned at the mental image, forever engrained in his brain.

“God damn, mother fucking-” Dean took in a deep breath, reminding himself that bastard was gonna spend the next year in jail. The older Winchester could probably arrange for someone to take him out before Gordon managed to escape, or whatever the fuck had happened last time to bring him back into their lives. Which he would have to figure out before it happened again. Goddamnit. One thing at a time. Dean blew that same breath out, chancing a glance at his unnaturally quiet brother. “I’m sorry, Sam.”

“Cas bring you back?” Sam glanced over his shoulder at the back seat. He was taking this all incredibly well, Dean thought, maybe with a little bit of worry. As Angela was sitting directly behind him, all Sam could see was the woman’s legs, curled up on the back seat, so he turned frontward again.

“Yeah. Woke up in the attic and figured…why waste it. Might as well try to find Cas.” Dean bobbed his head back and forth, not talking fast but not giving Sam time to really interject, either. Between the exhaustion, the blood loss, and what was probably an emotional roller coaster from Hell, Sam shouldn’t be taking this so calmly. Dean didn’t like it, but he was actually more worried about what would come out of his brother’s mouth when the quiet ended. “Fucking Uriel had him-her tied up. I busted her out and she took care of the rest.”

Dean sent his brother a grin mostly out of instinct, the post-high of a crazy escape, a battle fought and won. Flying out of Heaven, crashing right through the gate, had been pretty damn badass. Not to mention the way they’d tag-teamed and taken down Uriel. Dean’s smile faded, though, at the memory of Cas kneeling in front of his brother, eyes so damn mournful, as he told Dean to look away.

The hunter cleared his throat, more somber now. “Uriel’s dead.”

Sam was startled to hear it. He glanced again to the backseat, less of a full turn this time, but both Angela and Cas remained unconscious. The younger Winchester slowly turned back around, worrying at the inside of his cheek. Uriel had been Cas’s brother, a trusted friend, even if that trust was misplaced. And Cas had been adamant about returning to Heaven to protect her family. Even a traitor’s death – and probably more so his betrayal – would weigh on the compassionate angel. “How did she…?”

‘Take it?’ was Sam’s intended question, but it wasn’t the one Dean heard. At least, not the only one he heard. He understood what Sam was asking, but he knew his brother was also asking it assuming

Castiel had been forced to kill her brother again this time around.

"She's not the one who did it," Dean replied a little stiffly. "I did."

His brother's eyes practically bulged out of his head and it would have been funny if the subject matter was anything else. Eh, it was still a little funny.

"How?"

Dean shrugged but couldn't completely hide the grin tugging at his lips. Yeah, he knew Cas mourned Uriel's death, but Dean sure as hell didn't. He was glad that asshole was out of the way and happy to be the one to do it rather than make Cas carry that weight. Plus…come on; it was a total badass move (besides, Dean had never been one to shy away from owning that before, why start now?). "Stole his angel blade off him. Sure as hell taught him not to underestimate the 'mud monkeys.'"

"Huh." Sam turned his gaze back to the windshield and road beyond. That…. He made a mental note to talk to Cas whenever she woke up, make sure she was okay. Losing a brother, even if you weren't the one to do it, was still, well… Sam glanced at Dean from the corner of his eye again, drinking in the sight of the older Winchester just breathing, just being alive.

He fisted his hands in his lap, one curled over the other, to hide the fact they were trembling once more. Cas had healed him – apparently well before she should have, given her now unconscious state and the fact that he'd gotten to have eight and a half minutes of conversation with Angela Garrett – so it wasn't withdrawal. It *wasn't*, Sam told himself fiercely. And even if it was, it wouldn't be like last time. He'd taken in so much less blood this time. So it wouldn't be like last time. It wouldn't.

"Ava," Dean suddenly breathed out, somewhat out of nowhere. There was a shock of revelation carried on the single word. In the lapse of silence, the older Winchester had turned his thoughts back to Sam's original question, about the voicemail. It took a minute, but he remembered. Sam had called him because Ava Wilson showed up at the motel room.

Beside him, Sam straightened, gaze snapping to him, partly in surprise but mostly due to confirmation. "So you do know her. This happened last time?"

"I mean, not *this*." Dean motioned at the three of them, fleeing Lafayette with a gunshot victim, a recovering corpse, and an unconscious angelic vessel in the backseat. "But yeah, Gordon came after you and there was some chick with you at the time. I…I think her name was Ava."

The older Winchester shrugged at not having more to say, somewhat self-conscious of it. He didn't really remember much about Ava; he'd never even met the lady, just spotted her through a hotel window at the time and then spent months searching the country for her with Sam. It wasn't easy remembering what had gone down eleven years ago, especially with someone who'd existed mostly as hearsay for him.

Sam snatched the folded note back off the dashboard, bloodied and bullet-holed, and held it up. "She left me her number."

"You dog." Dean' waggled his eyebrows at his brother, an automatic response he really couldn't help.

Sam's immediate response was a rolling of his eyes, then the verbal equivalent: "It's not like that, Dean. She has a fiancé."

"Yeah, so?"

Whoa. The déjà vu hit like a bag of bricks to the gut, so much so that Dean almost lurched physically forward. Shit. That couldn't be good. It was never good.

"I promised I'd call her when I found you and didn't die." Sam stared down at the ruined handwriting as his brother huffed a laugh. It was off, with Dean rubbing at his chest like there was something stuck there, but Sam didn't catch it. Between the bullet hole and the blood, Ava's number was completely illegible. It wasn't the end of the world – could have been so much worse, really (the same bullet that destroyed the note could have killed him) – but Sam couldn't shake the regret. He'd made Ava a promise. More than that, she was one of Azazel's children. He wanted – needed – to check in on her, too.

"I'm sure she'll get over it," Dean offered, trying for comfort but failing in his usual Dean-way. He was busy rubbing at his chest and wondering what the hell they were walking right into, yet again. "Especially if she's ready for a ball and chain. Probably get over being stood up in a day or two. Less, even, since it's you we're talking about."

Sam rolled his eyes again, folding the paper back up and tucking it

into the front pocket of his jeans. He couldn't bring himself to get rid of it yet. Something about throwing it away just didn't sit well with him. Like he was throwing her away. "Do you know anything about her? What happens to her?"

"I never met her, but she was one of Azazel's kids. A psychic – had visions, like you." Dean lowered his arm from his chest, tapping a finger against the steering wheel instead. Some of it was coming back, but slow and sluggish, like digging through sludge. "She…uh… she was at the battle royale, I think."

Not that he really knew the details. The truth was, he'd been so much more concerned with Sam at the time, first with finding him and then…after. Memories hadn't really stuck so much those first few days, at least until the shock of what had happened, what he'd done to make it happen, what he'd *sold* to make it happen, had started to wear off, replaced with dread and denial.

Wait, there *was* something else. He remembered looking for her. They'd spent weeks looking for the missing woman after…after they'd found a blood-covered apartment and no Ava.

"She live in Peoria?" Dean suddenly asked, eyes locked on a road sign as it flew past. Peoria was the second destination listed and his Timey Senses clenched, curled up in his gut tighter than an anaconda mating ball. His stomach gave an additional lurch of nausea at the image ('*Thanks for that, brain.*').

Beside him, Sam frowned, going back through the conversation he'd had with the frenetic woman. She'd mentioned being a secretary, having a fiancé…and the newspaper clipping she'd shown him, it had been from the Peoria Journal Star. She'd said it, too. '*Just a secretary from Peoria.'*

"Yeah," the younger Winchester answered slowly, worry starting to draw his brow down sharply between his eyes. He looked at his brother again, gaze turning serious. "Dean, what happens?"

Dean pressed down on the gas, Baby surging forward with a rev of her powerful engine. "We gotta get to her apartment. Start looking for an address."

-o-o-o-

"So, Rachel."

Zachariah sat in front of her, across the large expanse of a white, ethereal, over-compensating desk. Not that Rachel would ever say as much. Didn't stop her from thinking it, though. (Didn't stop any angel who had to deal with Zachariah from thinking it).

"I understand from the Gate Guards that your second in command has turned traitor?"

"Yes. Uriel-"

"And you'd be willing to file a report to that extent?"

Rachel hesitated at the bland color spread across Zachariah's grace. It swirled sluggishly, twitching at the corners now and then, like an agitated eddy playing at being calm. It was…disconcerting, and Rachel neither liked nor trusted it. She had only reported directly to Zachariah three times since her placement in Castiel's unit, but she could, with a fair bit of confidence, claim that as her takeaway of this angel. She neither liked nor trusted him.

"Yes…" Rachel replied slowly, feeling like she was walking into a trap she couldn't see. Castiel sometimes did that to them, in their combat drills. It kept Rachel's instincts sharp, though she was concerned why those instincts might be flaring up now, in a superior's office, in the safety of Heaven's inner walls.

"Great." Zachariah rolled up the parchment in front of him, the contents of which Rachel didn't even know. She had assumed the Dominion would be asking for a verbal report. He could hardly know what had occurred between Uriel and Castiel already, and the Gate Guard's knew nothing other than her commanding officer fleeing Heaven with a human soul, Uriel in pursuit.

"Sir-"

"So, the traitor Castiel will be brought up on charges, should he ever return to Heaven. And we will, of course, mourn the loss of Uriel."

Rachel blinked. All thirty-six eyes, simultaneously. And then again. She…must have misheard?

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't…Uriel is dead?"

"Yes, tragic I know," Zachariah said, the features of his human faces forming something of a pout. He was probably going for sympathetic, but Rachel had never found him anything close to that. "He will be

missed. Rest assured, we'll hunt down his murderer. You can go now."

"His…murderer?" Rachel tossed her head, sharp edges of her grace stubby and jolting. She visibly shook herself, those angles and corners beginning to vibrate in unease that was quick on its way to frustration. "Sir, there's been a misunderstanding. Castiel-"

"Has murdered one of the Host," Zachariah interrupted, bland face no longer so. In fact, his expression had grown stony, his grace hardening into sharp ridges, and Rachel immediately took note. Combat training had her prepared for attack, at any moment, and her superior officer was giving off all sorts of warning signs. Not that Zachariah was a physical fighter, but Rachel knew that violence came in many forms. "Or do you disagree that Castiel and Uriel – and only Castiel and Uriel – left Heaven?"

"Yes, they did-"

"And Uriel is dead, while Castiel has not returned."

"That doesn't mean-"

"And," Zachariah raised his voice, presence growing larger with the swelling of his grace, "is it not a fact that only an angel can kill another angel?"

Rachel quieted, realization of what was happening – what Zachariah was making sure was happening – settling in her colors like lead.

"Now, then." The Dominion settled behind his desk once more, bland smile slapped back in place on all four faces. "It was very commendable what you did, chasing after the traitor to try and save one of our own. As both your commander and second in command have been removed from rank by various circumstances-"

(Those circumstances being death and framed-for-murder.)

"-I am placing you in charge of your unit. Congratulations, Rachel." Zachariah stood in a sweeping gesture and Rachel mirrored the change in position out of instinct and a millennia of training.

"Sir, Castiel-"

"Was acting alone, as far as we can tell," the Dominion once more finished for her, something that was growing more than just

frustrating. He eyed her and the face that resembled a lion twitched with a barely restrained snarl of its jowls. Rachel found herself staring at that face. "Unless, of course, you know otherwise? Anyone found helping a traitor will be held accountable for his crimes, you understand."

Rachel snapped her primary eyes back to Zachariah's center face. It was quite difficult to move through the sudden stiffness in her grace – her essence both frozen and rigid – but she managed a nod. "I understand, sir."

"Great!" Zachariah clapped his two forelimbs together, grace churning an ugly yellow-pink where it met and swirled together like a child's finger painting. "Well, you better get back to your unit. Congratulations, again, on the promotion. I'm sure you're very proud!"

She left his office with an escort, completely unsure for the first time in her long life. Rachel knew what she had just agreed to, knew the logic behind agreeing to it, but felt utterly wronged by the action. Should she not have stood up for Castiel? For herself? Rather, she had walked away without protesting their innocence, without condemning Uriel, who was the guilty party to these events.

Rachel hardly noticed her escort depart at the entrance to the Heavenly Offices. She walked on autopilot, slowly and without notice, back to the barracks where her unit was housed. The walk was not a long one and, in this case, not nearly long enough for her troubled thoughts and churning grace.

"Rachel!" The angel looked up at Samadriel's voice, only to find him hurrying towards her from the barracks. He must have been waiting for her return. "Is everything okay? What's going on? They're saying that Castiel is a traitor? That he killed Uriel?"

Seeing Samadriel's concern, his clear confusion and the way his grace surged and retreated with hope and then fear, Rachel's grace hardened with resolve. She may have walked away from Zachariah's office without a fight, but she would not walk away from her unit. She had a duty to do and Rachel would not allow that responsibility to be defined by an angel who had never dirtied his hands in battle or led a command.

Or who so carelessly dismissed his subordinates.

"Gather the Flight," she ordered, and Samandriel straightened to

attention at the order. "There is something we must discuss."

-o-o-o-

Zachariah watched the new Flight Commander leave his office under escort, all four faces eying Rachel's retreating form with wariness and distaste. He turned to one of his men, standing beside his desk.

"Watch her. Watch the entire unit."

The angel nodded at the order, turning swiftly to carry it out. Zachariah eyed the door to his office again, tapping one manifested finger against the surface of his desk. He didn't trust any of those good-doers in Castiel's unit. It was far too likely that, as their leader and mentor, he had gotten to all of them. One bad apple poisoning the batch.

Zachariah let out a breath that turned into a hum. He turned to one of the other angel's in his office, at his disposal. "Find Naomi. Tell her I want to speak with her immediately."

-o-o-o-

Gordon Walker sat in the interrogation room – not his first – and eyed the one-way mirror with the kind of stoic distaste that had always made cops uncomfortable. It's why Gordon avoided them, even on cases. Never worked well with the local LEO's. Never cared to.

The door to the room opened, one such cop – probably a detective, given the pressed shirt and shiny shoes – walking over to the table. Like every LEO ever, the guy slapped a folder and an evidence bag onto the table between them, then settled down in the chair across from Gordon like a fat cat in his tiny little kingdom.

"You know," the detective began, grabbing the evidence bag almost lazily, opening the seal and pulling out Gordon's phone. "You really should lock your mobile device."

The hunter immediately frowned. He did keep his phone locked. With a relatively secure six-digit access pin.

The detective tapped something on the phone, turning it around to face him and Gordon blinked at the home menu. No pin. Phone just open, with everything on it – like *photos* – admissible in a court of law. Brown eyes slid closed with realization, a smirk playing at the corner of his lips.

“Nice move, Sammy,” Gordon muttered, realizing the hunter had disabled the locking system on his phone, knowing the cops were on their way and would be able to use anything they found on the device as evidence against him.

Damn. He’d have to remember not to hand over his phone to anyone again in the future, particularly an adversary as smart and devious as Sam Winchester.

“Hey!” A hand slapped down on the table in front of them and Gordon snapped his eyes back open, locking them on the man in front of him. “You think this is funny?”

The detective thumbed through his phone, opening the photo gallery and turning it back around to show Dean Winchester’s deceased face. Gordon stared at it for a long moment. At the green eyes, frozen open and lifeless. At the blood and brains spattered across skin and pavement.

Dean Winchester had been dead. Until he wasn’t.

“So, you like taking pictures of corpses, Mr. Walker?” The man watched him, eyes dangerous, but nowhere near as dangerous as the things Gordon hunted. Or the hunter himself. The detective swiped to the next photo. “Who are they, huh?”

The picture was a woman, head no longer attached to her body but conveniently propped up beside her corpse. Like a proper photoshoot. Gordon had found it hilarious at the time.

She was vamp, the last he’d had taken out before turning his sights on the Winchesters. He liked getting them out of their nest this way. Usually started with the women. They were easier to lure away, with promises of a good meal or a good night, never realizing that Gordon’s definition of both was just as bloody and deadly as theirs. After the kill, he’d take a photo and bait the rest of the nest. Vamps may be monsters, but most of them had cell phones. Hell, Gordon had seen nests with sixty-two inch TVs, cable, and PlayStations, for Christ’s sake.

One little text with a picture of one of their kind dead, head rolling, and the whole rest of the nest came calling for revenge. Not that they ever got it.

“You like killing girls?” The detective’s voice was taunting, pushing, and Gordon’s eyes flickered back up to meet his. The cop swiped to

the next photo, the woman in that one as equally decapitated as the first. Gordon should have deleted them, but he'd never thought to worry about cops, of all people, getting a hold of them. "It make you feel like a man?"

"You shouldn't call women 'girls'. Not in a professional setting," he taunted right back, keeping his tone even except for the slightest taint of condescension. The detective growled low in his throat and Gordon just smiled.

"So you, what? Got a decapitation kink?"

"Maybe I just like taking pictures." Gordon shrugged, not a care in the world. This was all utterly unimportant – beneath him – and he'd get out soon enough. "You know what else I like? My Miranda Rights. I'll take a lawyer now."

He watched as the man across from him clenched his jaw, veins and muscles bulging in the square line of his face.

"Fine." The detective stood, throwing the phone back into the evidence bag and scooping it and the folder off the table. "But we'll be running those faces and when we get matches you're going down for murder on top of the weapons charge. So I suggest you tell that lawyer you want to make a deal."

Gordon watched the man – just a man, while Gordon was so much more, took out so much more, ever damn day – leave, door slamming shut behind him. The hunter settled back in his chair, content to wait. He wasn't in a great spot now, but he'd been in worse before. He'd get out of this one, too.

Once he did, he was going after the Winchesters. And next time, he'd bring a lot heavier artillery than a rifle.

-o-o-o-

Ava Wilson's apartment was a mess. They didn't make it in time to save her, not that Dean knew if they could have to begin with. The Winchesters got to Peoria in the early hours of the morning, early enough that it was still very much dark out, and yet still entirely too late. The fiancé was dead in a puddle of blood and sheets, Ava was nowhere to be seen. The déjà vu was so strong Dean felt physically sick.

Sam crouched down past the foot of the bed, next to another pool of

red over by the window. The purse he'd seen Ava sling over her shoulder only hours ago was sitting, abandoned, in the middle of all that blood. The contents were spilling out of the tipped over bag and Sam reached out, picking up a knife sheath he recognized all too well. The weapon itself was nowhere to be seen, just like the woman he'd given it to.

He set the useless leather guard back down, careful not to disturb the crime scene. A glint of something reflective drew Sam's attention to another object among the blood, and the young hunter leaned further forward to reach for it. Sam picked the metallic object out of the congealing mess, silver and diamond glinting in the beam of his flashlight.

An engagement ring.

"Ava," the younger Winchester breathed out, the sound full of grief for a woman he'd barely known yet felt entirely responsible for.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: And *that* wraps up the Heaven Arc!! Which I couldn't label out loud earlier cuz you all didn't know Dean was going to Heaven XD There's so many characters and sub-plots going on now that just wrapping up that arc took half the chapter -_-

Gordon, Extra Creepy Edition: I loved the way Gordon was portrayed in the show – he was a real son of a bitch and super creepy – and as I started writing him I just…I don't know, ended up pushing that. I started writing his motivational narration and was like…holy shit, this guy is coming out creeeepy AF. And then with the whole taking a picture of Dean, I thought…you know what…Gordon always gave off this kinda-sick-and-evil vibe to me. I could see him taunting vampires with the death of their nest-mates, and keeping the photos as trophies of sorts. Because he's human, and he's better than them just because of that. Turns out, I like writing the creepy ones (Azazel probably should have tipped me off to that one…XD)

(Writing Zachariah is kind of my favorite too. He's such a dick.)

Other Character Check-Ins: To everyone asking for updates on other characters (Crowley, Azazel, Lilith and Persephone are the top requests (and holy crap, you guys are asking for more of the OC. I…I'm stunned and very honored), I do hear you, your requests are noted! I appreciate not only your interest in what's

happening elsewhere in this story but also the nudges for me to remember everyone/everything too, haha! XD

Those characters are all coming up. Feel free to keep nudging, it helps keep me on track and lets me know where audience awareness and likes/wants are. I ask only for patience in the meantime; any character that doesn't have to do with the current arc won't get screen time because screen time is so darn tight just covering what we need to cover! (By that I mean it's taken 8 chapters of roughly 6,000 words each just to cover one night dealing with a single badguy. All other villains are just gonna have to wait XD) Soon as we get to the end of this arc (which usually means downtime in the plot; we've just had three back-to-back arcs with very limited downtime lately, which is rare btw), I'll work those characters we haven't heard from in a while back in.

Up Next: With this arc wrapped up, we're headed back to Cold Oak to rescue Ava. But Cas needs some time to self-heal since Plan Trust-Uriel-To-Do-It didn't go so well, and the boys desperately need sleep and a break they can't afford to take. So first we're headed for Bobby's. Luckily, the boys aren't alone; they have Roadhouse connections too, maybe a couple that would be willing to head towards Cold Oak for them.

Chapter 99: Season 2: Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: This chapter is a little late because I've been majorly struggling with motivation lately. Not so much with the story (there's absolutely no worry about abandonment here), but life in general. Burn out is returning now that I'm back at work; I have so little time and, worse, so little energy when I do have time. The good news is that my contract is up at the end of March and I am taking more time off to recover! The bad news is that until the end of March, my output levels are going to drop significantly, and I want you all to have ample heads up that that is coming.

Chapter Reference – Jo's Apartment Hunt: The boys (Andy included) showed up to a hunt after Jo called them, but after she was kidnapped by the ghost, Ellen showed up for the world's most awkward family road trip back to the Roadhouse. See **Chapter 66 and 67:Season 2, Chapters 33 and 34** for a refresher.

Quality Warning: This chapter got a slightly better edit than last chapter (and oh boi, I re-read that one and gaaaah the errors in are just…. I could tell which sentences I added post-edit because there were full-on missing words every time. Every damn one. Good god Gertrude) but it's likely there's still some things I missed.

(Btw, I'm very slow to get back and edit chapters, but feel free to point errors out. I take no offense to it and if you leave it in a review/comment for that chapter, it makes finding/fixing it suuuper fast later on :D)

(One of the things that was on that butt-broken phone were dozens and dozens of screengrabs of the story as I read through it on my phone and highlighted all the errors to fix. Sigh)

Chapter Warnings: Lots of chatter and a break from all that damn action for once ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"We have to go back, Dean. We have to go back to Cold Oak."

Those were the first words out of Sam's mouth as they climbed back into the car outside of Ava Wilson's apartment on the southeast side of Peoria. Dean didn't disagree, but his stony silence in the face of Sam's adamancy wasn't exactly the rapid agreement the younger Winchester had been expecting (or going for).

"She could be in trouble."

Oh, she was definitely in trouble, the older hunter thought, hands wrapped tight around the wheel as he pulled away from a crime scene they most definitely did not want to get caught leaving. They'd call it in (anonymously, of course) as soon as they were out of the city.

"If Azazel's grabbed more kids, we have to get to Cold Oak," Sam insisted again, practically vibrating with pent up adrenaline and anger. He was so damn sick of Yellow Eyes ruining lives, so tired of not being able to stop it. Of feeling responsible. Well, this time, they would stop it. This time, no one else would die or bleed in that damn mining town.

"Azazel's gone, man." Dean didn't meant to snap, but he was tired. And not the type of tired that sleep would fix. He knew this type of tired and, damnit, they were supposed to have years before they reached that point. Years! "It's been *a week and a half*, Sam. Ten days since zombie land! Since Andy went missing, and we almost lost Cas, and you got friggin' dosed with demon blood again. A fucking *week and a half*, alright? Azazel's locked up tight in Hell, not out kidnapping friggin' kids, okay?"

Sam was quiet. Too quiet. "Ava's missing and her fiancé was torn to pieces."

Dean closed his eyes against the reminder. Damnit, he knew that. He wasn't trying to say…. What was he trying to say? The evidence was clear as day; either Azazel was topside again (and their sacrifices – Cas's sacrifice – in Rivergrove had meant crap) or he had other demons doing his dirty work. Dean knew from experience both were a possibility.

It just wasn't…fucking fair. That they never got a break, even when

they fought tooth and nail for the few wins they did get.

"I get it, alright?" Dean sighed, reminding himself that he wasn't mad at his brother. This wasn't Sam's fault any more than it was his. "But neither of us have had more than a couple hours of sleep in the last two days, alright? It's been crisis after crisis, and we can't keep going like this. We need a break or we're gonna slip up, Sammy. The kinda slip up we can't afford."

Plus, his Timey Sense was sitting thick and heavy in his stomach, not unlike dread, and Dean didn't know *why*. Which had him wary and on edge, hesitant to act because who the hell knew what the right call was when his gut got this way. Something about the timing was off, he knew that much. Ava had been missing for months before the battle royale last time. He was pretty sure Sam had mentioned her name after everything…worked itself out (at which time, Dean had only been registering about a quarter of the things going on around him, too busy staring at his not-dead brother and drinking in the sight because he only had a year left to do that).

Ava couldn't have been at Cold Oak the whole time, right? Which meant she might not even be there now. And if she had, then she'd survived that month last time. There wasn't much reason to think that would change, right?

"We're eight hours from Bobby's," Dean countered when his brother fell silent. It was an understanding silence, even if it was still angry. Anger at the unfairness, at the lack of control. Dean got it. Oh, did he get it. "It's on the way to Cold Oak, anyway. We get there, we crash for five, six hours, and then we hit the road again."

Beside him, Sam stared at his lap, jaw clenched tight and fingers curled into fists. Dean wasn't wrong. He *knew* his brother wasn't wrong, but it still wasn't right. If there was one thing that could piece Sam's anger – poke through his own helplessness and frustration – every time, though, it was his big brother sounding so defeated.

Sam saw Dean's gaze dart to the rear view mirror, checking on the angel still passed out in their backseat. That was worrying Dean too. Angela (or Cas?) had slept right through their two-hour mad drive to Peoria and the fifteen minutes they'd been in the apartment, in and out of the car without trying to be quiet. She'd never woken. Never even twitched. Dean had no idea if that was what the knots in his stomach were on about, but it certainly wasn't helping.

"Besides, Cas isn't in any condition to go anywhere," the older Winchester muttered, turning his eyes back to the road even as Sam glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping angel too.

"What happened to her?" The question was quiet, soft in the way that people tried to be when they were considerate and sensitive. Dean hated it.

"I don't know," he replied tersely, keeping his eyes locked forward and not checking on the angel, repeatedly. Not like looking at her was gonna change anything. "I've never seen a trap like the one in Rivergrove, man. Cas said it…damaged his- uh, her core, or something."

Sam's mouth twitched towards a frown and he had to keep himself from glancing at the backseat again as well. "She'll be okay, though. Right?"

His brother shrugged, a defensive gesture Sam was used to seeing when Dean was angry about his lack of knowledge or control over a situation. The younger Winchester could relate all too easily. "She said she was healing. That those cracks were mended, just tender. And keeping 'em healed was exhausting."

Which explained why they had a sleeping angel in their backseat.

"She just needs rest," he added needlessly, for his own reassurance as much as his brother's.

Sam sighed, flexing his fingers and trying to release the tension that clung to his system like a parasite. He knew, probably more than his brother did, that Dean wasn't just talking about Cas. He really wasn't wrong; Sam was exhausted himself, in a way that worried him a lot more than one night without sleep should. They did need a break. They just couldn't really afford one.

"Okay," he agreed, still quietly, but he nodded with more resolve than his voice could convey. He glanced over at his brother. "We'll head to Bobby's. Cas will probably heal faster in a bed than in the car, anyway."

Hooked up the machines that would keep Angela Garrett alive and comatose-ed (totally a word) so that Cas didn't have to.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam watched the tension inch out of his brother bit by bit. Dean had been worried he'd fight him on it. That

Sam would put Ava at a higher priority than Castiel. The younger Winchester should have known better. There was something between his brother and Cas, and it always put Dean so on edge when he had to defend it. Probably because he didn't like acknowledging it was there. Like Cas might mean more to him than she did to anyone else and that wasn't okay.

Sam sighed internally. Not just because he had to tread his brother's emotionally stunted land mines. Sure, he was annoyed as he always was to jump through hoops to keep Dean from shutting down on him, but it also hit the younger Winchester hard – hard enough to knock that anger out from under him – to see his brother so worried. Worried for Cas, worried his worry would make him weak, worried that Sam would blame him for that worry.

Classic Dean Winchester, insisting he face the world alone and then refusing to admit it was a lonely road.

"Dean…" Sam hesitated, realizing he didn't really know how to put any of what he needed to say – what his brother needed to hear – into words without Dean automatically shutting down because of it. "I know this…all of it…. Dude, it *sucks*."

Dean, expecting *Samantha* to give him a cross between a lecture and a heartfelt plea to embrace his inner uterus, let out a bark of laughter. It was bitter and huffy, but such a Winchester form of agreement that Sam quirked a smile at it, too.

"None of this is fair or easy," Sam continued, trying to voice his own frustration and fears and love, and not really having the right words to do it. He wasn't even sure the right words existed. "But you're not alone, alright? We're in this together."

Dean glanced sidelong at his brother.

Crap. They were having a moment, weren't they?

Damnit, they were. Sam snuck it up on him with a fake-out – even wrangled a laugh out of him, that bastard – then went and turned it into a moment. Dean knew it because his stupid, traitorous eyes started stinging and the back of his throat felt tight (and a friggin' highschool playwright was whispering about the power of brotherly love and B.M. scenes.)

(Not. Helping.)

Only Sam could do this to him. Take their mutual anger and turn it into…something else. Something manly, of course, not anything gooey or warm at all. Something that smelled like the color brown, damnit, and not rainbows and unicorns. (Dean was *not* using the 'L' word. Fuck that. This was not a chick flick, there was no melodrama here, boy or otherwise. This was an action packed, guns-blazing, obscenity flying, mother 'effing *shitshow*, was what it was. No chick flick moments, no brotherly love. At all. Nope.)

(Damnit, he was too goddamn tired for this.)

In the midst of all his not-thinking-about-it and not-answering-because-feelings-eew, Dean frowned. Something between his brother's words and his inner manliness chasing that playwright away with a baseball bat, Dean's thoughts hit a little speedbump that turned him in an entirely different direction.

They weren't alone, were they? Dean was from ten years in the freaking future. He should know that, better than the Dean from 2006 ever had.

"Call Ellen," he said suddenly, causing his brother to look over at him with raised, questioning eyebrows. "You're right, we're not alone. Screw Gordon; we have Roadhouse connections, too. Maybe Ellen can find someone – a coupla hunters – to send ahead of us. Check out Cold Oak. We'll meet 'em there tomorrow."

Because the Winchesters really did need a break, but Dean also understood Sam's edginess and worry. Ava didn't deserve whatever was coming her way. If there was any way they could spare her it, they'd do it.

Sam, deciding to let Dean have his narrow escape from the 'moment' (because he had a good point and Sam really was worried about Ava), and instead held up his phone. He hadn't wanted to leave it behind for the cops to find, useless as it was to the Winchesters now. He showed it pointedly to Dean, the bullet hole that went straight through the device, having split it almost in half. The damage was clear even in the dark light of early morning.

"Shit," Dean swore, glancing between it and the road. No wonder Sam's phone had gone straight to voicemail. "That the one you took in the chest?"

He'd picked a couple pieces of plastic out of the wound when he'd speed-bandaged the thing, but it hadn't occurred to him to ask.

Honestly, Dean had other things on his mind at the time and Sammy was alive, so the cause of the damage hadn't been as much of a priority as patching it up *quickly* so he could keep it that way.

Dean dug out Bobby's phone from his jeans, tossing it over to his brother and decidedly not thinking about the hell-of-a close call that shot must have been. Didn't matter, Sam was alive. The younger Winchester flipped the device open, going through the contact list before locating the Roadhouse's landline.

"Boys?" Ellen's voice was clearly worried, loud in the silent car as Sam held the phone between them, already switched to speaker. "Tell me you're alright."

Dean winced. Right. The last Ellen had heard from them, he was demanding Ash hack Gordon's phone for a GPS location because he'd tried to take Dean out (*had* taken Dean out, but Ellen didn't need to know that) and Sam was definitely next. Now it was barely five o'clock in the morning – only a handful of hours later – and the barkeep had answered on the first ring.

Crap.

"We're okay," the younger Winchester spoke up immediately.

At the same time Dean said, "Sorry, Ellen."

There was a relieved – and definitely irritated, mama bear – sigh on the other end of the line (that made Dean's heart ache only a little. Just a little). That woman absolutely had her hand on her hip right now (and dark circles under her eyes too, no doubt). Dean winced again.

"Tell me what happened."

"Short version? Gordon Walker's an asshole." Despite the look he got from his brother, Dean didn't regret saying it. Shit was the truth.

"We're fine, Ellen," Sam cut in, still sending Dean a patented bitchface (#9, the short version of which was basically, *'Shut up, Dean'*). "Gordon…uh…" The Samsquatch trailed off, that look morphing into something more cautionary. Questioning. "He found out about us. That we're…psychics."

Dean suddenly pulled his head back, face all sorts of affronted. He split his attention between his brother and the road, and mouthed,

"*That's* why he iced me?! Son of a *bitch*. That goddamn, no good-"

"He said he got found us through someone at the Roadhouse," Sam continued over the near-silent tirade his brother was on. Dean beat on Baby's wheel when just mouthing the words weren't enough of a release.

Ellen let out a haggard sigh, frustration and regret tilting her head back, phone pressed more to her neck than to her ear as she took a moment. "I'm sorry, boys."

"Not your fault," Dean spoke up, still looking hella pissed, but not holding it against the barkeep. It surprised Sam, who was used to a similar volatility, only with a lot less control over who it got unleashed on. "You don't control those people."

She shouldn't have been surprised that those were the next words she was going to say, lips open and forming the first syllable and everything. Right. Psychics. Ellen huffed, readjusting the phone against her ear. She still felt like crap about it, but Dean was right. She oughta listen to him.

"Where's Gordon now?" Ellen asked, unsure which answer she was hoping for. A dead hunter often brought out the worst in other hunters. A dead hunter by another hunter's hand was going to be a real problem. But Ellen was no fan of Gordon Walker and certainly wouldn't be mourning his loss.

"Jail."

Ellen's eyebrows climbed towards her hair. "Jail?"

"Yeah," Dean continued and the smirk on his face was audible through the line. "Sammy's idea. Son of a bitch's going away for a couple years, at least, on all those unregistered weapons."

"Not to mention the live grenades," Sam added with a snort, something between bitter and amused. Ellen, however, was too busy curling a fist over her heart, which had skipped a painful, terrified beat. She took it back, she was more than okay with Gordon Walker turning up dead.

"Grenades?"

The two boys quieted awkwardly at the concern – and definite anger (of the mama ear variety) – in the woman's voice. Dean glanced at

Sam, unsure what to say, and the younger Winchester looked like he was cycling through his default perfect-son-with-puppy-dog-eyes responses that he kept on him like an encyclopedia of sympathy and understanding.

"Like I said," Dean decided to spare Ellen the chick-flick moment she couldn't have possibly have meant to walk into, "Gordon's an *asshole*."

The look Sam sent him was totally worth it, because it had gone from the judgmental range of bitchfaces to the rarer, understanding end of the scale.

"But you boys are alright?"

Dean cleared his throat on instinct, now cycling through his own array of responses to that question. *'Sure?' 'Not really.' 'Sam's been shot and we got a sleeping angel in the backseat.' 'Well, I was dead, but hey, I got better!'*

"Yeah, Ellen. We're okay," was Sam's far more tactful reply. "But we do need something from you."

"Anything."

"Can you find a couple of hunters – ones you trust – to check out a mining town in Black Hills, South Dakota?" Sam tried to switch from the call to a web app, hoping to bring up a map, but Bobby's phone was too old. It didn't even have an internet application. Well, Sam thought, going for optimism, no matter how weak, at least they *had* a phone. "I'll send you the coordinates in a text. The town's called Cold Oak."

"Okay, sure, I can get someone on that," Ellen said automatically. It was clear she was writing it down from the sound of a pad of paper crinkling and her slightly distracted tone. There was a telling pause in the middle, in which Dean could practically hear her brain grinding away. He could picture her straighten up, ignoring that pen and paper she'd been scribbling on, to grab the phone from where she'd pinched it between her shoulder and ear. "Wait, isn't that the haunted town near Mt. Rushmore? The one the townsfolk all abandoned a century ago?"

The brothers exchanged glanced.

"Yeah, that's the one," Sam answered, trying to keep his voice totally normal. Like this was just your average, ordinary, hunter-buddy

request.

Ellen wasn't buying it for a second. The judgmental silence was utterly telling. "Okay, why there?"

Dean licked his lips nervously. This was the part of this conversation he'd rather not have but knew he couldn't avoid. They were getting to the point of toeing a dangerous line with Ellen: how much they were willing to tell her versus how much she was going to figure out on her own. Or, at the very least, she'd know they weren't telling the whole truth. Ellen had called them out on that pretty damn quickly the first time around (and with a pretty sharp tongue, Dean remembered).

The older Winchester leaned slightly towards the phone in his brother's hand, choosing his words carefully (something he was not historically good at). "The yellow eyed demon is kidnapping kids- uh…psychics. Like Sam." And like him, according to the lie they'd told Ellen, though he couldn't really say that out loud, could he? Because Azazel wasn't going to nab him, and when he didn't, would Ellen have questions Dean couldn't afford to answer? The hunter shook his head. Problem for another day, among all the others. They had enough on their plate right now. "We think he's taking 'em to this town."

"What for?" Ellen definitely had that way-too-smart-for-her-own-good frown firmly in place now. Dean could see it, even several hundred miles and a phone call away. '*I just run a saloon'* his ass, Dean 'd have to remember to take a sip of something the next time Ellen declared she wasn't a hunter, so he could spit it out at whoever was nearest. Hopefully not Ellen, though. Dean liked to live, uncastrated.

"We, uh," Sam shot his brother an only slightly panicking look, "we don't really know."

The non-verbal frown increased, and Dean winced in the front seat at the heavy silence. They should have thought up a lie before they called her. "Well, how do you know he's taking them there, then?"

Damnit, Ellen. The older Winchester tightened his hand around the steering wheel. They really needed her to just trust them on this.

"Because he already tried to take Andy," Dean bit out. Beside him, Sam went still, no doubt remembering the same thing Dean was. A lot of blood, a mangled neck, and their friend shivering and shaking in their arms.

Now Ava could end up the exact same way.

"That kid that was with you on Jo's hunt?" When the Winchesters didn't answer right away, staring at the phone and the road in equal parts, Ellen sighed. She'd gone a little overboard on the mama bear shtick that trip – not that anyone could blame her, mind you – but she hadn't made the best impression on the boys or the kid they'd had tagging along with them. Her explode-rather-than-stay-silent daughter had been suspiciously tight-lipped about that boy. Now at least she knew why. "Didn't realize he was a psychic."

That might also be because she'd sat in Jo's car on the edge of the cemetery while they finished excavating H.H. Holmes, refusing to speak until they were done and on their way safely back to the Roadhouse. Long past that, actually. By then, it was screaming more than talking and the topic of conversation (yelling match) most definitely wasn't the scrawny kid following the Winchesters like a lost puppy.

"He's like me, Ellen," Sam spoke up, voice quiet and tinged with all sorts of emotions. Ellen could only place the guilt, but she also noted it was the fourth time she could think of that one of the Winchesters isolated Sam as something other than Dean. Like Dean wasn't the same sort of psychic, or something. She knew they were lying to her, she just didn't know what about at this point. "Azazel targeted him a week ago, and now he's gone after another one. A girl. Ava. She doesn't deserve what he has planned for her."

For any of them.

Ellen was quiet for a good stretch. "And she's there? At Cold Oak?"

Dean looked over at Sam. She shouldn't be. Ava should be home in bed, with her fiancé and her normal life. Because Cas had kicked Azazel's ass back to Hell. They'd changed the timeline, damnit, and wasn't Time supposed to throw a hissy fit when they did that? Where was their hissy fit? This was *exactly* what had happened last time. Azazel should still be stuck in Hell. Even if he managed a ticket on the express train out, Dean knew it wasn't that easy to escape Hell. Only the Crossroads Demons got free passes; everyone else had to find holes to slip through, which weren't big or easy to find. Or, of course, they could flood a Hell Gate once they got it open. And Dean was sure as shit keeping an eye on the one in Fossil Butte. Bobby'd had someone checking those railroad lines once a month since Dean slipped up and had to tell the older hunter everything that was coming.

So Azazel should still be in Hell, and Ava should be back at home, in

bed. But she wasn't. Which meant Azazel was topside or he had other demons doing his dirty work, with orders in place well before Cas had kicked his ass to the curb.

Damnit.

"We don't know," Dean hedged, though it was technically the truth. "But it's where he took Andy, so it's the best lead we got."

Ellen blew out a breath of air, but Dean could tell they'd talked her into it, hopefully without any more pushing for details. "Alright. I'll make a couple calls. Asa Fox was working a case in Montana. Jo was with 'em, last I heard. They may still be in the area."

The speed at which Dean stiffened into a rigid statue would have been impressive if it wasn't so damn warranted.

"Ellen, no-" Sam started at the same time his brother gruffly said, "Nevermind, we'll go ourselves, it's fine."

"Now wait just a damn minute," the woman snapped, silencing both Winchesters. "I don't like it either, but they're the closest. I'll make other calls, but if you boys are asking for someone to go in your place then I'm willing to bet you got a damn good reason. You want someone there tonight, they're likely it."

Baby's steering wheel creaked under Dean's white knuckled grip, and Sam sat in quite guilt beside him. The fact that Jo wasn't at the Roadhouse – that she was out hunting – was as much on them as it was on Jo. They'd all but told her to – certainly encouraged her to – the last time they'd seen her.

"Now, why can't you boys go yourselves?" Ellen's voice shifted from *don't-mess-with-me* to something dangerously bordering on concern. Dean didn't like it. Definitely didn't feel like they deserved it.

"We're fine," he insisted for the second time that night. "Forget it, Ellen, we'll go to Cold Oak-"

"We've had a rough week," Sam cut in, voice betraying how tired they both were. Dean shot him a glare, but Sam just ignored him. It was Dean who'd said they needed the break, Dean who'd pushed for it. And the older Winchester hadn't been wrong. They couldn't afford to make mistakes, not with the stakes – an Apocalypse and the end of the world – so high.

Besides. Ellen deserved the truth. At least some version of it.

"We're running on an adrenaline streak and no sleep," Sam continued, staring at the phone and hoping honesty was an apology enough for Jo. Speaking of Jo. Sam's eyes dropped from the phone. He hadn't realized she'd left home. She hadn't called them in months. "I'm sorry, Ellen. We're probably the last people you want to hear from right now."

The barkeep let out another sigh, haggard and weary this time. "Much as I'd like to blame you boys for it, I can't. She's good. Hell if I want to admit it, but she is. My baby girl's a damn good hunter and she was always going to be, whether I liked it or not. Too much like her daddy." Neither of the Winchester boys dared speak, and the woman sniffed sharply down the line, composing herself. "And Asa's one of the best. He's keeping her safe."

Dean glanced over at his brother almost hesitantly, both of them in a completely different mood than they had been a moment ago. Funny how easy it had been to send a couple hunters they didn't know ahead of them into the fray. Hell of a lot harder when it was Jo. Dean was mentally beating back images of that girl walking into another abandoned town. Beating those bloody images back with a god damn crowbar.

Why the hell was Ellen agreeing to this?

(For the same reason's she had walked hand in hand into that same damn town – that same damned fate – with her daughter all those years ago.)

"You tell them recon only, alright?" Dean turned his gaze back to the road, fiercely ignoring the knot in his gut as he all but agreed to putting Jo in danger. Damnit. A couple of psychics they didn't know weren't worth Jo's life. But he knew Sam's tone, knew he was the one who actually cared about rescuing Ava Wilson, and he was the one making this call. Dean didn't like it, but he would, at the least, respect it, because he hadn't been wrong; they were running on fumes. "They see anyone in that town, they call us. These psychics are powerful, Ellen. If there's even one of 'em in that town, they don't go in, you got that? We'll be there by midnight."

"Alright." Ellen didn't exactly like his tone, especially considering she was sending her daughter into whatever the hell mess this was (a Winchester mess was exactly what it was), but she could at least

appreciate Dean's worry for Jo. "Look, they'll be at least a couple hours themselves, Dean. Why don't you boys take that break, get some sleep. It sounds like you need it. You can meet them there tomorrow morning."

When nothing but silence persisted in the car, Ellen rolling her eyes became practically audible.

"You're no good to my daughter dead in a ditch cuz you fell asleep at the wheel."

Dean clenched his jaw hard enough to start a headache behind his temples, the lines of his body tense. But, once again, everyone in the car seemed to have a valid, frustrating-as-hell point. This would be a hell of a lot easier if Ellen would just be pissed at them for getting Jo involved in yet another suicide mission.

He could tell by the set of the barkeep's tone that that wasn't gonna happen anytime soon. He'd lost this argument before he'd even realized there was one to be won. "Yeah…Yeah, alright, fine."

Didn't mean he had to go along with it, though. They'd be there at midnight, regardless of what Ellen thought they needed or what Asa Fox could handle or what he said he'd do. This was Jo they were talking about.

"Anything else they should know about?"

"Yeah, there's an Acheri demon in the woods surrounding the town," Sam piped up, hand fidgeting in his lap. His brain was miles away, trying not to touch Andy's mangled neck as the kid sobbed into his shoulder. "Tell them to bring red ribbons or handkerchiefs."

"Will do."

"…Ellen…" Dean hedged again, ready to tell her once more, not Jo. Anyone but Jo. But Ellen cut him off.

"It'll be fine, Dean," she said, voice as firm as a worried mother's possibly could be. "Recon only, like you said. They'll find your girl."

"Thanks, Ellen," Sam said quietly beside him, since Dean's throat wasn't really working anymore, maybe from anger, worry, or actually having someone give a damn about him. Probably all three. "Oh, and call us on Bobby's cell. Both of ours are, uh, out of commission."

There was a huff down the line, like Ellen knew what that meant (she didn't, but she could probably imagine. The sorts of stories hunters came back with. *'My phone went down in a swamp fighting a voodoo witch.' 'Mine ate it on a werewolf. Literally. The werewolf ate it.' 'Bucky lost his to a chupacabra. Had to gut the damn thing just to get it back. 'Course, by then it didn't work worth a damn!'*).

"I'll call you back when I hear from them." Then she was gone, the line clicking dead, and Sam lowered Bobby's phone. Dean's hands were still white on the wheel.

"We take turns driving to Bobby's," he said abruptly, eyes so fierce on the dark asphalt ahead that Sam wouldn't have been surprised to see it catch on fire. "Two hour shifts, other one sleeps. We get Cas set up, get an hour or two in a bed, and head back out."

It wasn't much – it probably wouldn't be enough – but it didn't matter. If Jo was heading to Cold Oak ahead of them, then Dean was going to shrink down that time as much as he possibly could. They had to get Cas to Bobby's, that wasn't a choice, and the Salvage Yard was on the way anyway. They could each catch a couple hours restless sleep on the drive there, another hour at Bobby's if they could spare it, and from that they'd be able to drive another seven, splitting that with naps too.

It wasn't great and they definitely wouldn't be in the best shape when they got there, but it sure as hell was better than letting Jo fight their battles for them with no clue what she could be walking into.

-o-o-o-

Bobby's phone started ringing about twenty minutes later, and Sam frowned at the unsaved number coming up on the screen. He glanced at Dean, wondering if they should answer Bobby's cell with an unknown contact calling. His brother just shrugged unhelpfully and so Sam flipped the phone open, pressing it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Nice of you idjits to let me know yer alive," Bobby's dry voice came through, causing Sam to flinch. "You know, after yer angel lady came-to choking on medical equipment in the middle of the night, screaming bloody murder for a phone."

The unknown number must have been one of Bobby's landlines. Of course he wouldn't have those programed into his own cell.

"Uh…Sorry, Bobby," Sam answered, voice truly contrite as he lowered the phone, switching it to speaker. He saw Dean stiffen, his shoulders climbing towards his ears like a child who knew he'd just gotten caught being bad and was in for a whooping. "We've been a little, uh…things have been kinda hectic."

"I'll bet," came that same dry tone. Oh yeah, both Winchesters knew they were in big trouble. "So hectic you only had time to call Ellen Harvelle 'stead of the guy yer angel woke up at two in the morning *again*, with another disappearing act. No, I had to hear it from Ellen that Gordon Walker was after you. Oh, and that, thank yer lucky stars, you boys were alright."

The bitter sarcasm was like acid, each word dripping on their skin and burning clear through to the tender flesh beneath. Dean winced again, eyeing the phone like it might explode on them. "Sorry, Bobby. We should have called."

"Yeah, you should have." There was a tone shift somewhere in the silence, and finally the gruff old hunter sighed. "You gonna tell me what went down?"

"We can tell you when we get there." Dean's grip on the steering wheel loosened for the first time in about an hour. His fingers ached but he ignored it. The pain felt earned and deserved.

"Yer coming back?" The way Bobby said it, the words might have been *'About damn time,'* even though they'd only just left the Salvage Yard two days ago.

"Not for long," Sam answered, sounding apologetic. "We met another psychic, Ava Wilson. She's gone missing. We think Azazel might have taken her back to Cold Oak."

The silence on the other end of the line was telling and both Winchesters realized, belatedly, that Andy was probably listening in. Shit. Well, nothing for it now.

"We gotta drop Cas off. She's hurting. Needs time to heal up." Dean moved right along, refusing to let anyone on that call linger on that damn, cursed town. "We need some sleep, too. Much as we can afford."

"Alright," Bobby responded after another pause and a sigh. "Your beds are made up. The kid's been camping in one of 'em, but I got extra sheets."

"Don't worry about it," Sam answered at the same time Dean said, "I can sleep on the couch."

They could hear Bobby snort, which probably meant Andy was making a similar, if not silent version, of the same offer. "Right, well, you boys just get here."

"Will do, Bobby," Dean answered, pushing through that little bit of choked-up emotion he always got at their gruff-as-hell, surrogate father expressing care and concern. Well, in Bobby-fashion, of course, but still. Dean could hear it in the man's tired voice. They probably hadn't gotten much more than Ellen tonight. "Get some sleep. We'll be there in a couple hours."

Sam flipped the phone closed once Bobby hung up, setting it on the seat beside them. The two brothers exchanged relieved glances. That could have gone much, much worse. The majority of their hides remained un-flayed and still attached to their bodies. Miracle of miracles. That was getting off downright easy in a Winchester-Singer world. Now they just had to hope Bobby wasn't saving the verbal lashing for when they showed up in person.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Not the most exciting chapter, but I think after the last nine weeks we've earned ourselves a break, no?

Up Next: The Winchester-Singer-Gallagher-Garrett household gets a chapter of chatter and rest, more of the first than the second because, let's be honest, sleeping is pretty boring to write/read about. Unless you're Dean and sleeping means you dream of two different versions of your angelic best friend seeking conference with one another. In which case, sleeping is just another form of chatter ;D

Updating Schedule: I have a friend visiting next weekend, so I may not have time to get a chapter edited and posted. However, he's a writing buddy so, who knows, we may spend plenty of time writing. I will do my best!

I do want to give as much heads up as possible on the schedule going forward. After the next chapter (our 100th chapter, guys!) I will be switching to a two-week posting schedule. In addition, there may be the odd patch with a longer wait. My job wraps at the end of March, but so does my time in this city (and country it just so happens), and I will be busy dealing with packing up my

life and planning the move. So until mid-April, my posting schedule is going to be a tad unpredictable. I'll keep you guys as updated as possible during chapter posts, and please remember to check my profile for information if I go missing an extra week. (I will also try to answer reviews and pokes to keep you updated that way too!)

Thank you for all your support! I'm so glad so many people are enjoying this story :)

Chapter 100: Season 2: Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: HAPPY 100th CHAPTER EVERYBODY! I am so sorry you had to wait three weeks for it. I tried to get it up last week, but between the first stage of packing and some personal stuff popping up, I simply didn't have the time. I will hopefully keep all delays down to just two weeks going forward, but it isn't something I can currently offer with any guarantee. Thank you all so, so much for your patience and understanding!

Previously on TRSF… Dean and Cas 'rescued' Sam from Gordon Walker though not before he took a nasty bullet to the chest. Cas was injured from a battle against Uriel and Angela Garrett had to take over for him, including one hell of an awkward conversation with Dean about 'feelings,' particularly those he might have towards Cas (which he *doesn't*. Definitely not. Nope, no way, screw that). The boys left Gordon to rot in police custody, only to realize that Ava Wilson was in trouble. Knowing Azazel likely took her to Cold Oak, the boys called Ellen Harvelle for back up. She passed the call on to Jo, who was hunting with Asa Fox not far from South Dakota. The boys planned to meet the pair at Cold Oak, but had to stop at Bobby's to drop Cas off so she could heal. After having been awake and running on adrenaline the entire night, the boys could honestly use a break of their own…

Chapter Reference – Andy's an immature brat (but we love him): Quick reminder that Andy decided to test his growing mental powers by sending images of gay porn to Dean. Since then, Dean seems to keep running into the topic (sometimes quite literally). See **Chapter 85: Season 2, Chapter 52** for a refresher!

Chapter Reference – Dean and Cas had a spoonfest in a motel room while (not) watching Jaws: Quick reminder that Cas asked to confer with the grace in Dean's chest, and ended up doing so in a motel room, on a bed with Dean, hand buried under his shirt (skin-on-skin contact is so much better for transference, apparently) while Sam was out on a jog and Dean definitely wasn't paying any attention to the movie on in the background. See **Chapter 57: Season 2, Chapter 24** for a refresher!

Chapter Reference – Faith (this time around): Quick reminder that this story's version of Season 1 episode 12: Faith, happened

with Sam as the one dying (from a brain aneurism when he pushed his powers too hard) and Dean taking him to see Reverend Roy Le Grange with his leashed reaper performing 'miracles'. See **Chapter 17: Season 1, Chapter 16** for a refresher!

Chapter Warnings: Sam needs some stitching, Angela needs some machinery, Cas needs another healing trance, and Dean needs to get his head out of the gutter – or wherever the hell it's gotten off to lately (which is all Andy's fault, he's definitely decided).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 67

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Lucky for the Winchesters, another couple hours of sleep for Bobby meant that before they arrived, the gruff old hunter had time to cool off from being totally forgotten by his boys. He was significantly less grumpy by the time they pulled up outside the house. Not that they didn't get the deadpan glare that promised pain if they ever left him hanging without knowing what happened to them for that long again.

It probably also helped that Dean was carrying Angela – bridal style, with Cas nowhere in sight – up the steps when Bobby opened the front door for them. Then there was Sam, with a bandaged shoulder he was definitely favoring and bags about a mile deep beneath his eyes. That sure didn't hurt their chances of sympathy over a lecture (which Bobby had surely prepared, extra sleep or not). The gruff hunter just stepped to the side, door held open, giving his boys a side-long look that was as worried as it was scolding.

"I'm going to take her upstairs," Dean said without much more explanation than that. Angela was starting to stir in his arms. They hadn't bothered waking her up when they'd parked the Impala in the dusty yard. The last three times they'd tried at various gas stations and food stops had been unsuccessful, to the point where the Winchesters stopped trying.

As Dean headed for the stairs, he tossed over his shoulder, "Sam's been shot, one to the chest, left side. Needs proper patching up."

"Gee, thanks, Dean," his brother muttered under his breath as he stood next to Bobby, knowing he'd just been made the sacrificial goat, thrown under the bus so Dean could get out of an in-person lecture. He'd be too busy 'helping Angela-slash-Cas'. How altruistic of him.

"I'll get the med kit," Bobby grumbled out the side of his mouth as the older Winchester started up the stairs. That was definitely concern in his voice and a bit more of a sympathetic eye for Sam. Dean's back, meanwhile, got a narrowed-eyed promise of a lecture at a later date. It helped mollify Sam at least a little and he followed his surrogate father figure into the kitchen without protest.

"Andy!" Bobby hollered as they passed through the den.

Oh, good, Sam thought. *Andy's alive.* They hadn't killed each other yet. That was good. It had definitely been up for question until that moment, considering the mute psychic was nowhere to be seen.

The yell was somewhat needless, it turned out. The kid popped up behind Sam like a ghost coming out of nowhere. Sam jumped, then hissed and made a ginger grab at his injured shoulder. Andy had the decency to look regretful about it.

'Sorry,' he mouthed. Bobby gave him a pointed look from behind Sam. The kid glared back, then rolled his eyes and raised his hands, repeating the apology in ASL: a circle rubbed over his sternum with a straight-thumbed fist.

Sam raised his good arm, fingers spread wide and straight, and tapped the point of his thumb against his chest a couple of times. Pretty much the ASL equivalent of *'It's fine"*, at least according to the internet. Andy blinked at the unexpected non-verbal reply, then beamed at the younger Winchester. Sam, for the sake of manly men being manly (which he rarely cared about, but childhood lessons were awfully hard to shake), beamed back, then had to ignore the slight blush to his cheeks when he turned to Bobby, who was staring at the pair of them with nothing short of affection (and perhaps a touch of pride).

"Get the whiskey," Bobby ordered, breaking the moment once he had Andy's attention. The kid nodded an affirmative, one hand raised in a thumbs up, before he headed for the liquor cabinet in the den. Sam followed Bobby into the kitchen, not looking forward to yet another hunter's rendition of home health care. Dean's had been plenty for one day.

Just once, he'd like to show up at a hospital and get real painkillers.

(Only, no, not really. The last time he'd gotten that wish, he'd been dying from pushing too hard and Dean had gone and thought about trading his life for another's via a pastor's wife and a hooked reaper. So, yeah, no, he'd take *Patched Up By a Hunter 101* any day.)

Sam settled into the kitchen table, Bobby grabbing a med kit from one of the cabinets (lesson one in that book would be '*always keep a med kit in every room'*, and had he mentioned Bobby would probably be the author of it?), when Andy all but skipped back into the room. He held up a bottle for inspection.

"Not the good stuff, kid," Bobby grumped immediately, apparently still somewhat crabby despite his nap and cool down time.

"You have good stuff?" Sam parroted with a raised eyebrow. From the way Andy turned the label back towards himself with a very similar raised brow, he was obviously thinking the same thing.

Bobby glared at both of them and told Andy to try again, this time in very pointed Sign.

-o-o-o-

Dean made it halfway up the stairs with Angela before the woman woke up enough to wrap languid, teasing arms around his neck. She opened that devil mouth of hers to say something Dean knew he'd immediately regret hearing, so the hunter put a stop to that right then and there.

"Shaddup."

She just batted those eyelashes all ladylike, blue eyes playing way too innocent. "I didn't say anything, Dean."

"Uh-huh. Let's keep it that way."

The woman in his arms chuckled as they reached the top of the stairs. Dean headed for the room full of her medical equipment, trying not to wonder how Angela felt about being hooked back up to it without a say. Essentially forced into a coma. They hadn't even asked her – hadn't had the chance to, really – and now that Dean was thinking about it, he was kinda too scared to.

"Sorry if what we talked about in the car messed things up," Angela said out of nowhere, voice soft. She was smiling up at him and for once it wasn't a smirk. Dean definitely didn't trust it.

"Thought I told you to stop talking." Which wasn't technically true. He'd told her to shut up before she could start. She just hadn't listened, clearly. Dean nudged the door open with his toe then stopped at the threshold with a loud, frustrated sigh. "Sorry. I'm not trying to be a dick."

Angela laughed in his arms, tightening her hold around his neck un-sarcastically (for once). "I'm not taking it personally. It's been a rough couple days, huh?"

"Yeah, you can say that again," Dean muttered, mostly under his breath as he crossed the room towards the bed.

The machines were set up and ready to go, ventilation tube clean and resting on the bedside table. Bobby's doing, no doubt. Dean avoided looking at it, not caring to think about the woman in his arms pulling it up and out of her throat all on her own after waking up in the driver's seat. Instead he focused on setting her down onto the mattress with as little jostling as possible. Not that Angela Garrett was fragile, or anything. He sure seemed to be learning that the hard way. Not that he usually thought of women as fragile. Hell, none of the women who were fixtures in his life could ever be described as fragile. Just… ugh, he didn't know. He was being stupid and he knew it. He blamed Rachel for getting in his head. Or maybe Andy. Or hell, Cas at this point, for picking a stupidly gorgeous vessel who also seemed to have a decent sense of humor and a ridiculously down-to-earth grip on her current situation, all of which was confusing the fuck out of Dean. Yeah, that. All of that. Definitely Cas's fault.

Angela unhooked her arms from around his neck to settle her full weight on the bed. Dean cleared his throat, avoiding looking at those blue eyes, too. "Uh, look…thanks for being so, uh…cool about this, you know?"

It wasn't every day you found someone who'd lost everything and yet agreed to serve as an angel's vessel. And kept serving, to the point where she'd shown up on Cas's behalf to what turned out to be nothing short of a damn shootout. With grenades.

"You're welcome," Angela answered, that smile still suspiciously un-smirk-like, all open and warm. She scooted herself up the bed so that she was mostly sitting upright against the pillows. "It's been an… adventure, of sorts." She paused to laugh weakly, like it was her own little joke. "Don't get me wrong; it absolutely sucks sometimes and there are days I wish I hadn't said yes. But…it seems worth it,

somehow."

Dean didn't know what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. He'd never served as a vessel and, frankly, never wanted to. Ever. He couldn't relate, and he definitely couldn't understand the kind of faith that allowed Angela Garrett to be a passenger in her own body, unto the end of the world (or worse).

The silence stretched, awkward and unfitting in the small room, until a warm, soft-skinned touch to his arm startled the hunter into meeting Angela's eyes.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. But what you and Cas have, *whatever* that may be – and I'm *not* pressuring you, Dean –" she chuckled once again at his expression and, despite Dean wanting to scoff (and change the subject, and run from the room screaming, and maybe never have to talk with this woman ever again), he also mostly believed her. He couldn't really look away from those stupidly honest blue pools, much as he wanted to. In the end, Dean just rolled his eyes to avoid doing either fully. "– it feels special. And important. I don't think I could just stand by if it meant Cas not being a part of all… this."

Dean let out something between a grumble and a sigh, grabbing the chair beside the hospital bed and pulling it underneath him. Because apparently they were doing this. He didn't really want to have this chat – or any other with Dragon Lady after their last one – but Angela was giving a lot up to be with them. Peace and literal Paradise; a never ending eternity with her loved ones. He supposed, while she was passing all that up to help them, he could at least keep the woman company while she was in the driver's seat, since she seemed to want to talk.

"We need him," Dean said bluntly, going for direct over the emotional declaration his words otherwise could have been. Unfortunately for him, they still stupidly tried to be the latter, given the way his throat closed up before he was even done talking. "He is important. To us, to *this*. Sam and I can't do it without him."

"Then it's worth it." The words were without hesitation, but Angela's smile weakened despite them. Her gaze dropped to her hands pooled in her lap. "It's not like I said yes out of pure selfless grace, you know." She laughed lowly, pure self-deprecation in every huff, and Dean felt something dangerously close to pity for this woman sitting in there, talking to a man she barely knew, in a house she was a stranger to, in

a state she'd probably never seen. All because they'd needed her. The woman tried valiantly to rally her smile, but it was sadder the second time around. "I was scared. I didn't want to die."

Dean dropped his eyes, too. It's not like he'd forgotten that Angela was slated to that fate, but it hadn't been on the forefront of his mind lately. Not with all the other people he knew with deaths that seemed a lot more…well, certain, he supposed. It was kinda hard to remember her destiny had been set too when she was alive, awake and chatting him up like they were old friends.

He didn't ask about her use of past tense, though he hadn't missed it. He thought about asking, about whether she was ready now or if she even realized it, but decided not to. They *weren't* old friends and Dean had to remind himself that he barely knew this woman. The person he knew was only borrowing her face.

"It's not all bad," was what came out of his mouth. He offered that blue, blue gaze a grim smile. "Death's a pretty sweet deal, actually."

At least if you were headed upward, which he was pretty damn sure a lady like Angela would be.

She laughed, thinking he was talking from (very recent) personal experience. "Yeah? What's it like? Castiel was pretty sparse on the details."

"Angels and reapers tend to be like that." Dean leaned back into the chair, telling himself he could do this. Just a normal (okay, fine, abnormal) conversation with a (sort of, maybe?) friend who just needed some reassurance about her impending mortality. He could do that. Sure. "Heaven's all good memories. On a loop, only you don't know they're memories. You get to relive all your greatest hits with your favorite people."

He was smiling by the end of it, even if there was a bitter twitch deep in the muscles around his mouth. Heaven wasn't real and never would be, in Dean's option. Not the memories, not the Holier-Than-Thou bullshit, not freakin' *God.* But Angela didn't need to know any of that. Probably wouldn't pick up on it, either. She was smiling, likely thinking of what some of those memories would be. Dean wondered who her favorite people were. He'd never thought to ask, since Cas had assured him they were all dead. That had been his requirement for her to serve as a vessel.

It was unsettling how much that thought now felt like the deathblow,

rather than an attempt to save someone from Jimmy Novak's fate.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound too bad," Angela answered, voice oddly soft and calling Dean away from his increasingly dark thoughts. The hunter couldn't tell if he'd helped or made it worse. Which seemed all too par for the course, now didn't it. Then Angela was straightening up ever so slightly, like she'd heard something Dean hadn't caught. The woman suddenly laughed, a totally different sound, with a lot more genuine joy and mischief than their conversation called for. Dean raised an eyebrow and Angela smiled widely. "Cas is awake and a little behind on the conversation. He wants to know what damsels in distress and very tall towers have to do with female dragons."

At Dean's confused expression, Angela winked and said, "Because you're my hero, Dean. My Knight in shining armor. My valiant-"

"Okay, we get it," he barked, though he was pretty sure it came out as much of a plea as it did a demand. The glare he gave her almost immediately made the Dragon Lady laugh all over again. The hunter just snorted in response. There was no winning with this woman. Ever. "I'll be sure to give him the cliff notes on *Rapunzel* so he's all caught up."

He'd meant it as one hundred percent, acrid sarcasm, but given the way Angela's lips spread wider with pure, shameless devilry, Dean knew he'd stepped in it right away. "Aw, isn't that a sweet thought. You reading Cas a bedtime story."

The hunter internally cursed every bone in this woman's body while externally he blushed bright red and tried to hide it by ducking his head, mind on a completely different conversation held almost entirely via a rearview mirror.

Yeah. Totally didn't work. Damnit.

"Of course, *Rapunzel* didn't have a dragon, you know."

Had he said bones? He meant fiber. Every fiber of this woman's sarcastic, *thinks-she's-so-damn-funny*, evil, *evil* being.

"*Sleeping Beauty*, then, and it doesn't matter, cuz I'm pretty sure I told you to shut the hell up," Dean growled, well aware the angel behind those gorgeous blue eyes was listening now. Which only reminded him moreover of their last conversation and how he was apparently broadcasting some misleading signals all over the friggin' place. Time to backpedal like only Dean Winchester could. "You know I didn't

mean it like that."

"Like what, Dean?" Those goddamn eyelashes were back to batting pure innocence.

"Jesus, you really are a Dragon Lady," he muttered, not really meaning to say it aloud.

Angela laughed again, a joyous enough sound (and so odd coming from someone who wore Cas's face (even if the reality was the other way around)) that even Dean could admit her stupid amusement was probably worth his misery and humiliation. Well, some of it. A little. *Very* little. And afterward she could go back to shutting the hell up.

She leaned towards him, winking. "I work hard at it."

For lack of anything better to do and feeling incredibly awkward for no damn reason, Dean stood from the chair, turning towards the various machines surrounding her bed. He made a grab for the heart monitor clip and clumsily attaching it to her finger. That led to him grabbing the wires for monitoring brain activity next, one of the five things he knew how to do out of the dozens necessary to hook a human body up to life support.

He probably should learn at some point, considering it was his best friend sitting on that bed in a woman who needed those machines due to demands laid out by Dean. He'd never been good with the tech sorta stuff, though. Give him a needle and thread and he'd stich you a friggin' Van Gogh across any battle wound, but a bunch of machines, wires, and tubes? He was helpless all over again.

"I'll, uh…" Dean definitely fumbled the words as hard as he fumbled the first monitor, placing it at her temple. He was blushing again and he didn't know why and her stupid, knowing smirk definitely wasn't helping. "Most of this will have to wait for Sam. Bobby's patching him up, then he'll be up to do the, uh, the rest."

Angela chuckled so softly it was mostly just air through her nose. She took the second electrode pad from him, peeling the cover off the back and sticking it to the other side of her scalp like she'd done it a thousand times before. Suddenly Dean wondered what her profession had been. He was wondering a lot of things about this woman he'd never really thought twice about. Something about that felt…bad. Pathetic, if not wrong all together.

"That's okay. Cas can do the rest," Angela answered as she passed him back the thin plastic covering that kept the sticky coating on the back fresh when it wasn't busy sticking to skin. "He wants to talk to you anyway."

"Uh…" Dean's hand froze, halfway to tossing the piece of plastic beside the heart monitor and now failing miserably. He had to catch the thing twice as it slid off the side of the machine. Goddamnit. Why the hell was he blushing worse now? That…that definitely wasn't right. He was blushing because of friggin' Angela Dragon Lady Garrett. Because she was the devil, but a hot one, and Cas- well, Cas had nothing to do with it!

Damnit, what was it with women – human or angelic – messing with his head lately? He had enough issues keeping shit straight up there on his own.

"It was nice talking with you, Dean," Angela said sweetly before her eyes flashed a brighter, lighter blue, and then it was Cas sitting stiffly, back ramrod straight, in the hospital bed, staring at him, and Dean had to figure out *rapidly* how to act completely and utterly normal. Because that's what he was. That's what *this* was.

Mother friggin' *normal*.

"Uh…"

Oh, yeah, this was going *great*. Why hadn't he volunteered Sam for Cas-slash-Angela duty and taking the Bobby lecture when he had the chance? Why hadn't he also just slit his throat when he'd had the chance, sitting in the car on the side of that stupid highway in Lafayette, while Angela Devil Lady Garrett went and blabbed her opinions all over him like chick flick word vomit?

"Hi, Cas."

Good, great, two words strung together. Progress. Way to go, Dean.

"Hello, Dean."

The hunter found himself caught in that wide, endless, unblinking blue stare, desperately thinking that he could not be the most interesting thing in the room. But Cas just kept on staring and Dean fidgeted, fumbling the next sensor between confused and jittery fingers. What the hell. No, really. What the *hell?* Interacting with Cas had always been at least a little awkward. Even once it had stopped

being awkward at all, the fact that it was no longer awkward had seemed, well, awkward. But this…this was flippin' ridiculous. This was his friend, his angel, who he'd survived Heaven and Hell and friggin' Purogatory with, and Dean was standing there braindead and blushing like a schoolgirl in pigtails, damnit!

He needed to get his head back on straight. This was just a result of dying. And Andy messing with him. And Dragon Lady messing with him, and Rachel messing with him, and Heaven being, well, *Heaven*, and so on. Dean would get his head back on straight and all…this (whatever *this* was) would go the fuck away.

Then everything would be normal and good and right in the world.

Yup. That.

Realizing he was still holding the last EEG sensor, Dean suddenly thrust it out to the angel. Right. Medical equipment was interesting, Cas could go and stare at that.

"Here." The angel dropped her gaze to the electrode as Dean flopped it back and forth by the connection point. "Angela said you could…?"

Cas retrieved the small device from his hand and placed it low on her skull, just beneath her left ear. They then proceeded to play a near-silent, awkward-as-hell (at least for one of them) game of *Pass-the-Medical-Device-So-Cas-Could-Hook-It-Up*. Which Dean was not – he repeated: *not* – referring to as 'Playing Doctor' in his own head. No way, no how. This game (which was totally *not playing doctor, damnit*) included moments when Dean had to turn around as fast as he possibly could (almost tripping over the chair he'd been sitting in only a few minutes ago, catching himself on the armrests and then very deliberately picking it up and moving it several feet away like that had been his plan all along and he'd only added almost-tripping-and-killing-himself for the extra flair) when Cas starting doing things like pulling back the blankets and unbuttoning her slacks with *no friggin' warning.* Unfortunately for Dean, it wasn't until after he'd chosen (*deliberately*, mind you) to move that chair that he realized what he'd handed Cas was, in fact, a catheter.

Look, it wasn't *his* fault he hadn't been paying any attention, alright? There was a reason he didn't help out with this stuff, leaving it all to Sam. He was doing everything he could just to get his brain *going* again. God, he missed the days when Cas was a boy and also an angel with a vessel that didn't need things shoved places that

Dean was absolutely not thinking about. He almost couldn't believe he was saying this, but Dean missed when things were *normal*.

"You…uh…you good?" Dean asked, back still to the bed and the potentially undressed-and-doing-things-Dean-*wasn't*-thinking-about angel.

"Yes," Cas answered and Dean (who wasn't entirely ready to trust that the angel understood and would, in fact, have pants back on when he looked) risked a glance over his shoulder. But Cas was back to ramrod-straight attention, blankets tucked into place around her, pants and unmentionables safely hidden beneath (on or otherwise), and was once more watching Dean with that unwavering gaze. "We should discuss the healing trance."

"Uh…right. Yeah." The hunter turned fully around, rubbing his hands across his thighs almost nervously, fidgeting for the pure lack of anything else to do in the quiet room. Then Cas's words registered, and he had entirely new things to be worrying about. "Wait, 'trance'? You said you just needed rest. A trance sounds kinda ominous, Cas."

"It is how angels recover from severe damage." Whether or not the human in the room found the phrasing any more or less reassuring, Cas didn't seem worried. Well, much. It was hard to tell with the stoic expression and rigid posture, but Dean was pretty sure Cas was too tired to be worried. Which, honestly, might be *worse*. "It is called a trance because we shut down any systems unnecessary to the healing, including what you perceive as consciousness."

"And angel radio, I'm guessing." Dean could figure out that much on his own. Last time Cas had ditched them for healing, she'd said she wouldn't have her ears on. If she'd been doing this 'trance' business up in heaven, then that was probably what a 'system shut down' meant. Angels were weird, man. "That's what Uriel was helping you with."

Supposed to be helping with, the dickwad. Fat lot a good it had done them.

"Yes. Another angel is usually present to assist in entering the trance and keeping the damaged grace from…" The angel trailed off, blinking once at Dean, as if unsure how to proceed. Dean knew that look. Which, shit, meant this version of Cas was starting to pick up on what did and didn't piss Dean off. And that meant whatever she had to say was gonna piss him off.

Goddamnit.

"Just spit it out," Dean sighed, bringing that chair back over to the bed and sinking into it damn near bonelessly. He was too tired for this himself.

Cas fidgeted with her hands, both of them twitching like she planned to move but purposefully didn't. "If an angel's core is damaged enough, it goes-"

"Supernova," Dean suddenly finished for her, blinking even as he said it. As he realized it. He'd seen that. He'd seen that happen a hundred times, the most recently only last frickin' night. "Wait, are you saying you could-"

"It is very unlikely," Cas hurriedly explained. If she thought there was more than even the slightest chance, she would have expended the extra energy to move Angela's medical equipment down to Bobby Singer's panic room, in order to contain the blast and Holy light that marked an angel's end. "Healing trances are often a last resort, to keep an angel from…'going up.'"

This time those hands did move, raising off the bed to curl into bunny ears. Dean ignored it with every fiber of his being. He'd wasted every damn word he'd had with Angela Garrett over the last twenty-four hours, not once addressing those damn air quotes. God damnit.

"But you're not close to that, right?" Focus on the problem at hand, curse out the Dragon Lady another day. Because they were talking about Cas's life here, even if the angel didn't seem worried about it (go figure that). For probably only the third time in their entwined existence, Dean was sitting stiffer than the angel in front of him as he repeated, "Right?"

"Right. I don't think it's a concern here." Her answer, not ask quick this time, carried enough steadfast confidence to put Dean back at ease. Well, mostly back at ease. Some ease. Not deaf-con level five readiness, at least. Maybe just a three for now. "In cases of severe damage, grace can…'overload' when balance isn't maintained throughout our entire being. Like…."

"The coolant system on a nuclear plant blowing out." Or a damaged bullet blocking the barrel. Yeah, Dean got the image. However grace seemed to work, it was required for all the 'systems' to function. Same as any machine, organic or not. The more systems bowing out, unable to get a supply of what was needed, the faster the bigger picture shut down. Cue meltdown or explosion or death, etcetera, etcetera.

"Yes…" This time, Cas's answers was far more unsure. She gave Dean the kind of look that said *'stop comparing me to your human things.'* Dean ignored it. Cas was the one always using analogies and shit. Dean was just taking her lead. "A second angel lends their grace to maintain an even spread, or to supplement when the damaged angel does not have enough grace left. In this case, another angel may not be necessary."

"I don't know, Cas." Dean didn't look so confident. Cas hadn't even been able to walk on his- er, her own back at that gas station. Somehow, he doubted the guy- girl- woman- damnit, *angel* had enough grace to cover all those systems on her own. "You aren't doing so hot on your own, you know? Maybe we should call Rachel."

He was pretty confident the stoic angel would help. Her concern for Cas's wellbeing had seemed genuine, and she'd cared enough to help Dean find him in Heaven. Her. Goddamnit, this was *annoying.*

Cas shook her head. "Heaven will be locked down, now. There is nothing she can do to help."

The holes Castiel had previously made use of (and which he suspected Rachel found once Dean called her) would be more closely monitored now. Heaven's Guard would be closing up as many as they could find. Zachariah had been lazy after Castiel's first disobedience, only bothering with the two she had mentioned in her report. But now… now she was certain Rachel would have no way to come, even if Castiel did call her, which she would not. The less involved Rachel was in this, the safer she would be. The safer his entire Flight would be.

It pained Cas greatly to admit it. The future Dean came from was one where Heaven despised her. All her brothers, hunting her, hating her. She worried now that between Zachariah's influence and cunning cruelly – with no one to counter his machinations on Castiel's behalf – she was doomed to the very same future.

At least she was sticking to the timeline, Cas supposed bitterly. How difficult it could be, to swallow your own advice.

"It is possible to enter a trance unaided," the angel continued, moving away from her cynical thoughts and focusing on the current issue. She had several to pick from, as it was. "But I have never attempted it before. I will leave my…'ears' on so that I will hear your prayers."

That was one mistake she would never make again. It wouldn't matter

if she was dying; her connection to the Ether – and therefore her charges – would remain. No matter what.

"I should be able to wake myself up if needed-"

"How long are we talking here, Cas?" Dean was staring at her with growing worry, which on his face looked like anger. Castiel was getting better at reading that.

"I do not know," she admitted regretfully. "The purpose of the trance in this case is to speed up the healing process. I will shut down any unnecessary systems, including supplying grace to Angela's body. But I have never done this without another angel supplementing grace. I…I would guess a week. Maybe more."

Dean stared. And stared. And it was definitely anger on his face, but it wasn't because of Cas. Damnit. The hunter closed his eyes, running close-to-shaking hands over his aching, tired eyeballs, digging his heals in until he saw spots. *Damnit*! He was sick of getting Cas back only to lose her again. Again and again. Like fate was purposefully keeping the damn angel from him.

He snorted, dropping his hands from his face. Right. Like the Universe gave that much of a shit about him – any of them – to begin with. The man from the future rallied himself, shaking off the bitter, asshole version of Dean friggin' Winchester that liked to surface now and then and dig a cynical hole straight back to Hell. The hunter reminded himself that Cas was here. Mostly safe, mostly okay, and would get better. That counted for something.

It had to.

"Alright," he muttered, opening his eyes to find worried blue regarding him solemnly. Dean cleared his throat, straightening up in the chair and also reminding himself this wasn't just about him. "Yeah, alright. Whatever you need. Just, focus on healing up."

And he would focus on patience and the positives. Right. A real good skill of his.

Dean ran a hand down his face, scrubbing at the five o'clock shadow that had taken root while he was busy being dead and running around heaven and also kicking Gordon Walker's ass. He needed a shave. A shower and a shave, and he wasn't gonna get either of 'em, because he had a million other places to be, friends to help, new baddies to get to first. "Is there, uh, is there anything I can do to help?"

He wasn't an angel and he definitely couldn't 'supplement' anything for the guy, but he wasn't useless. (He friggin' *wasn't*, damnit.)

That blue gaze dropped to his chest almost immediately, despite the flutter of hesitation beneath dark lashes. Dean almost sighed, realizing where this was going well before Cas opened her mouth. "Entering the trance is the most difficult part. It maybe help to…to have contact with another source of grace."

Right. *He* wasn't an angel, but he was kinda, sorta housing one.

Dean managed not to roll his eyes as he reached out and grabbed the angel's hand, pulling it flat to his chest. It was still embarrassing, but a lot less than that first damn time. And the second. Even if Sam had just as much likelihood of walking in on them here, too. Or god, *Andy*. Ugh. Dean almost didn't manage to hold back the groan at the mere thought.

Hell, he had to hold back a groan at the realization that he was *getting used* to this. These little grace-seeking confabs. Good grief, he might as well start braiding Cas's hair right here and now (not that he actually knew how to braid hair…).

Cas closed her eyes, lids sliding shut over pools of blue in a way that made Dean very, *very* uncomfortable. Like touching his chest was the most satisfying, wondrous thing in the damn world. Which Dean wasn't thinking about, because he'd done *enough* blushing today, thank you very much. Blushing wasn't even a thing he *did*. Which meant it would be just great if he stopped doing it any damn time now.

Like last time, only without the excuse of *Jaws* playing in the background to give him at least *some* excuse not to watch the angel, Dean found his eyes locked on Cas's face. He was tired and honestly needed about a week's worth of sleep himself, but he knew he wouldn't get it until Cas went under (or whatever). (And even then, who was he kidding? He and Sam were getting an hour, tops, before they'd be back on the road, heading towards Jo and their next, never-ending crisis.)

(Christ, he was *tired*.)

Cas's features were relaxed. Peaceful, even, and Dean found himself envious. Or maybe it was guilt. Either way, his thoughts were back on that dream, sitting on a picnic table at a kid's birthday party – a friend of Ben's – drinking a beer next to Cas. His Cas. Not that this Cas sitting in front of him wasn't also sort of his. Er. Well. No, nope, he definitely

didn't feel comfortable addressing the very female looking angel as his.

Was that a double standard?

…Yeah, probably. Shit. But also to hell with it, because it didn't change how Dean felt, and how he felt was *awkward.* So moving on, back to the point.

He hadn't gotten one of those dreams since. Months, now, since he'd seen his Cas and Dean could admit, whether with bitterness, jealously, or just plain regret, that he missed his friend. It was damn frustrating to have the guy tangled up in his soul – to literally be housing him – and yet have him entirely unreachable.

Dean realized he was being watched and snapped back to the present. He found now-open eyes regarding him with one of the more intense stares Cas possessed.

"Uh…Everything…everything okay?" Damnit, he was blushing again. At least this time it was because he'd been caught staring while also frowning like a friggin' kid whose ice cream had tumbled off the cone to melt, spoiled, on the ground below.

(He needed to stop using analogies that painted him as a child. They were *not* helping.)

"Your thoughts are very loud."

Dean blinked. What the hell was he supposed to do with that? Then he realized what he'd been thinking and winced. With a rough swallow and *more god damn blushing*, he cleared his throat. "Uh, right. Sorry?"

Cas just stared at him before she dropped her hand from his chest. Dean moved to protest, hand following after Cas's before it seemed to realize what it was doing and fell awkwardly to the edge of the bed. Still. His protest wasn't because he could feel anything from the depleted sliver of grace inside him (the loss of that warm, fuzzy, happy flip-flopping would actually be worthy of protest, embarrassing as it was), but because Dean knew Cas needed this. Before he could figure out how to put that into words that weren't straight from a chick flick (and therefore unacceptable to say aloud), the angel levered herself up by the arms and scooted a foot over. Cas resettled on the far edge of the narrow hospital bed before resuming her intense stare, now with a hint of expectancy. Dean stared right back, utterly confused as to what it was she was expecting, until Cas patted the

narrow, now-empty space next to her thigh. Not unlike what he'd done back in that motel room while *Jaws* played in the background.

"Uh…thanks, but…I'm good here, buddy." Dean tapped one of the arms of the chair like it was friggin' live preserver and he was happy hanging out in shark-infested waters so long as he had it.

Cas leveled a look his way that said she well knew he was a drowning man. "If you wish to speak with him as well, you will need to be asleep. It would be better if you did not fall to the floor or spend too long in a position you might regret when you wake."

That…that was a lot of words, but the gist of it, if Dean's ears were working any better than his brain, was that Cas wanted him in bed with her. Oh, and that he'd get to talk to Chest Cas.

Wait, *what?*

"Wait, what?" Dean shook his head to clear it, quite literally trying to knock the cobwebs loose. The angel in front of him rolled her eyes without either eyeball ever rotating, Dean was sure of it.

"When I commune with the grace in your chest, it is not a conversation as you would think of it, as I said before."

Despite Dean's adamancy that he was good in the chair, Cas did not move back over to the center of the bed, hand still resting in that empty spot beside her. There was a depression in the mattress where she'd been sitting. Dean wondered if it would still be warm from her body heat. Angels were always so weirdly cold, but Angela Garrett hadn't been. Dean wanted to reach out to that spot. Find out.

The hunter shook his head. Physically shook his head to dispel that messed up train of thought. What the hell? Something was seriously *wrong* with him.

"But it might be possible to induce a dream state in which you could speak with him, as I believe he has done before."

Stress. It had to be stress. Maybe he needed to take some time to himself; a cold shower or a little hand-action should knock this shit right out of him-

Cas's words registered – unexpectedly and suddenly – in his damn-near broken brain (and it was. It was so, so broken lately. He blamed Andy. Didn't matter that this wasn't gay porn right here. This was still

somehow that damn kid's fault.) Despite his head being screwed on sideways, Dean was reaching out for Cas's wrist before the words were even done leaving those stupidly perfect lips. Before they even registered, really.

Maybe it was an aborted move to seeking out that body heat. Maybe it really was stress. Or maybe it was that he missed his friend. His friend who he'd spent a horrible, miserable, terrible, stressful week (one of the worst of his life, and that was saying something) thinking he'd lost forever. A friend he'd barely started to mourn, a friend Dean still couldn't see, couldn't be *sure*, because he was nothing more than a shadow and some mumbled words of reassurance from another who thought of that sliver as a power source and something that *shouldn't* be buried in Deans' chest.

Cas stared down at the hand wrapped around her arm, then to the hunter it belonged to, and Dean tried not to be self-conscious about this. He wanted to see the other Cas and this Cas was offering. Dean wasn't passing that up, no matter what this might look like or how he battled the red still plaguing his cheeks. Instead, he uncurled his grip from Cas's arm and held out his hand instead. When the angel still only stared, he wiggled his fingers as obnoxiously and obviously as possible, looking pointedly down at his open, offered palm.

"I'm good in the chair, so come on. Bring on the dream state, or whatever."

The angel still eyed him like she worried a bit for his sanity (which, *fair*), but placed her hand in his, palm up as well. Dean wasted no time pulling that baby straight to his chest. He was still annoying disappointed at the lack of flip-flopping reaction from behind his sternum, but he tried to ignore it. Reminded himself Cas was in there and, in a second, he'd have proof for himself.

Cas closed her eyes, peace once more stealing across her face, and Dean did the same. Well, he closed his eyes, at least, and waited. And waited.

Nothing happened.

He tried to give it a minute. He was usually pretty quick to fall asleep when he put some effort into it and, boy, Dean was putting the effort in. After a ten count when still nothing had changed, Dean cracked one eye back open, hoping maybe Cas had noticed it wasn't working, too, and would know what to try instead.

The sight of the bunker library around him was shocking enough for a double take. Both of Dean's eyes shot open, and he stood partially out of the chair beneath him, heart pounding. The lights were bright, the table gleamed, the walls were lined with shelves of books that smelled like home. The lamp centered on the stretch of table in front of him – the old 50's style desk type had had him grinning and shaking his head in disbelief for the first solid month after he and Sam had moved in – was half-blinding in contrast to Bobby Singer's dark guest bedroom. Dean hadn't bothered to turn on the lights, his arms full of Dragon Lady at the time. The chair beneath him was different, too. Old and sturdy, made of wood instead of cheap plastic. He slowly sank back into it, marveling at the achingly familiar texture of the wood beneath his fingers.

"Hello, Dean."

The hunter's head snapped to the side, where Cas – his Cas, in a Jimmy Novak lookalike body, with trench coat and a still-missing tie – stood beside his chair. Angela Garrett stood just behind Cas and to his right. Probably not Angela, given their current location and the fact that this was supposed to be an angel confab.

"Cas?"

"Yes," they both answered in unison, voices equally deep and raspy. Dean almost laughed. Then he thought about it and decided to hell with it. He laughed away, loud and full and happy. Not like either angel would understand why he was laughing or judge him for it. Probably, anyway.

"Man," he said, rising from the chair once more as he stared at his Cas. He couldn't help it; he was smiling like a kid on Christmas morning. Not that Dean actually knew what that was like. He assumed it felt something like this, though. The human took a step forward, intent to hug the missed angel. "Am I glad to see you-"

-o-o-o-

Bobby, halfway through stitching up Sam's damn-close gunshot wound, managed not to stab the kid right through with the curved needle as a heavy thud from above shook the walls around them. All three hunters angled their heads back immediately, eyes locked on the ceiling in the silence that followed. Well, Sam was pretty liquored up by that point, having downed more than a couple shots of pure rotgut to dull the pain as Bobby cleaned the bullet hole with nothing but the

same liquid, so his reaction was about a half second slower than the other two.

"Wha?" As was his speech.

"What the hell are they doing up there?" Bobby groused, mostly to himself, as he turned his attention back to Sam's still aerated chest. Had he mentioned it had been damn close? He was gonna kill Walker himself, if he ever got his hands on the son of a bitch.

Andy, meanwhile, snorted. It wasn't much more than the chuffing of air, but Bobby had gotten damn familiar with it in the last week. It meant the kid was miming something behind the gruff hunter's back that he paid no attention to. It got Sam chuckling drunkenly, though.

Definitely something inappropriate, then. He'd gotten damn familiar with the kid's sense of humor, too.

Bobby just shook his head, pushing Sam's injured arm back down when he tried to sign something equally ridiculous back. He resumed stitching the younger Winchester up, grumbling about house guests and strays all the while.

-o-o-o-

Dean climbed off the floor where he'd ended up sprawled after startling awake mid-fall. He glared at Cas as he got back to his feet, kicking the useless, traitorous chair a few feet to the side. The angel was giving him the most blatant, *'I told you so*' look that had ever existed on anyone's face ever.

"Shaddup," he growled as he approached the bed, then added, "Scoot over," unnecessarily, since Cas was still on the far side of the mattress.

Still, the obedient angel nudged herself over another half inch as Dean climbed onto the bed and settled beside her. The twin-sized bed really wasn't built for two people and they ended up far too close for Dean's taste, pressed together from shoulder to thigh, with Cas slanted towards him in something way, way too close to spooning (even if it really wasn't).

"Not a word," he muttered lowly as he tried to find a comfortable position that was also the least awkward as physically possible given their current arrangement. The short answer? There friggin' wasn't one.

Cas agreed (silently), though she killed any notion of not-awkward the minute she rolled even further onto her side, now absolutely spooning Dean, in order to reach across him and settle her hand on his chest. To add insult to injury, she slid that hand underneath his t-shirt to get free access to nothing but skin.

Damn that motel room. And Sam's irritating penchant for healthy things like exercise. And *Jaws*, and Cas's stupidly peaceful face every time she went for Dean's chest, and every other stupid thing that night that had led Dean to setting this precedence of skin-on-skin pectoral fondling as fucking *fine*.

What the hell had he been thinking?

The human fought off yet another ridiculous, absurd, not-friggin'-okay *blush*. He told himself his cheeks were red with furious, furious rage, before he closed his eyes and slipped back under.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I couldn't help it. Not the world's most awkward cuddle session, cuz that was a given, but Dean refusing Cas's advice and falling off the bed because of his stubbornness XD

Quality: It has been weeks since I wrote this and I was definitely worried launching into the edit that it would be such a boring, unsatisfying 100th chapter after a three week wait, but I changed my mind by the end of it. It may not be the action-packed mess of the last several months, but I forgot about a lot of the comedy I put into it. It feels nice to get back to some laughs and awkwardness and just bantering interaction between our fav characters. I hope you guys feel the same!

Destiel: I am also hoping Dean's continued freak out and thoughts are still very much in character. It feels like it is to me, but we are getting to a challenging part in this story where I have to push Dean past what he ever was on the show, and I want to make sure I do that while keeping him every bit as believable as I've managed so far. Not unlike trying to get him and Sam to stop lying to each other (which canon has definitely defined as part of their relationship while I'm determined to move past it). So please keep me honest, guys! If you think I'm pushing a character too far I want to know so I can either adjust or, at the very least, be aware.

Pronouns: The Heaven Arc ruined me. I'm back to using 'he/his'

for all of Cas's stuff again *head thud* Apologies if there were any missed errors related to it.

(Muse: *whispers* you know what a solution for that would be?

Don't say it.

Muse: *whispers* Bringing Jimmy back.

Alright, look here, bitch. Vessel swapping was YOUR idea and now you just-!)

Ahem. Anyway. Moving on!

Up Next: So the dream was supposed to be in this chapter, but I'm verbose as f**k and we all know this. So *next chapter* Dean gets his dream angel(s) on. Cas and Cas have a chat about the future, Dean muses on the two of them, and Cas and Dean share another quiet moment**.**

Delay? I will be perfectly honest (as always) with you guys. I do not know when the next chapter will be up. I honestly feel like crossing the one hundred chapter milestone would be deserving of two chapters but, the thing is...I don't have the next chapter for you :(It isn't fully written yet (eek!). Unfortunately, I haven't written anything in *weeks*. Part of that is the depression, part of it is how crazy RL is right now. But! While Real Life is only getting crazier, the depression is easing up (yaaay!) I still have to pack my entire life and deal with a lot of arrangements/ paperwork/so on and so forth that comes with moving countries, but I have been feeling so much better this week as I start to transition. So I don't know when I'll finish up the next chapter and post it, but I do have high hopes.

My guess is another two week wait (for which I am truly sorry for, but it is what it is, and so many of you have been so, so damn supportive of me taking care of myself :)) I will keep you guys updated (don't forget to check my profile page for status updates on this story) and I will hopefully see you all again sooner rather than later!

Cheers (and thank you so much for your patience and support),

Silence

Chapter 101: Season 2: Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Sooooo, that was longer than a two week delay [insert sheepish whistling here]. Granted, between packing up my entire life, moving counties, *and* the pure surrealism that is our world right now…I would argue the delay is an understandable one (and, according to the many, many, *MANY* comments full of support, encouragement, and patience, many of you would agree :) Thank you so much for your patience, guys. I have safely relocated and am now in quarantine, so I should have plenty of time to write.

Speaking Of: Time for an Anecdote! I was definitely hoping to get this chapter up last weekend, but on our first day of full-freedom-nothing-to-do-but-stare-at-the-walls-or-write, I sat down at my computer and went, okay let's write! And the muse said…

Muse: Let's stare at the walls.

Me: ….I'm sorry, what?

Muse: They're such an interesting shade of blue.

Me: …..*looks around Dad's office* Blue? That's not blue. That's white, if white thought it was blue.

Muse: I wonder what caused that divot.

Me: What divot?

Muse: Right there. See?

-THREE HOURS LATER-

Me: Hey dad, tell me about that time a rival assassin broke into the house and tried to kill you.

My Dad: …?

Me: That divot, in the wall in your office. Clearly that's from a rogue bullet. You obviously tried to patch it up with spackle but you must have been in a hurry. Was it date night or something?

My Dad: ...the Quarantine is getting to you, isn't it? It's only day three, honey.

(Funny side note: there was an actual ongoing joke among my friends back in highschool that my dad was a hitman. We told him our theory once and the next time he came back from a business trip, the first words out of his mouth were "I missed." XD)

Quality Warning: So I obviously struggled to get this chapter out, and I feel it's evident in the writing. I'm usually a first-draft-writer only with an editing pass for grammar tacked on at the end. I very rarely do a second draft or polish pass. But that means when I struggle with that first pass, I have absolutely no clue (or experience) with how to recover from it or fix it. Other than starting over, haha (…which I tried with this one ._.) But, I really didn't want to delay it any longer and, to be honest, if take two didn't go all that much better I'm kind of doubting waiting around for my third re-write will be all that fruitful either.

Previously on TRSF… The boys have just returned to Bobby's from two days in Lafayette, Indiana where Gordon Walker set a trap for them. He took out Dean, who ended up in Heaven and decided to look for Cas in the process, and tried to take out Sam who wasn't so easy to kill. Dean found Cas, but not time to save him from Uriel's betrayal. Cas managed to best his brother in battle, but was still quite injured from Azazel's trap in Rivergrove and needed a healing trance to finish his recovery. Before entering the trance with the assistance of Chest!Cas, Castiel offered to bring Dean into his own head so he could speak with his sternum-riding friend.

Chapter Warnings: Cas and Cas have a chat while Dean desperately wants a beer and remembers why he doesn't *like* dreamland, because it gives him all the feels and makes him think about orphaned baby angel monsters. Wait, what?

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 68

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The second attempt at hugging his friend was far more successful, and

Dean – with his chin tucked over Cas's shoulder where no one could see his ear-to-ear grin or hands pressed to his friend's shoulder blades – marveled at the familiar feeling (the *rightness*) of that infamous trenchcoat beneath his fingers.

"It's good to see you, man." Dean pulled away before it got awkward, giving Cas a hearty tap on the shoulder. "I'm glad you're here."

And he was. So, so glad that the little sliver – the *shadow* – of his friend that he'd been carrying secretly in his chest for more than a year now was still with him. The last little vestiges of another time, another *home*.

"I had nowhere else to be," Cas returned with a quirk of his lips. A simple smile, yeah, but it made Dean's chest all warm and fuzzy. Must be the grace, finally happy to be reunited.

The hunter, rather than respond to that with anything even resembled feelings, looked around at their surroundings, once more taking in the bunker he'd only gotten a brief glimpse of before. It looked just like it should, down to the last book lining the shelves of the Library. God, he missed this place. It even *smelled* right.

"So…uh…the bunker, huh?" Dean asked, going for teasing and hitting more around the sheepish mile marker. Even he couldn't quite cover up just how much he'd been homesick for it.

His Cas looked around (and wait now, *'his'* Cas was…well that was… okay, it wasn't *wrong* but it also was…uh…it just wasn't… He couldn't go around calling the guy 'his' to differentiate between him and…er… the other Cas. But shit, what to call him? Or her. Chest Cas? Past Cas? …Boy Cas? Dean had a feeling if Sam was here with him, that one definitely wouldn't fly. Or Dragon Lady, for that matter, cuz that would make Present Cas 'girl Cas'. He could see the feminism rant coming from a mile away, and wasn't sure who'd be bitching louder, his brother or the actual woman.)

There was a distant but fond smile on (his) Cas's face (damnit, not *his*) that made Dean feel stupidly happy just seeing it. He tamped down on that right away, cuz, come on. There were limits to how much mush one could handle in a single dream (no matter how much he'd missed his friend or thought he was dead, drained away like a battery to save all their lives), and they'd passed Dean's limit sometime around the man hug.

"This is the place that feels most like home," Cas supplied. He smiled

up at Dean, that shy little grin of his he always got when he was nervous to admit something (usually because, well, *feelings* and Dean were a volatile concoction to start mixing). "For both of us. We are in your head, after all."

Ah. Huh, Dean hadn't thought about that. He'd figured they were in… er…Cas's? Could you even go into an angel's head? Dean was so used to Cas showing up in his like it was a natural thing that he'd never stopped to think if the reverse *wasn't* an option. Apparently it wasn't, given that they were once again messing around in his noggin. Such was life when your best friend was an angel. (Angels? As in plural, now that he was staring at two of them in his head? Did he have two best friends now, or just the one split across two times? Damnit, time travel was so friggin' confusing.)

"I hope you will one day to get to see the bunker and call it home, too," (his) Cas said, now addressing his female counterpart (Lady Cas? Uh…yeah, nope, that wasn't gonna fly either) who merely nodded at the possibility. Clearly no emotional attachment there (but, then again, that Cas (Lady Cas (*'no, Dean, pick another name, damnit*)) hadn't really hit the 'oh, I do have emotions and I shouldn't shove them so down deep that even my toes can't wiggle around those guys (in part because I'm a wavelength of celestial intent and don't have toes (wow, this anecdote is really getting away from us, here (*focus* Dean!)))' stage of rebellion just yet.)

"I hope so as well," Lady Cas (Damnit. Now it was stuck in his head and gonna be a thing) replied exactly like she was supposed to, which might have pissed Dean off any other day (how often he found Cas frustrating when he- uh, she…no, wait… nevermind, just *Cas* frustrating when the angel was busy being so *other* rather than anything remotely *human*). But today he had his old best friend and his (tentatively new best?) friend and his bunker. All that was missing was Sammy and a cold beer.

One day, Dean was gonna show the bunker to his kid brother. Soon as that key showed up this end of Henry Winchester's trip through the time closet, he was taking Sammy to the Batcave, man. Just…Dean sighed as he did the math. Six more years. Just six more years and they could go *home*. Actual home, and not just a memory.

"Shall we begin the healing trance?" Lady Cas interrupted (who Dean would *not* think of as a fun sucker, here. He *wouldn't*. She just… contrasted starkly (or whatever Sam would call it. He knew words better) against his Cas (damnit, not *his* Cas, just *Cas*). Especially here,

with the bunker and all its shared history as a backdrop). Dean supposed it wasn't really interrupting. Neither he nor the Cases were talking. And if they weren't talking but it was still an interruption, then that would make this a *moment*. Which it was absolutely *not*.

So Dean cleared his throat even as Cas smiled simply at his counterpart and agreed they should get started. The hunter rubbed his hands on the thighs of his jeans, weirdly fidgety and suddenly feeling out of place. Probably because he was once more stuck in dreamland without a clue as to what he was actually supposed to be doing. After the last time (and the times before that), it wasn't really his favorite scenario to reenact. "Uh, what can I do to help?"

"Nothing. I will assist Castiel in entering the trance." His Cas settled in one of the chairs beside the long library table, Lady Cas mirroring him. The two were practically bumping knees, and Dean stared at that. It was like…a family reunion somehow. That was weird. Man, dream thinking was weird. He remembered how messed up it had been in Dad's head, how difficult it had been not to blurt shit out, but man… hella inconvenient right now (who was he kidding? When was dreamland *ever* convenient?). "However, it may take some time."

Dean looked up from their touching knees to the matching pairs of ocean blue eyes locked on him. That…okay, that was disconcerting. Twin eyes, vessels that could have been siblings if it weren't for the clear race difference in Angela Garrett's (gorgeous, smooth, ruddy-red, sun-soaked, tropical wet drea-) skin tone.

"Uh…" the hunter cleared his throat, realizing he was staring. At both of them. It was weird having the two of them in the same place, side by side, and Dean couldn't even begin to reason why. Didn't want to. He was backing out of this while ahead of the grave he was digging himself with a shovel made from all the adjectives little Dean was supplying for Angela's skin. Yup. Backing right out; out of the conversation, out of trouble, right out the library door. "Right, yeah, I'll…er…I'll just…go grab a beer then."

Once Dean was in the hallway (managing to make it down the step and a half of stairs with only half tripping, minor flailing, and recovery like a pro) he spun on his heel, his back to the angels, and headed as far away from that conversation and those identical stares as possible. He could hear Lady Cas ask something as he retreated and absolutely refused to listen to what it was. Or to his Cas's deep, gravely chuckle that came in response.

"Right. Just gonna grab me a beer and stay out of trouble," Dean muttered as he picked up his pace to a light jog, just for a dozen feet or so to really clear out of hearing range. He practically growled his next words when he could still hear his stupid best friend's stupidly deep stupid chuckle. "In my own head. Awesome."

-o-o-o-

Cas watched Castiel; he studied the contours of Angela Garrett's face, the blue of her eyes, the strong hints of Indigenous descent in her skin and skeletal structure, likely one of the Polynesian islands. He could see why Dean was having problems looking past the human to the angel. The hunter always had had a weakness for beautiful women.

Castiel was watching Dean's retreating back, something between amusement and confusion (more like intrigue, Cas supposed) coloring her grace a myriad of pink, blue, and yellow.

"He's something, isn't he?" Cas asked, a wry lilt to his words that he knew this younger version of himself wouldn't quite understand yet. Suddenly he got why Dean – and so many other humans, really – had teased him so readily over the years. It was rather easy, wasn't it?

"He is the Righteous Man," Castiel answered, turning to the older angel with a question (incomprehension) in her eyes.

"Yes," Cas answered, that twist of his lips growing, although he could not deny there was likely a sentimentally there – a fondness – that was causing as much caution in his counterpart as was this line of questioning. "But he's more than that, too."

Castiel paused, contemplating his words and her own answer. Cas knew he was asking rather leading questions, but that was his goal, really. He felt somewhat like a teacher to this younger version of himself. How simpler – how less painful – her life would be if he could give her all the answers it had taken so many years (and so much anguish) to find out for himself.

But life didn't work that way, though, he knew. And he risked endangering the timeline if he pushed his younger self too hard.

"His soul…" Angela's blue eyes were distant, trailing after the hunter who had long since disappeared from visual range. Not that either angel needed human vision to check up on him in his own head.

"It's the brightest you've ever seen," Cas finished for her, because he'd

once contemplated the same thing. Once said the same thing to a brother who hadn't understood. Who'd tried to tarnish that soul, hidden loyalties to the Devil, lied to and eventually turned on Cas as well. None of his other brothers had ever understood, either. Cas didn't think he was wrong, didn't think what he saw in Dean was a lie, but it certainly added to his many doubts about himself (*'came off the line with a crack in your chassis'*) that he seemed to be the only angel in all of existence who could see it.

"It was the same for you?" Castiel asked. Her tone wasn't hesitant, but curious. This had to be quite the experience for her as well. He tried to imagine what he would have done, ten years and so many Apocalypses, crises, hunts, failures, and losses ago, had Dean Winchester showed up in front of him with a sliver of his grace and a doomed future.

She was handling it admirably, in his opinion. Not without her flaws, of course. Cas certainly knew they had enough of those. But in those early years – in her years now – he had done more good than bad. He had to hope Time would stay the same, at least in that regard.

"Yes. Even in Hell." Cas lifted his head, matching her gaze on that hallway Dean had disappeared down. He wasn't seeing the bunker, but fire and flame and hellspawn. A tower run by a master of torture and misery. A soul, with blade in hand and bent over another on the rack, shining still in that dark, bloody place. "The first time I saw Dean Winchester's soul, it was clear to me there was something different – something special – about him. Something worth saving."

"No matter the cost?" Castiel's question was quiet, so quiet Cas almost didn't hear it. But, then again, he really didn't need to. He knew the question, knew it by heart. Had asked it himself so many times, so many years ago. He still knew this angel (some days he still mourned the loss of her in himself). Knew all her fears and doubts.

"Yes." He turned to face Castiel. There wasn't much left to his grace, but Cas let it flow honestly. There was no point hiding from himself, after all. "You're going to find that there is a line between what you should do and what you're willing to do. I crossed that line more times than I should have. Many more. But… He and Sam are going to save the world. They're worth it. And after that…well, after that, you can decide for yourself what's worth the price."

Cas had made his choice. Standing on a driveway in Cicero, Indiana, on another plane of existence, watching his friend try for a normal

life, with Heaven on the brink of a Civil War and the newly minted archangel already doubting himself…. He'd made the decision that Dean was worth any cost. And it had cost him. It had cost him *everything*.

He couldn't make that choice for his younger self, but he hoped… maybe she would choose differently. Maybe she wouldn't ever have to. Maybe, that way, Castiel would break the world less times in the name of an emotion it had taken too many years to identify and not even half that time to find futile. Cas hoped for her sake (for Dean's sake and the sake of the world several times over) that maybe this version of himself would not go so far. Wouldn't ever have the chance to, if Dean managed to change it all.

But that was many years and unknowns away. Cas was letting his personal regrets distract him from the task at hand. Right now they had an Apocalypse to derail, and this Castiel had to make all the same decisions if they were going to stop it.

"I worry that I…" Castiel broke off, turning away from her counterpart with a shame she couldn't yet put into words. He could, but he didn't. "What if I can't be what he needs me to be?"

What if I can't be you?

Cas wouldn't want her to be, if he was being honest. But he couldn't say that. This version of himself was not ready to hear it. The doubts she was experiencing were tentative, fragile things. Push them too far, add too much to them, and he knew she would collapse beneath them. He certainly had.

"You will be," he said instead, because that was something he had absolute faith in. That, and one more thing. "Even if you don't, even if you mess up, he'll still come for you, still take you back. That's what Dean does. That's what family does."

"That doesn't sound particularly healthy," Castiel said with an innocent frown, and Cas actually laughed.

"It's probably not." More than just probably. It was how he and the Winchesters had gone too far, pushed too hard, and broken the world a couple of times as a result. And they never seemed to learn their lesson. "But it'll get you through the Apocalypse." And that's what mattered. After that…the world would be Castiel's to figure out. Cas could only take her so far down that road.

At the slow churning of her grace, the way the swirls moved like sludge and struggled against the weight of her own emotions, Cas let his smile drop and put his hands on her knees. Her grace startled from the touch but her physical body did nothing more than look up at his.

"You are me, Castiel. And I'm you. We were told that angels do not change. We were created as we are, as we always have been, as we always will be." He paused, taking in a breath he didn't need but had learned to take many years ago as a human. "Do you believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore." The answer was a miserable one (and an honest one) and Cas couldn't fault her for it. He smiled, a little of his own bittersweet sadness coloring his grace in blue eddies.

"Well…I believe that those doubts you're having? They're the first step. A sign that you can be what Dean needs." She looked up at him, meeting his human eyes almost tentatively. He knew what she was thinking. That she wasn't even completely sure she wanted that. Yes, she worried she wouldn't be what Dean needed, but she worried more that she wouldn't *want* to be what Dean needed. Cas had been there, too. "I believe you will be. And I'm you. So I'm probably right."

The humor went largely over her head, but he had known it would. Castiel stared at the older, broken version of herself, embracing emotion she could barely understand, and realized she could not see herself in this angel before her. But…she also could. She could see how they were the same and yet so different. And if what he said, if angels did not change, if she was born this way, born *his* way…

"Tell me about Naomi."

The words left her mouth before she could think them – or their consequences – fully through. The angel across from her stiffened, those veins iridescent white and light blue suddenly shifting into planes of dark grey and terrified indigo. Castiel almost apologized, but didn't. This was her future she was staring in the face. She needed to know.

(She deserved to know.)

Cas's shoulders sagged suddenly, the colors of his grace running together like a ruined watercolor.

"What did she take from us?" she asked again, the request as respectful as it could be of the burden it so clearly put upon her counterpart. (A burden she was growing fearful of, and that would not do. She could

not be what Dean needed her to be if she was *afraid*.)

"Everything," Cas whispered, his grace turning pallid, dull and neutral. All the colors blurred together until nothing was discernible, nothing was left but a milky, agitated grey. "Too much."

She reached out instinctually – perhaps something leftover of what Angela Garrett would have done were she on the physical plane right now – and folded her hands around the larger set resting on her knees. Her brother, for lack of a more accurate word to define their unique relation, looked up to meet her gaze and grace with his own.

"Show me."

-o-o-o-

Dean decided to take a detour to the dormitory wing on his way to the kitchen (cuz this was his head and he *could*). This whole thing (being back in dreamland, all the stupid feels that came with it (and it was absolutely *dreamland* responsible for all that, thank you very much), two sides of the same damn angel staring at him with stupidly identical eyes, Cas most definitely making fun of him with that little amused smile) would have been eye-roll worthy if Dean hadn't asked to be here in the first place. Hell, it was still pretty eye-roll worthy. So Dean did that (and then did it again because, again, he was in his own head and he *could*) and opened the door to his room, sticking his head inside almost tentatively (which was ridiculous, cuz this was *his* head!). Just a peek, was what he told himself. Make sure it was still there (in his head…because…where else would it be?). But soon enough he was swinging the door all the way open and drinking in the familiar sight of his bed, his weapons on the wall, the photo of mom propped up on the nightstand. Home.

Damn, but did he miss this place.

He sat on the bed, listening to the familiar creak, and closed his eyes against the swell of homesickness. Dean could count on one hand the number of times he'd ever felt homesick, and three of the five of 'em were for his Baby. Green eyes (that were *not* glistening, damnit. Friggin' girly, chick-flick adjective right there) slid open, taking in his room bathed in warm, welcoming, artificial light. He just drank it in. Sat there for who-knew how long (Cas said it would take a while, and Dean knew the angels would come find him if he was needed) and drank it in.

Six years, and he'd be back. Just half a decade and an apocalypse

later. Yeah, right.

The hunter climbed to his feet, ignoring how heavy he felt (stupid dreamworld, stupid dreamworld-enhanced feelings) and headed for the kitchen. He had a beer to get and some angel twins to return to.

The door to the kitchen (that golden twenty-three shining beneath the Aquarian star) was closed when he got there, but Dean didn't think much of it. Just grabbed the handle and pushed with every expectation that it would give. Only it didn't. Dean's shoulder thumped bodily into the very solid wood and the rest of him bounced right back off of it.

"What the-" the hunter frowned at the door, pressing one hand flat to its surface and the other jiggling the doorknob. The thing rattled but wouldn't turn: locked. "The hell?"

Dean frowned at it. He…hadn't even known the kitchen door in the bunker could be locked. He supposed there wasn't any reason to think otherwise; it was a door just like any of the others, and most of them locked. Still.

"That's weird…" He pulled his hand off the door, turned to leave, only to turn back with another frown as he stared at the kitchen entrance. His eyes dropped to the floor. The crack beneath the door was pretty damn small, but Dean was pretty sure the light was on in there. He dropped to the ground, but couldn't see through the micro-thin space for anything more than a couple inches. With a brow furled more in an annoyed pout than actual frustration, Dean climbed back to his feet. With a headshake, he turned back down the hallway. "Guess that's a no on the beer then."

Apparently his head was policing his alcohol intake as much as Sammy was these days (the kid had loosened up in the months since Dad's passing once Dean hadn't tried to drown himself into an early grave, but he still side-eyed the bottle anytime Dean went for something stronger than a beer).

Maybe he could ask Cas about it. Yeah, they were in his head, but Cas was sorta a resident there too, so maybe the angel would know what was up with Dean's subconscious beer-blocking him. The hunter made his way back towards the library, still in no rush and allowing himself more to stroll through the memories of his home (which, admittedly, would have been nicer with a frigign' beer in hand).

"Hey, Cas, did you know the kitchen-" Dean pulled up short, cutting

his own words off as he rounded the corner back into the library only to catch sight of the two angels. They were…uh, close. Like, knee-bumping, hand-holding, forehead-pressing close. Dean cleared his throat, but neither angel seemed to hear him. Neither one opened their eyes or so much as twitched.

The whole thing seemed strangely intimate and, considering they were the same guy…. *Aaaaawkward.*

He cleared his throat again, to similar results.

Okay. Well… despite Dean's definitely-don't-know-what-to-do-with-this reaction, he didn't really want to intrude. He'd been friends with Cas for eight or so years now (nine, including this re-write of history. Did that count? Dean figured it should count), and there were still plenty of things about angels he didn't know shit about. Like communing with one, apparently.

That must be what this…uh…closeness was. Yup. He was going with that.

You'd have thought one of the angels would have maybe warned him it would look like the cover of the world's most cliché romance novel, though. Not that Dean knew what the cover of any romance novel looked like.

The hunter coughed awkwardly again, not for the angels this time but his own wandering thoughts. Frickin' dreamland, man. Still, neither Cas noticed so Dean decided to wait them out. He sort of tip-toed over to one of the arm chairs sporadically placed between the bookshelves lining the walls, and settled in. He was only a dozen feet away from the angels, but he figured the space was appropriate for not-intruding-on-ridiculously-tender-angel-moments. Not that either angel cared about space.

Or tender moments, he was pretty sure.

Well, maybe his Cas. Lady Cas ('*nope, we're still not calling her that, Dean*') was too new in her introduction into humanity to even know what a moment was. But his Cas probably did. They'd had enough close calls, enough almost-ends to be able to share a hug when they all survived or pass a quite word between one another about how damn wrecked they'd be if the other person hadn't pulled through. Those, Dean supposed, could be called 'tender.' You know, if your name was Samantha and you liked chick flicks and sleepovers and braiding each other's hair.

Cas had changed a lot in those eight years, though. A hell of a lot. Dean was reminded of it often; pretty much any time he interacted with Lady Cas these days ('*Present Cas, This Time Cas, anything but Lady Cas, Dean. Angela and Sam are both gonna kick your ass, you idiot*'). The hunter was lucky, so far that he hadn't really pissed the angel off, expecting her to be the friend he knew and instead getting a friend that was nearly a decade old to him. Back in his timeline when he'd first met Cas (the same version of Lady Cas he had now), Dean had hardly called the angel a friend. More like a stick in the mud with a stick up his-

Well, that had obviously changed over the years. And Lady Cas wasn't nearly as much of a dick as his Cas had been back then. Well… sometimes, she was. Okay, more often than he'd like, but still not nearly as much as his own timeline experience with his angel. Dean reluctantly had to admit that the Dragon Lady was probably helping out there.

(She would never, on pain of death or torture or another forty years in Hell, get him to say it aloud, though.)

Dean frowned, leaning back in his chair as he tried to think of when his Castiel had become *Cas*. And not in name; the hunter was pretty sure he'd started calling the guy 'Cas' almost from the get go (truth was…he hadn't been entirely sure he'd get 'Castiel' right and it had seemed easier to purposefully piss off a terrifying, supernatural badass that could snap him like a toothpick than to do it accidentally just because Dean's tongue couldn't handle anything more complicated than a single syllable when put on the spot) But Cas-the-Angel-whose-full-name-I-might-not-actually-be-able-to-get-out-without-mangling-it-something-awful-and-who-might-throw-me-back-in-Hell-if-I-do did eventually become Cas-my-best-friend, and looking back on it, Dean wasn't sure when.

It had been… the human frowned, a memory floating to the surface that he was less than happy to recall. That stupid room Zachariah had stuck him in right before everything well and truly went to shit (a Baroquian nightmare come to life). (Dean didn't actually know what the hell 'baroquian' was, but that's what Sam had called it later once Dean finished telling his brother all about his cameo on '*The Suite Life of Zach And Cas*'.)

The hunter's honest-to-not-God-but-anyone-else first thought was that he couldn't have considered Cas a friend at that point. The asshat had spent the month leading up to that nightmare acting like more of a

dick than he ever had before (ever since his pals had dragged him back up to Heaven for some bible boot camp), and Dean had been so fucking done with him.

But…maybe that was it. Dean got pissed at people he didn't like, sure. Murderous, even. Zachariah had more than deserved that angel blade to his gullet, and damn but did Dean hope he got to be the one to deliver it again this time around. But he'd never been even half as mad with Zach in that stupid, awful, fucked up room as he had when Cas was there, mouth sealed up in a thin line, following his Boss around like a whipped puppy, eyes telling Dean to give up already and fall in line behind him. Dean hadn't wanted to kill Cas then, not like he'd wanted to kill Zach. He'd wanted to slap the angel until he came to his senses and *helped* him.

Because Dean only ever got that mad at the people he cared about.

"Huh," he mumbled, green eyes flickering to the two angels, still sitting with their foreheads pressed together, eyes shut.

So he couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he'd started thinking of Cas as a friend (maybe that dream, on the dock at that mountain lake, when Cas had told him they needed to talk…had risked everything to tell him the end of the world was coming, even if he hadn't gotten it out then and wouldn't again for *months* because of what his asshat family had done to him up in Heaven?) but it had been a lot earlier than the hunter would have thought. And that room, when Cas had finally listened, had finally *seen* what Dean was trying to smack him over the head with, finally faced up to what his own people were doing (stopped being a coward) and saved Dean, got him to Sam (maybe not in time, but he'd died trying, damnit), that was probably the moment Dean had realized Cas was the closest thing to a best friend he'd ever had (and immediately lost, of course, because he was a Winchester, and they didn't get nice things (at the time, standing in Chuck's living room pulling teeth out of the man's hair, he'd thought, '*well, that would have been nice had it lasted. Figures.*').

When Cas had come back…it was the first time Dean had ever seen a miracle he actually believed in. And not in the cheesy, chick-flick way (and anyone thinking it can piss off) but in the honest-to-God-we-need-a-miracle-or-we're-all-dead way that something (someone) had actually pulled through for them (though Dean still sort of refused to thank God for it).

He wondered when this Cas (Lady Cas (no, *not* 'Lady' Cas, damnit))

would reach the same point for him. Maybe she already had? He didn't think so (and felt guilty for thinking it). But they certainly seemed to be off to a better (Better? Maybe just different) start than he and his Cas had.

Dean was just starting to lament how much this entirely internal and quickly-down-spiraling conversation could really use a god damn beer when the two angels in the center of the room stirred. The hunter sat up as the Casses pulled apart. His angel looked…well, way too pale and about as depressed as Dean's train of thoughts had been getting (shit, was he somehow influencing this world with his thinking? It was his head, after all). Lady Cas was…

Shit. She was *shaking*.

"I can't go back," she whispered, almost too low for the hunter to hear. Dean started to get out of his seat, but Cas caught his eye and shook his head ever so slightly. Slowly, the hunter sank back into the armchair. "I won't."

Cas caught her hand again, just one this time, and wrapped calm, calloused fingers around softer, trembling ones. He knew she was talking about Heaven, and understood. Once he'd learned of Naomi, once he'd felt her *touch* first hand, sat in that chair and wished to God he would just *die*, he had never wanted to go back, either. He'd run away and hid, first in a hundred Biggerson's across the nation, then in Metatron's lies, and finally in the bunker itself with a laptop full of Netflix.

Eventually, he supposed, he'd hidden behind Lucifer, too. He'd never really stopped hiding, regardless that Naomi was dead.

"Perhaps it's for the best," he answered quietly. She likely shouldn't return to Heaven. Not with this timeline's series of events or even the better circumstances (the lies) of his own. Cas still wanted to believe, even now, with all that he had seen and done, that some of his brothers were worth saving. Almost wanted to tell this younger part of himself that she should try to save them (Rachel and Samandriel. Balthazar. Even Hannah, for all her betrayal had stung in the end, was still worth saving in the angel's eyes). None of them deserved the fate he'd brought down on their heads; banishment from Heaven, the loss of their wings, death for so many of them.

But that was not this Castiel's burden to bare. Nor her risk to take, should Zachariah or someone higher up, like Naomi, catch wind of her

disobedience. Besides, if Cas could guide her on a better path than his own now, he could perhaps still save his brothers from the fate he'd sealed for them in his world. His last penance.

"You have work to do here." He released her hand, somewhat pleased to see the rippling of her grace steadied. It was more a dull agitation now rather than the full panic she'd been experiencing once he'd shared his memories of Naomi – of what she'd *done* to them – with her.

"There is more you did not show me," Castiel said rather abruptly, raising her gaze to his. Her blue eyes and the grace behind them held a challenge. There'd been large gaps in the scant, handful of memories he had shown her of the angel who could tamper – who *had* tampered – with her mind. Events, she sensed, that had less to do with Naomi, but were still in his past, which meant they were in her future. "You held back."

Of course he did, Cas couldn't help but think. Almost scoffed aloud at the notion. "You don't need to see it."

And she didn't. He could not imagine this version of himself, young and naïve, still believing in her Father and her brothers, learning of everything that had come to pass – everything Castiel had let come to pass, had *made* come to pass – and not run from it. From him, from Dean or Sam. From a fate she had every right to fear.

A fate that, if Cas had any influence in, *would not be hers.* At least not beyond an averted Apocalypse.

If anything, her grace grew grimmer. She knew the basic outline of what he was hiding – and why he was hiding it – and she thought he hid it to keep her on a course. But there was one thing she seemed quite stuck on, so sure of, that Cas disagreed with.

"I am not your future, Castiel," he spoke steadily, calmly, and tried to convey his honesty – his true sincerity and intent – behind the words. He would be so disappointed – so saddened and anguished – if she ended up like him. Instead, he turned his gaze to his charge, his best friend and arguably his favorite human in all of creation. Dean stiffened under those eyes (filled with so much damn emotion and intensity, he really wasn't ready to figure out the parts of this exchange he was clearly missing). "The Winchesters are. And you will make your own choices from here, not mine."

While Dean frowned at that (and how cute it was, the hunter so

offended by Castiel's 'chick-flick' affection. The angel had long ago learned to find amusement in that rather than the sting of rejection or yet another human thing he'd gotten wrong), Cas turned back to his counterpart. She was watching Dean as well, but Cas could read the uncertainty in her eyes. There was no affection there. At least not yet. Maybe not ever, if they messed this up.

She looked away.

"There is nothing wrong with doubt," Cas reiterated, looking first at her and then down at his own hands. Hands that had wielded a blade – held so many lives in his hands – with both crippling doubt and terrible certainty. "There's nothing wrong with being afraid."

"They're not exactly traits of a Warrior of God."

This time Cas did snort at his younger self's words.

"No." They most certainly were not. It had taken him years (and a lot of tutelage under Sam and Dean and Bobby Singer) to realize that what angels embodied as traits of a devout warrior were mostly lies and ignorance. Humans, though, they were the ones who'd gotten it right, messy as it was. They were far closer to what angels *should* be. "They're traits of something more."

Dean, who was now at the point where he couldn't figure out if he was going to gag from the conversation or the uncomfortable warmth in his chest (watching Cas not only console his younger self but profess (ridiculously) that Dean and Sam were pretty much the answer to just about everything (had he mentioned it was ridiculous?)), cleared his throat *loudly*.

Cas eyed him all the more fondly for it, like he knew why Dean was interrupting, and the hunter decided he was in full rights to be annoyed by that. Damn warm and fuzzy angel.

"We should begin the healing trance," the older angel declared instead, finally pulling away from his younger counterpart to sit fully in his own chair. Dean thought he looked like a dad finishing up a pep talk with his son (er, daughter?). You know, the kind that mortified the kid but left the parent all proud they'd done their civic duty?

Of course, that led Dean to thinking about this Cas giving his younger self 'the talk', which had him snorting out loud. Which drew two sets of identical blue eyes to him.

"Uh…yeah, you should, uh…" Dean offered his most charming of the 'whoops, ignore me over here' smiles and wished, yet again, for that beer. "Go on, start the healing thing, or, whatever."

One angel eyed him with a cute little frown, the other an annoying amount of sympathy. Damnit, why had Dean even wanted in on this angel confab again?

Cas turned back to the other angel, a stupidly knowing and teasing smile on his face. Lucky for Dean, Lady Cas wouldn't likely understand why. She straightened in her chair (a silly thing to even say, considering Dean wouldn't have thought she could have sat straighter to begin with, but apparently she had been all but slouching in angelic body language) and placed her hands wide apart on either kneecap. Cas, meanwhile, reached forward with one hand and splayed it across her chest, right over her sternum and collar bones. The other formed his standard two-fingered touch to her forehead. The younger angel closed her eyes with a deep, fortifying breath.

And then…they just sat there.

Dean gave it a second, then another couple more, then glanced around like someone else might be there to comment on whether or not this was how it was supposed to go. The seconds stretched into a minute and Dean found himself wishing (*again*) that he at least had a beer or a drink or hell, even a lemonade, to pass the time.

Instead, he found his mind drifting back to his earlier thoughts, about Cas reminding him of a parent. He supposed that wasn't the most absurd thing to think, given the situation. Cas, as an older version of himself sitting in front of a younger, more naïve, and clearly more worried Castiel, was kind of like a parent. More a parent than a sibling, considering what Dean knew about angel siblings and how they really weren't anything like family at all. Given the way Cas had clearly been trying to comfort and guide his younger self, despite clear hardships he bore on his own shoulders and didn't want to pass along to her, Dean could see the parental side of this.

Cas would have made a pretty good dad, Dean mused, thinking on the guys awkward but sincere interactions with most humans he came across. Especially Claire. Dean had never really given it much thought, before. He'd thought about what kind of dad Sammy would make, unlikely as that had seemed after Jess died in his timeline and the two were split up in this one. For a while, though, Dean had thought *'maybe someone else will come along for him*,' but it hadn't really

happened. Sam had been too angry, to devoted to hunting (revenge) to let anyone in. There'd been a few who had tried, a few who Dean had even thought stood a chance. But ultimately, Sam had been too angry, too bullishly committed to his 'destiny' as a hunter (the 'destiny' that had gotten Jess killed – and if he didn't fulfill that destiny, what had her death even been for?) that he'd shot himself in the foot on the dating front. A couple of times over, actually. He'd started to come out of that eventually, years and years later. And Dean had thought, for a minute, *maybe* there'd been something there with Eileen, but he guessed Sam had never gotten the chance to go down that road. Amara and the end of the world had made sure of that.

Dean wondered for a moment where Eileen Leahy was right now, and if he should try to find her. Probably not, considering she'd spent most of her life in Ireland and he didn't actually know when she'd made it Stateside.

Not that any of that mattered to Dean's current train of thought (which he was going to say came out of an abundance of boredom and lack of beer?). He doubted Sammy was ever gonna be the 'settle down and have kids' type this go-around, either. He was pretty sure, despite him and Jess staying in contact this time around, that Sam already knew he could never go back to his Stanford life. Dean would get him there if it was what he wanted – he swore to every damn last deity out there that if Sam wanted back in that life, he'd figure out a way – but he was pretty sure his brother would turn him down a second time.

(It was too bad, Dean thought almost lazily, picking at a loose thread in his jeans rather than the beer label he didn't have. He would have made a damn awesome uncle. He'd made a shitty dad, but he'd have been a good uncle. And raising a kid in the bunker would have been something else. Chasing some little tyke through the halls, cooking him all sorts of culinary masterpieces in the kitchen (when his dad wasn't looking, because heaven forbid the kid eat something that wasn't rabbit food). Teaching him (or her, Dean was an equal opportunity uncle) to shoot their first gun in the armory. Sometimes Dean almost regretted that part missing from their lives. It had been hard after he'd let Ben go. Harder, still, once he'd learned he and Sam were Legacies. Something about the title, *Legacy*, just made you wonder what you'd leave behind when you finally bit that last bullet. Made you want someone around to pass that title to. Dean would have made an awesome uncle to a little Legacy with Sammy's puppy dog eyes and floppy hair.)

He'd thought before about how good a dad Bobby woulda made (*had*

made, blood or no blood). Dean knew the man had lost his wife before the two of them could consider starting a family. Although he'd never asked Bobby if he'd wanted one. He knew his surrogate father had daddy issues of his own. And he knew from first hand experience there was nothing more terrifying than thinking you might turn into your old man. (Somehow, given how Bobby had raised him and Sam over the years, Dean still suspected the answer to that question was an obvious one, daddy issues or none.)

But he'd never thought about Cas's potential as a father. Probably because he was an angel, and if Dean had ever mentioned it aloud, he'd have gotten the Cas-version of a lecture on how angels didn't procreate (or some other droll reasoning on why there were no little Cases flying around in all their chubby baby fat and diapered glory). Then again, Cas had taken on somewhat of a parenting role in Claire's life, once it became obvious she very badly needed it. They'd had plenty of talks, Dean and Cas, about trying to guide a troubled kid through their teenage years. (Of course, once Claire had Jody and Dean had made sure Ben and Lisa were safe from him and all the dangers his life brought with it, then the two hunters had been supplementary parents at the best. One stuck with nothing but memories and regrets, the other fulfilling a responsibility born mostly from guilt). But Dean had never asked if Cas actually wanted to be a parent (or even liked it once he'd taken on the part). He'd been eager as hell to help with Claire, but Dean had never asked if that was because he thought he should or if he actually wanted to take on the role.

Watching the two sides of Cas now, having seen Cas walk his younger self through something that had clearly been traumatic (Dean didn't know why Lady Cas was suddenly adamant about never returning to Heaven, but given that Cas had shown her something, Dean could hazard a guess or two (and was, frankly, relieved. Even if that relief came with some guilt)), Dean's opinion on Cas as a father was shifting. He couldn't help but wonder (again, because he was apparently bored out of his mind and not nearly buzzed enough) if Cas had wanted to be a dad, especially after so long among humans.

He'd have made a good one, Dean decided. Maybe an awkward one (for sure. The hunter could just picture the poor guy with an infant. Football hold and eyes so wide they were nothing but rings of white set in his face). He snorted to himself at the image.

Not that Dean could exactly picture a situation in which a baby landed in the angel's lap. He wasn't actually thinking of Cas 'procreating', as

the angel would most definitely call it (Dean woulda called it sowing some angel wings or doing a little cloud jumping. Making baby angels. Doing it like they do on the Divine Channel. …Alright, that last one needed a little work. Regardless: all semi-lude things that would have made the angel blush. Which Dean was only now realizing he would take rather perverse pleasure in. Why did he even know what Cas looked like when he blushed in the first place?) Although, at least in terms of ending up with a baby in the bunker that wasn't somehow his or Sam's direct result of being red-blooded, healthy young men (hey, Dean knew what could very well happen when bumping uglies), they did work in a field that had a lot of accidental death. He supposed weirder things had happened than an angel-turned-almost-human adopting a human orphaned by a monster.

"Dean."

The hunter startled, realizing he'd gotten lost in his thoughts – thoughts of Cas and kids, and wasn't that weird? – and focused back on the present, particularly the trenchcoat-wearing, black-haired, kid-less angel standing in front of him.

Shit, had he been thinking out loud again in his own head? (…Was that even a thing? It was *his* head, damnit.) Cuz those were weird thoughts and he so did not need Cas wondering why he was thinking about the guy adopting little monster babies.

Wait, what? No, that's not what he'd been thinking about-

"Dean," Cas repeated, this time with a fondness in his voice that seemed reserved only for when the hunter was being ridiculous.

"Uh, right. What's up?" Dean sat upright in his chair, glaring ever so much at the angel's overly amused expression. Damnit. The hunter's gaze slid behind him, where Angela – Lady Cas – was now asleep in the library chair, breathing away peacefully.

Damn, how long had he zoned out for?

"I thought you were getting a beer." Cas's eyebrows were pinched downward at his empty hands, glancing at one, then the other, and then raising a questioning eyebrow Dean's way.

"Yeah, uh…kitchen was locked." Dean climbed out of the chair, stretching and popping his back as he did so. But Cas was frowning at him.

"Locked?"

"Yeah. Must be my subconscious or something. Sammy's been kinda on me about drinking since dad died again. Can't blame the kid." Dean walked around Cas, not really noticing how the angel's frown only increased, blue eyes losing focus in a blank sort of way behind Dean's back. The hunter walked over to Angela's body, but didn't touch her. He didn't want to accidentally wake her up after all the work Cas must have done to get her into this healing trance thing (or whatever it was). "Should we get her to a bed or something?"

He turned when Cas didn't answer him right away, but the angel was staring off at something in the distance. Dean followed his gaze, but only saw the library.

"Cas?"

The angel shook his head slightly, eyes coming back to focus on the hunter. Then he held out his arm and Dean looked down to find an ice cold beer gripped in his hand. "This is a dream, Dean. You don't need the kitchen to get a beer."

"You couldn't have mentioned that earlier?" the hunter groused, but he smiled like it was Christmas and swiped the beer with childish joy. He popped the cap using the table, then leaned against the edge of it and took a refreshing, much needed sip. "So what were you two talking about?"

At his glance and slight nod in Lady Cas's direction, Cas glanced down at the sleeping angel as well. "She is having doubts."

"Oh." Dean frowned, then tried not to frown and failed miserably because he'd already been frowning to start with. He lowered the bottle. "About…me? Uh, us, I mean. Me and Sam?"

Real smooth recovery there, Winchester. Real smooth.

The look Cas pinned him with was fond, yet again, and Dean wondered why the hell he was blushing in response to it. "No. Doubts about Heaven. About herself, and what she can be."

"That's…good, isn't it?" Dean hazarded. Doubt is what had eventually led the angel standing in front of him to join Team Free Will. Doubt kinda had to happen for an angel to question orders. Dean needed this Cas to start having those doubts.

"Yes, it is. But it doesn't make it any easier. Or less terrifying."

The hunter winced, realizing he'd stepped right into that. Right, he'd always been pretty terrible at considering Cas's feelings around the whole Apocalypse mess (and, let's be honest, well beyond that, too). Cas was always one of his blindspots, one that Sam had eventually had to sit him down and talk to him about. Dean partially blamed the angel himself for it; how was the hunter supposed to factor in Cas's feelings when the early-days Castiel had insisted he hadn't had any? (And okay, that might have been an excuse for the first year, maybe two years of their friendship, but the other six? Yeah, Dean had just been an ass for the rest of it and he knew it).

"I'm sorry," he said before he could weasel his way out of saying it. It was surprisingly easy to talk yourself out of an apology, no matter how much you knew it needed to be said. Cas raised an eyebrow at him and Dean ducked his head, picking at the label on the beer bottle to avoid that piercing gaze. "I told you she wouldn't lose her home, wouldn't have to leave Heaven this time. That I'd change it, and I…"

Failed. Totally and completely failed. He hadn't even been able to keep that promise for a year, let alone the length of the Apocalypse stretched out in front of them. Seriously, some days Dean wondered why Cas had even bothered sending him back.

"It's not your fault." The angel crossed the distance between them, coming to lean against the edge of the table beside the hunter. He shrugged, which seemed incredibly passive given what Dean was apologizing for. "I don't think there is a version of these events where she could have sided with you and Sam and not leave Heaven because of it. It was never an option, Dean."

The hunter flinched and Cas didn't know if it was from the harsh honesty of his words or the cruelty of pointing out yet another thing Dean was helpless to change. It was, in fact, Dean getting pretty damn tired of making promises he apparently couldn't keep. To Sam, to Cas. To who knows who else.

"It was a choice, one she made willingly," Cas reminded him, trying to soften the blow. The angel leaned over enough to bump his shoulder to Dean's and the hunter smiled half-heartedly at the gesture, less sure about the words that came with it. "One I have no doubt she would make again."

"Yeah?" His immediate response was more bitter sarcasm than a

serious question, but Cas answered it anyway.

"I would have."

It shouldn't have made him feel better. It really shouldn't, because Cas shouldn't be willing to throw himself on top of the grenade that was the Winchester lifestyle again and again and again, and Dean sure as hell shouldn't want him to. Should be able to tell him – her – *them* – not to. But, god help him, Dean did feel better hearing it.

"Perhaps, this time, do not betray that choice by giving up in the future and praying to Michael?" Cas offered, making Dean immediately grimace. There was a smirk on the angel's face to take away the potential cruelty of the words, so Dean tried not to let them dig little burs into his heart and tug. He mostly failed, because he was Dean Winchester; guilt was a friggin' building block to his very soul.

"I won't," he promised, expression solemn and, he hoped, enough to convey just how much he meant those words. He was going to keep making promises, damnit, and he'd find a way to keep them too. "I'll stay the course, no matter where it goes this time around."

Hopefully, that course wouldn't include selling his soul, a trip to Hell, or the need to ever become the Michael Sword because they weren't going to let the Apocalypse get started this time around. But, Time had sure proven herself a cold-hearted bitch, so Dean was now leaving all doors open at this point. At least, he was here in dreamland, where he could almost admit those possibilities (fears) aloud, with the only other person still alive who would understand them.

Cas smiled softly again, an expression that all but screamed, *'I believe in you*' and was way, way too close to chick-flick territory for Dean's comfort. He cleared his throat.

"Uh, so…" he fumbled for a change of topic away from the warm and fuzzies (because there had been entirely *too much* of that going around so far). Dean realized realizing he still had a beer in his hand and used it as both a distraction and a way to stall until his brain decided to reconnect with his tongue. When he lowered the bottle again, he used it to gesture to the sleeping angel. "She gonna be okay?"

Cas glanced over his shoulder at the steadily breathing woman. "She has successfully entered the healing trance. So, she will be in time."

"She, uh…" Dean rubbed a hand through the stubble of his chin, so much shorter in the dreamworld than it had been only minutes ago in

Bobby's guest bedroom. He really needed a shower and a shave in the real world. And a week's worth of sleep, but he figured that was asking too much. "She said it might be a couple of weeks?"

He tried not to sound hopeful (pleading, more like) that Cas would correct that time table to something significantly shorter. It's not that he thought his Cas might know better but…no, maybe that was exactly what he was thinking. Or, at least hoping. His Cas was older and more experienced…right?

"She's badly hurt, Dean," his friend answered, expression full of remorse and regret, but his voice had an edge of scolding.

Dean immediately backtracked, guilt flaring. "I didn't mean-"

"I know," Cas interrupted him with a look. That classic tilt of his head and piercing gaze, arms by his side and trenchcoat stiff like a statue. An awkward nerd angel tax accountant you really didn't want to get on the wrong side of. God, Dean hadn't realized how much he'd missed his friend, even the version of him that was busy giving him a lecture. "I'm not accusing you of anything."

The hunter huffed, looking down at his feet but staring at the bottle in his hand. When he looked back up, there was a smirk in the corner of his mouth full of self-deprecation. "Except maybe a lack of patience, huh?"

Cas smiled that rare smile. The one that had been Dean's first clue, so many years ago, that the angel did, in fact, understand sarcasm. "Maybe that. I know this isn't easy for you."

Dean followed Cas's gaze back to Angela and dropped his hand from his chin to pick at the label on his beer. He'd have it shredded to little bits on the library floor in no time, at this rate. "Yeah, not like I know a thing about this stuff."

The angel raised an eyebrow at him. The one that said he was missing something that was obvious to everyone else in the room (which, at this point, was only Cas. So that wasn't really fair, now was it?). "I meant it isn't easy because you care."

Dean's brain stuttered at his friend's correction. Then, as the words hit home, he found his face flushing from the discomfort of a genuine compliment. Damn. Almost forty and he was still no good at hearing one of those and believing it.

"We should leave her to rest," Castiel spoke softly, and Dean startled at the tone for reasons he could not explain.

"Should we, uh, get her to a bed or something?" They could put her in Cas's room. Dean honestly didn't know if a healing trance needed a bed (well, clearly not, but would it help?) or if they should even still be hanging out in his head. Of course, it had been Cas's – Lady Cas's – idea to bring him into this in the first place, so he couldn't imagine he was hurting things by still being there (again, it was *his* head, damnit).

"It isn't necessary, but it would be the human thing to do." There was something about the way Cas said it, the smile on his lips as he transferred his gaze from the sleeping angel to the human hunter, that had Dean setting down his beer and sliding his arms under Angela's body. Cas grabbed the bottle for him as Dean lifted her out of the chair. He took a sip as he headed towards the dormitory wing, Dean following with the younger angel secure in his arms (trying to ignore the weird way his chest ached happily at this whole thing.)

(Stupid chest. Stupid dreamland. Stupid Dragon Lady getting into his head (*literally* this time) and ending up, repeatedly, bridal style in his arms. He was fireman carrying this woman next time, damnit (no, he wasn't, cuz there wasn't going to be a next time, double damnit).)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A/Ns: Aaaand I had to cut it off there, because *of course* the dream ended up being two chapters. Just this first part of it is almost two chapters long ._. Because of course it is. Did I really think it would be anything else?! (don't answer that)

(ha...ha...ha...it's like we got back-to-back chapters as a reward for our 100th chapter after all, jut in the shape of one chapter! Yaaaaay *head thud* *head thud* *head thud*)

Second A/Ns: I don't know how I feel about this chapter in the end. It was a BEAST to write. A lot of chapters half write themselves, but this one did not lend me a hand AT ALL. It was one of those chapters that I felt I had a lot of different cool ideas but I never got as deep or on point with them as I wanted. So the writing feels…oddly shallow to me. I actually wrote the whole thing twice. The first time I could not keep Chest!Cas from being a morose, depressing mess. The second time I managed a much lighter tone for, oh, about half the chapter and then that morose bastard popped right back up. Oh, and Dean was ALL OVER THE PLACE. Sigh. Apparently this was not meant to be the

light-hearted warm and fuzzy dream conversation, but a depressingly deep and angsty one instead (with warm and fuzzies forced into all the cracks because I'm a stubborn author who refuses to be shoved into a corner by my own characters, darnit!).

The Bunker Key: In the in-between of Henry taking the key in 1958 and showing up in 2013, the key didn't exist on Earth. So Dean's gotta wait until 2013 (and it's Dec 2006 right now). Time for fun facts 1) As you all know, the key is sitting in Bobby Singer's desk right this friggin' minute (because I'm a no good dirty rotten author) but Dean doesn't know that and 2) The British Men of Letters could get them into the bunker at any time because they have a key too (but the boys didn't find out about the BMOL until Season 12, so he doesn't know that's an option either!) and 3) I haven't actually figured out how the key works, because, like…they'd need more than one to keep coming and going from the Bunker as much as they do on the show (and it used to be a whole gaggle of members coming and going). So here's how I'm treating it: The bunker is on magical lock down until the key is used, then it's just normal warding and you can come and go as long as you aren't nixed by the warding (I imagine they added clauses into it for Cas and Jack and Crowley and Rowena at times). If it was just on normal warding level, I think Dean could figure out a way to break in. But since it's on the scary-key-only-no-other-way-in lockdown, Dean's screwed until the key shows up. (Also, I have only watched Season 8 once and my research on the bunker key has been spotty so far, so if I missed how this works in cannon, someone let me know!)

Fun Fact #665: The key will show (back) up before 2013, I swear! Things you gotta remember about your favorite no good dirty rotten author: I'm verbose as f*** and I definitely play the long game XD

(Okay, but, for real. The key's coming back, I promise. I'm gonna say "soon" and you all just have to remember that's a *relative* term in this 600,000 word beast, yeah?)

EileenLeahy: I really liked this character on the show and I was so annoyed when they killed her (yet another cool female character offed way before her time). I also really liked her and Sam as this cute thing that was just maybe getting started (and this, coming from me, who does not like romance. Eeew, romance!) I don't know if she'll come into this story to be honest, but I haven't forgotten about her either :D It would be especially cool for Sam now, since he's learning to sign for Andy. But I have other plans that will probably take this story away from Eileen's direction, so…unclear at the moment whether she'll make it in.

Dean as a Dad: I wanna make this super clear; I thought Dean did a pretty damn good job as a dad to Ben, in spite of going through the toughest year of his life. And I think if he hadn't chickened out and cut ties with them, he would have kept being a pretty good dad. So the narration here saying Dean was a shitty dad is all Dean's opinion of himself.

Cas as a Dad: Is a direct poke at Season 13. Since this is only covering 1-5, it is *veeeery* unlikely that Jack will ever get to make an appearance in this story. But I do try to poke at things now and then, especially when I can't actually include them due to timing or because Dean never lived through Season 13 in this version of events so he doesn't get to reminisce about Cas being a dad.

Reviews: I started getting back to people last night only to realize HOW MANY REVIEWS/COMMENTS we had last chapter. Holy Crap-a-mole. I...didn't even get halfway through *one* of the two sites, haha. I'll keep going tonight (once I get this posted) but I am so so so so happy and honored and ridiculously touched with your guys' outpouring of support, for both this story and my move. Thank you so much!

Up Next: Dean and Cas get to have a chat, one on one. Aaaand...that's...that's all I can tell you cuz it's not written yet *head thud* *facepalm* *head thud*

Chapter 102: Season 2: Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: So I had every intention of getting this chapter up last Sunday/Monday. It was written by mid-Saturday, and all I had to do was edit it. Whelp. Sunday came and went. Monday came and went. I couldn't even get myself to read the first three paragraphs. Dude. Guys. This lockdown business *sucks*. It is seriously messing with my brain. I have all the free time in the world and NO CREATIVITY.

[inhale deep breath]
AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

Quality Warning: *ahem* This chapter is not so different from the last chapter. I think it's a jumbled mess with some excellent ideas that are all tackled shallowly enough to make them less than excellent. Uuuuuuugh. Stupid lockdown. Stupid Brain!

Chapter Warnings: Cas and Dean have their quiet man-on-angel time (…that sounded dirtier than I meant it to…) only it's hardly quiet (…this is getting worse. I swear I didn't intentionally do this…), and by the end Dean's not entirely sure why he wanted man-on-angel time in the first place when all it amounts to are lectures about time, unsatisfying beers, and shocking revelations about Cas's status as a Star Wars Fan.

(….did I mention stupid brain? Stupid muse? Yeah? Okay then. Awesome sauce. You've been warned.)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 69

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean set Angela's body onto the bed in Cas's room. At least, Dean considered it the angel's room. Sure, that title had never specifically been stated. And, okay, maybe they had let the occasional other guest use the room while Cas wasn't around the bunker (it was the only other room they'd bothered to get a modern mattress for, after all),

but it was still *Cas's* room and always would be. Which meant Dean had frowned pretty darn sharply at Cas when the angel hadn't bothered to call it such. He'd only asked if Dean wanted to put Lady Cas in 'the guest room.'

Not 'my room' or 'her room' (hell, Dean would have taken 'our' room, at that point).

Nope. The 'guest' room. Like Cas didn't have a room in his own friggin' house (which was even more ridiculous when you factored in that they weren't even in the bunker, they were in Dean's *head*, where Cas was now a friggin' roommate). So they were left both standing awkwardly in the room, Dean next to the bed staring grumpily at the sleeping angel who was in *her* bed in *her* room, damnit, wondering how exactly to tell her stubborn counterpart that (and make it stick), without hitting chick-flick territory right off the bat.

(The dude had spent *how* many hours in here binging Netflix, and he didn't think the room was his?!)

(And how long living in Dean Sternum Condo, only to apparently think the representation of the bunker (which *he'd* friggin' chosen, not Dean!) wasn't his home!? Now that just pissed Dean off.)

"How is Sam?"

Dean didn't know if Cas somehow knew he was trying to broach a subject he didn't know how to bring up (and only getting angrier and angrier as the silence stretched), or if the angel just had lucky timing. The hunter turned towards his friend to find the angel regarding him with a simple, unfettered expression, the beer bottle still in his hand. His tactic, purposeful or accidental, totally worked. Dean forgot what he was getting all worked up over.

"Yeah, he's…uh, he's good. Real good. Heh, he's so young." Dean couldn't help but smile. It had been a while since they'd had time to just talk (since Dean had dreamt of the angel at all, let alone just to chat about the little things, those small, seemingly inconsequential moments that made everything they were both going through actually worth it). Dean left the side of the bed to walk up to Cas, swiping his beer back and taking a sip of the never-ending beverage (okay, so dreamland had *some* benefits, he supposed). "So, so damn young. Sometimes I forget he's just a kid, actually."

More often than he cared to admit, really. Those were the times, after he realized the Sam he was looking at was, in fact, so much younger

than the one he was used to (and not just in physical age, but all the shit they'd gone through mentally and emotionally, too), that Dean noticed – alarmingly so – how much he missed the brother he knew. The one who knew *him*, more so. It wasn't easy, having ten years on someone: ten years of stories, shared experiences, shared *pain*, only to have them remember none of it. Reflect none of it, in their actions or their words. Sometimes Dean got angry. Or frustrated. Sometimes he would sit in the Impala long after Sam had gone inside to their latest motel room home for the night, and Dean would bang his hand or his head against the steering wheel for lack of a better target to hit (and apologize profusely to his lovely lady, who was *always* there for him and hadn't changed a bit).

Because these days Sam wasn't always Sam. At least, not the Sam Dean expected him to be, the one he braced for. In any given scenario, be it hunting or talking or arguing or just about anything in their lives, Sam might choose to go left or choose to go right. And Dean guessed wrong more than just occasionally. Which was unheard of for Dean Winchester. But Dean, the man from the future stuck ten years in the past, would forget which brother he was trying to predict. He expected Sam to go left (*knew* he would go left, because the brother he knew would have gone *friggin' left)*. So he'd brace for left, shield left, argue for left, and then the kid went right! Because ten-years-ago-Sam often went right. Ten years ago Sam didn't have the experience, the growth, to see that left was the better option, damnit.

And 'right', of course, in any given scenario, was the choice fueled anger. Youth, petulance, foolhardy-ness, stubborn jackassery, or guilt-ridden martyrdom. (In other words, 'right' was everything Dean had ever taught his kid brother, and 'left' was the path of choices Sam finally made on his own over the course of ten years. Only, those ten years *hadn't happened yet*.)

Most of the time, though…. Most of the time, what Dean saw when he looked at his brother was *Sammy*: his kid brother who hadn't broken the world yet. Who hadn't released Lucifer or jumped in the cage with him to save a world that didn't deserve Sam Winchester to begin with. A kid that would never break down from cage scars or spend a year as a soulless robot or…. Or ever live through his brother tricking him into saying yes to an angel just because Dean couldn't let him go.

He missed his Sam, but Dean was going to do everything in his power – *everything* – to make sure that version of his brother never existed this time around.

(There was probably something to grieve there. Something worth mourning the loss of. But Dean didn't have time for either. He never would, not if he was going to prevent it all from happening in the first place.)

The older Winchester sighed, speaking out loud almost unintentionally, "I want to save him, Cas."

"You will."

The angel's swift, ever-unwavering faith was almost too much for Dean (always too much for Dean). The hunter became immediately wary of the conversation they were about to get into that had absolutely not been his intention (it never was. When he finally did open up, he almost always regretted it because no matter how 'healthy' opening up was (according to his brother) it *always* ended the same way: with a conversation that just demanded *more* opening up, damnit). Already feeling the crawl beneath his skin that always came with these chats (definitely an evolutionary defense mechanism, warning him of the incoming 'feels'), Dean decided to run for it. Casually, of course (because he wasn't actually running away. That would be cowardly (and he was no coward (except yes, yes he absolutely was when it came time for emotional Show and Tell))). He set the beer down on the dresser, no longer having an appetite for it, and headed out of Cas's room, leaving the sleeping Lady Cas behind on the bed. The conscious angel followed him, partially closing the door behind him as he entered the hall.

Dean was heading towards the library, forced calm in every step (because, again, he *wasn't* running away from anything), and ignored the angel following behind until Cas's hand landed on his arm. Those blue eyes were as intense as always, despite Dean searching for something – anything – other than the steadfast support he saw there.

"You *will*, Dean."

The hunter didn't know which he wanted to do more: roll his eyes, huff in frustration, or shake the angel off. But he didn't do any of those things (and who knew why not. Not Dean, that's for sure). He just stood there, awkwardly in the middle of the hall, glaring down at his best friend.

"Without ending the world?" he bit back, because, really, *that* was the conversation they ought to be having if they were going to have one at all. The one where Cas told him how to keep that innocent light in

his little brother's eyes without getting his (new best?) angelic friend killed or starting the Apocalypse doing it. Because he may have promised Sam – he'd *promised* him – that come the worst, come that dreaded day in Cold Oak where he held his dying brother in his arms, Dean wouldn't save him after the fact. But, most days…Dean didn't know if he could even keep that promise. He'd never managed to before, even if he had been trying in recent years.

"You're working on it," came the patient (and far-too-sympathetic-for-the-current-discussion) response. Cas was looking at him like he believed it, too. "Give yourself some credit, Dean."

The hunter dropped his gaze to the angel's hand, still curled around his forearm. Cas hadn't let go yet. Dean swallowed roughly, something tight and painful suddenly in his throat as the same arm throbbed in response, only a foot higher up where a hand-shaped scar used to be. Green eyes reluctantly met blue.

"Why'd you send me back, Cas?"

That hand pulled away – the loss of body heat leaving a stark absence in its wake that Dean wanted to shake off like droplets of water clinging to his skin – but Cas's ocean eyes stayed locked on his.

"For hope."

"Because you think I can change it." The derision in his voice set Cas's teeth on edge. Dean could tell by the way the angel clenched his jaw, and Dean found himself mirroring the movement.

"You can change it," Cas repeating what he'd already said in different words. "You already *have*."

"One person isn't enough!"

Even if that one person was Sam's whole world. Even if Jess made all the difference, he'd still *lost* her, whether or not she'd gotten to keep her life.

In front of him, Cas looked like he wanted to start tugging on his own hair. That, or hit the stubborn hunter in front of him. Dean jutted his chin out, practically asking the guy to do it. But the angel, for all that his face had eventually learned to show emotion, he still hadn't quite embraced the physicality of true expression.

"What makes you think it's been only one?"

Dean's brain sputtered for a minute, trying automatically to defend his point by thinking back through the events of the last year. Data gathering, Sam would have called it. Dean shook his head before he got further than a couple hunts because that wasn't the point, damnit. The numbers weren't the *point*. "It doesn't matter how many it has or hasn't been, it's still not enough!"

"Because you expect too much of yourself, Dean!" The angel's voice raised to match the volume and irritation of the human's.

"You wouldn't have sent me back if I couldn't do it, Cas!" Dean struck Cas in the shoulder with the heel of his palm. Not enough to hurt, hardly enough to even move the angel if he didn't want to be moved, but enough to escalate what was quickly becoming a yelling match.

"You *are* doing it!" Cas rolled his eyes in the same circle the conversation was going in.

Dean seemed to pick up on that too and threw his arms out, yelling, "Why are we yelling!?"

The abrupt question, shouted in nothing short of an outdoor voice at full volume and accompanied by agitated, waving arms, drew the angel up short. Cas looked temporarily affronted by it, before he ducked his head and huffed.

"You started it," he muttered grumpily, but there was no heat left in his words.

Dean pulled his head back to disagree (he had *not*-) only to realize Cas was…well, okay, he wasn't *wrong*. That didn't make him *right*, of course. But he wasn't entirely wrong. Dean glanced guiltily. Fine, so he'd mostly started it. The hunter had been itching for a fight, though he couldn't say why. Well, that wasn't completely true, either. Dean knew why; it had been the month from hell, between the damn Croats he'd never thought he'd have to fight off again, to Andy going missing and showing up half dead (surviving the kind of nightmare *no one* should ever live through), to Gordon Fucking Walker taking Dean out and trying to do the same to Sammy.

So he was a little worked up, alright? Which, apparently in dreamland, meant shouting in circles at his best friend. (Not that he'd cop to it, of course. He might be willing to own up to it in his head, but out loud, Cas definitely started this. Dean just finished it. Yeah, he was going with that.)

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. "Yeah, well, according to Sam, I do that."

(Okay, fine, maybe he'd cop to it a little. This was Cas, after all. And they *were* in his head.)

"Dean."

"Can we just drop it, Cas?"

"*Dean*." The angel – *this* angel, who so rarely pulled out the Warrior of God voice anymore – was definitely forcing the issue. Internally, the human allowed himself an irritated huff and decided if they were having this conversation, they definitely weren't having it in the friggin' hallway. But Cas grabbed his arm, fingers folding right over the same spot as before so he couldn't run away this time.

(*Excuse* you. He had not been runningaway. It was just…the library was a way better place for this sort of thing. Plus, there was an angel sleeping half a door away, alright?)

"Come on, man. We're gonna wake the other you up."

(It was a weak excuse and Dean knew it. At best, it would only stall the conversation, not stop it from happening in the first place. And Dean really wanted the latter. He didn't want to hear his best friend tell him he was doing everything he could. Because everything he could wasn't proving to be enough, and Dean didn't know what else to do, what else he could give.)

"You cannot wake an angel from a healing trance with raised voices." Oh good, the Warrior of God voice was now *exasperated*. That's what happened to the might and power of an angel when you subjected it to eight years of Dean Winchester. Unfortunately for Dean, that also meant this was the version of Cas knew all his tricks. Knew him well enough to know what he was trying to do and wouldn't let him get away with any of it. He didn't let Dean push any further, distract him with a pointless argument about what *could* wake an angel from a healing trance then. Nope, this angel just plowed right on into that conversation they were apparently having. "Dean, I wouldn't have sent you back if there wasn't hope. You are doing good."

"But?" Dean turned fully into him, dropping his arms in the same way he wanted to drop this topic, but Cas's grip on his skin remained. There hadn't been a 'but' to Cas's words, but Dean knew it existed all the same. It might be outside of what the angel was willing to put on

his shoulders, but it was there (it was the weight of the world. A weight he and Sam had insisted, on numerous occasions, wasn't Dean's to bare, at least not alone. But they just didn't get it). "It's not enough."

Cas huffed again, fighting against the irritation that was dealing with the unmovable wall of Winchester Martyrdom that had ever existed in time and space. "It will be. It has to be, Dean. You need to trust in that. And stop overthinking it."

The hunter just snorted, a clear indication of what he thought about that. The angel pinned him with a cautionary look.

"Some things can't change, Dean. You wouldn't want them to."

He'd heard that before, and he was *sick* of it.

"Like my dad?"

Cas released his arm, and this time Dean felt like a jerk about it. Cuz that hadn't completely been fair. John's death this time around wasn't on Cas; it was on Dean. It would always be on Dean.

Those blue eyes dropped away regardless, looking a little into the past and a lot into the floorboards. Apparently Dean wasn't the only one harboring guilt about repeated events (and yeah, now he definitely felt like a jerk). "I don't know. Maybe."

The hunter fought to keep his arms at his side, itching to come up and cross over his chest once more, to brood and be angry and *right* (because he wasn't wrong, damnit, and he deserved to be angry, he was *right* to be angry, regardless of what the guilt was saying). "And Sammy? Drinking demon blood, dying at Cold Oak? Selling my soul and breaking the first damn seal! Are those things that can't be changed, too, huh?"

Dean pressed forward with his bitterness, for once being the one to invade the angel's personal space. It got Cas to look back up at him, at least. If he couldn't be defensive with his body language, than he'd be friggin offensive. Only the move didn't carry nearly as much weight as Dean had intended. With Cas so close and his eyes wavering with levels of misery and guilt equal to what Dean was feeling inside (had been feeling for months, no matter how far down he shoved that shit), it just felt stupidly intimate instead of intimidating (god friggin' damnit).

The angel shook his head, gaze never leaving his charge's. "I don't

know, Dean. I hope not. I hope you can change them, but if you can't…"

"If I can't, then I'm going to Hell again and the world is *screwed*." Which wasn't true, because Dean *had* promised his brother he wouldn't do that. No matter what. (But also, *yeah right*. They were so friggin' screwed.) It didn't matter, though, because it felt good to be angry, so Dean was going to be angry. He backed away from the angel so he had room to run a frustrated hand over his scalp without elbowing his friend in the face doing it (he wasn't *that* angry. Yet.) "That's just *great*, Cas."

"Dean, Time is…a mess." The human snorted as Cas waved his hand around helplessly, at a loss for a better word. (Well…he wasn't wrong.) "In some places, at some times, and in some cases, there are what you could call anchor points."

"Anchor points?" Dean didn't have a clue what those were, but what the hell did Cas mean *some times* in *some cases*. What the hell, was Time some sort of fluid, shapeshifting bitch? It either was, or it wasn't, damnit. It was *time,* not a friggin rhyming riddle on a popsicle stick!

"Yes. Things that can't be…that are very difficult to change. Events that have such tremendous impact on other things, or were created by other such events, that they're too deeply rooted in the timeline to ever truly change. Not without pretty much destroying everything else." Cas shrugged kind of hopelessly and started walking. He passed Dean, headed for the library. Since that was where the hunter had wanted to go all along, he followed without resistance. "These events can be obvious – like the Apocalypse-"

"Thought we were trying to change that, Cas," Dean all but growled as took the couple of stairs up into the much larger, brighter lit Library.

"-or smaller, innocuous even. Things you wouldn't realize hold any significance in the timeline." Cas ignored his interruption (as he often did when Dean was being little more than petty or grouchy in an argument he wasn't winning or didn't want to hear in the first place), and settled into one of the chairs by the main table. He looked tired, enough so that Dean had to fight back a fresh wave of guilt (and worry) with fierce, manly fisticuffs. "What events are or aren't anchor points are hard to predict, because we do not view things that happen, or the order they happen, as Time does."

"That doesn't make any friggin' sense, man." Even as he said it, Dean

set aside his utter and complete discomfort with dreamland (seriously, it gave him the willies. Too close to witchcraft and hoodoo only with all the feels of a rom-com) and imagined two beers in hand. When cold, condensation-slick glass filled his hand out of seemingly nowhere, he held one out to Cas. An apology for all the yelling, he supposed (a non-verbal apology, because let's be honest, all the participants here knew that wasn't gonna happen).

The angel took it with a weak smile, then had himself a sip as Dean partook of his own.

"It's complicated, Dean." Again the hunter snorted, nearly missing inhaling beer foam down the wrong pipe. Yeah, Cas could say that again. And again, and again, and *again*. "Time is like…the earth beneath an overgrown garden. Thousands up on thousands of intermingled root systems that anchor each other into the ground."

Dean frowned, realizing where Cas was going with this and his 'anchor points'. Which was unfortunate, because the hunter didn't really want to hear it, even if he might need to.

(Dean got the weirdest sensation, sitting there sipping at his beer, being lectured about how time worked through convoluted and mostly useless analogies, that he'd done this all before. It was annoying, regardless of how familiar he was with déjà vu by now.)

"In some cases, you can pull a single plant from the garden, roots and all, and nothing else is affected. Other times, it's quite obvious by the proximity of two plants that their roots will be entangled and it will be a battle to pull one out and not damage the other. But the most common plant in this garden is the one that seemingly has no relation to any other, but whose roots are tangled with a dozen plants beneath the dirt."

"What's your point, Cas?" Dean growled low, fingers tight around the cold bottle in his hand. Because it *sounded* like his angel was telling him this couldn't be done. That he couldn't change shit. Damnit, why did they always circle back to this? Cas himself had said he wouldn't have sent Dean back if there wasn't a chance. So why was he sitting there telling him there wasn't one at all?

"Most of the time, it's very difficult to look at a single event and predict how wide its impact is beneath the surface. What other events it entangles." The angel shrugged again, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, back and shoulders hunched, picking idly at the

paper label like only the Winchesters could have taught him to do. "My point, Dean, is that you're trying to tackle this like a hunt and it isn't. It's *Time*."

"What?" He pulled his head back, frown firmly in place, and tried to decide if he was insulted or just confused.

"Changing the timeline isn't going to be as simple as looking for clues, finding the points that line up in the lore, and then taking the fight to the monster." Cas set his beer onto the library table, barely drunk (and Dean was definitely insulted. Hunting wasn't *simple*, damnit. It was hard friggin' *work*.) "What you're trying to do – what Time itself is – is unpredictable. You're not going to know which plants to pull up, which events to change, alright? And I can't tell you, because I don't know either. Almost no on in the cosmos does."

"Except God." Dean suddenly bit out, angrily realizing exactly where he'd had this conversation before. (Goddamnit!)

"Yes, well, I believe you tried that already," Cas snorted right back. Dean rolled his eyes but, yet again, the angel wasn't *wrong*. "Time would know as well, but I doubt she'd be willing to help us considering we're actively fighting against her will."

Dean skipped right over the part where they were talking about time like an actual sentient identity (because, at this point, nothing would surprise Dean, but that didn't mean he wanted to deal with it. Sometimes, ignorance was friggin' bliss and no one could tell him otherwise). "I can't just stumble around blindly and expect to avert an Apocalypse! It doesn't work that way!"

He'd definitely had this conversation before, damnit!

"Yes, it does, Dean. Because you *will* be changing things. You already *are*." Cas stared up at him from his hunched position, still leaning on his knees. His eyes looked damn near pleading and his human charge found himself swallowing roughly past that look. "It's the only way. Stop looking for order, stop trying to control every event and outcome. Listen to your brother and pick your battles."

The hunter turned away, both to avoid those stupid eyes as well as his stupid, faithful friend who never seemed to give up on him or, in this case, his conviction that Dean could actually do this. Like Dean friggin' Winchester could do anything. Like he'd hung the god damn stars in the sky.

His thoughts flickered briefly to Angela's words, back in the Impala on the side of a Lafayette highway, and Dean was inexplicably stricken by the reminder. He ground his teeth and forcibly pushed the thought away. "Alright. Fine. What battle?"

When he turned back to the angel, Cas was giving him another exasperated look, like he knew Dean was just being purposefully obtuse because he didn't like what he was hearing and didn't want to hear (or think about it) any more. "Lilith, Dean. Your Castiel already told you as much."

"She's not *my* Castiel," Dean argued back immediately, but by the look his Cas gave him, the angel knew he was being petty at that point.

"Regardless of angel-human ownership here-" And oh, did Cas get a glare for that one- "Lilith is the key to averting the Apocalypse without upsetting the timeline too greatly. Every other event is too entangled in the others. Sams' death, your soul deal, breaking the first seal. They'll all create a thousand unpredictable ripples and you'll drown trying to fight them all. But if we kill Lilith first-"

"Then none of it matters. The final seal's gone, there's no point in getting the rest of the party set up when the main event is toast."

Cas huffed, whether in wry amusement or something along the lines of *'somebody please save me from the hopelessness of humans, why do I even bother?'* was really anyone's guess (Dean was pretty sure he knew). "It's possible Hell could form a new final seal, but it would take centuries to do so."

The earth would be safe, at least for as long as it was the Winchester's job to protect it. Some poor sap a couple centuries down the line could deal with the fallout for their Apocalypse raincheck.

"So we gotta kill Lilith as soon as she's topside. Before the first seal breaks."

Which sounded strange coming out of his own mouth, giving that he would be the one to break it and given what it would take to break it. Dean shivered and ran a hand over his mouth to hide the tremble, further burying it down with a long swig of beer.

"Yes, and if you don't want to damage every other plant in the garden doing it, maybe don't make it look like you're tackling the giant Apocalypse Tree in the center."

Dean so did not appreciate circling back to that stupid analogy (what was it with everyone trying to explain time with analogies? It was *time*. It just…*was*, alright?!) but at least this Cas wasn't obsessed with friggin' air quotes while he did it.

"So…we pull up a bunch of smaller plants, then. Uh…wipe out some of the more minor shit that's going to feed- er, that's tangled in the… uh…Lilith plant."

Yeah, this sure as shit wasn't working for him.

The angel's exasperation definitely took on a fond look and Dean scowled if only to beat back the heat rising to his cheeks (no, no, no, he was not blushing. Dean Winchester did not *blush*. It was just more furious, furious rage, damnit).

"Take her out for a reason other than stopping the Apocalypse," Cas translated.

Dean's scowl turned genuine, tinged with incomprehension. The other Cas – Lady Cas – had said the same thing back at Bobby's house, when they'd first brought her up to speed. But they'd never gotten to the 'how' of that plan. The angel had merely said she'd work on it and, well…a lot had happened in the meantime. He doubted she'd had much planning time.

Not to mention, Lilith wasn't even topside, yet. And outside of Cas and her angel blade, they didn't have a way to kill Lucifer's first born, anyway.

(And, also, there was that whole idea where he just wouldn't let Sammy die this time, so there'd be no point in selling his soul, so no Apocalypse or first or last seals to even bother with and therefore Lilith and her entire posy could just fuck off for all he cared. Personally, that was still Dean's go-to plan: Don't Let Sammy Die. Then it wouldn't matter that everyone and their mother doubted whether or not he could keep himself from making a deal to save Sammy, cuz Sammy wouldn't *need* saving. See? Bullet proof plan, right there.)

"A reason like what?" he asked, almost cautiously. It was possible Cas had a plan his younger counterpart hadn't come up with yet. Sitting in a Dean Sternum Condo with nothing to do, he had a lot more time on his hands (at least when he was 'stable'. Sometimes this Cas wasn't always as present as he had been so far today). Plus, he had a lot more knowledge of future events to work with. Probably made, uh, pruning that whole garden thing easier, or something.

The angel eyed him for a moment, like he was sizing him up. Dean narrowed his eyes in return, immediately wary of what was coming next. "Like freeing a contract she's holding, Dean."

And rightly so, apparently.

"Oh, come on!" Dean had to resist chucking the bottle in his hand at the nearest wall. Waste of good beer, he told himself (even if it was Dreamland beer and he could just replace it). "All any of you have said since I got back to this time was not to sell my soul, damnit. Now you're telling me to do it just so we can take Lilith out *before* I go to hell and break the first seal!"

"Hardly." Cas rolled his eyes about as hard as Dean had, pinning him with that scary ass angel look that told him to shut up and stop being stupid before he got himself smote. "You're not the only contract she held in those days."

Dean frowned sharply at the angel. His first thought (being, *'What the hell?'*) was quickly overrun by his second thought (*'Who else did we know back then that-'*) and then his brain short-circuited and green eyes went wide.

"Bela."

Bela freaking Talbot.

God, what a pain in his ass she had been. But, admittedly, quite an interesting pain. And none too hard on the eyes, either. Dean honestly couldn't tell if he was looking forward to or dreading running into that woman again.

…Little bit of column A, little bit o' column B, probably.

"Why can't we just stop the hellgate from ever opening?" was what came out of his mouth instead of anything remotely in line with Cas's plan. Because his plan was stupid. They hadn't managed to kill Lilith the first time around until she'd *let* them. Yeah, Dean had ten years more experience and was a badass (translation: terrifying, borderline serial killer that Hell should be a lot more afraid of this time around, but, ya know, *details*), but even he had his limits. Lilith was Lucifer's first born; she was more powerful than *Abaddon*, and Dean didn't want to think about the lengths he'd gone to in order to defeat a Knight of Hell. (He did *not* slide a hand up and over his arm, covering the clear, unblemished skin of his right forearm.) "If Lilith can't get topside, then there's no last seal, no Apocalypse."

In addition to his own promise that he wouldn't sell his soul, well, shit, they'd be golden. Double golden.

(Only he knew, he *knew*, it would never be that easy.)

"It's not that easy, Dean."

Copy cat. (Copy Cas. Heh. Get it? See what he did there? Copy-nevermind, you get it.)

"There are hundreds of hellgates and Team Free Will, no matter how it's expanding, doesn't have the resources to guard them all. Regardless of whether or not Sam is killed or you sell your soul, Lilith will make it to Earth." Cas sighed, dropping the *'judgmental teacher dealing with his most difficult kid in class'* look and going back to his hunched shoulders and bowed back. "That's kind of my point, Dean. Trying to avert your soul-deal, or stop Sam from dying, or a hellgate from opening is far more complicated than killing Lilith."

The hunter gave him a look that clearly questioned whether he had his head on straight. (This was *Lilith.* Lucifer's first born they were talking about here. Had he mentioned they hadn't *been* able to kill her first time around until she wanted them to?) The angel ignored it.

"Trying to stop any one of those things would mean covering every possible way they could go down. It's pure defense, and it just won't work. You need to go on the offense."

Dean heard the words, even recognized the logic in them somewhere deep down inside his brain, but he was busy focusing on the one small, little, infinitesimal detail. One little detail that had turned his entire chest, his *soul*, to ice. "Cas…are you saying I'm going to sell my soul again? That that's- that's a…a what? An *anchor point*?"

Because- because up until that point, *he* hadn't been planning on it. Yes, everyone seemed to doubt his ability not to sell his soul if it meant saving Sam (even Dean himself, were he being honest). And yes, not doing that was going to be the damn hardest decision of his life (which is why Plan A was: Don't Let Sammy Die In The First Place). But if Cas was talking about it like it was inevitable, like selling his soul as inevitable, then…then….

(Only he knew. He'd always known, he'd just never wanted to know that he knew. Hell would get their way; they were always going to get their way. It was only a matter of leverage. If it Sam alone wasn't enough, then it would be Sam and Bobby. Then Sam and Bobby and

Andy. If Dean wasn't broken by that point, it would be Ellen and Jo and the whole damn Roadhouse. How many bodies would Dean let pile up beside his brother's before he did what they wanted? And if he knew that was going to be the end result, then what was the point of letting those bodies pile up to start with? Sam would hit the ground, cold and grey, and Dean, seeing the whole future painted out before him in a pile of people he loved, would sell his soul just to keep it from happening.)

Fuck. *Fuck!*

He didn't- he wasn't- …Dean didn't actually know if he had another forty years in the Pit in him. If he could survive it. He'd joked and he'd put on that same brave face as he had the first time around, but Dean hadn't actually thought it would come to that. He wasn't going to let it come to that. Except…maybe he didn't have a choice. IN which case…

God, he was *screwed.* The world was screwed. He didn't have forty years in him. He just didn't. There was a lot less of him left now, and what was left was shattered and broken, held together by duct tape, guilt, and a little bit of familial love that would mean damn next to nothing down in the Pit.

It wouldn't be enough to see him through to the other side this time. Not a second time.

"*No,*" Cas answered immediately, firm and forceful despite the eternity that could exist in a single second when it came to Dean's spiraling thoughts and what was quickly amounting to an anxiety attack. "That is not a guarantee. I promise, Dean. But…if Lilith is allowed to live, the odds of Hell claiming its Righteous Man for the Pit do increase. Um…a lot."

Which was Cas's way of saying no, it wasn't a guarantee, but it was really, really, really, really likely.

Dean swallowed roughly. Great. Great! So now they had to kill Lilith *or* he was going to be dragged back down as hellhound food. No pressure there, at all.

(*Fuck fuckity fuck fuck!*)

Dean didn't want to think of forty more years in the pit, so he didn't. "Okay, so we kill Lilith as soon as she's topside. Only, the hellgate opened *after* I sold my soul the first time, Cas."

"That doesn't mean it will happen in the same order this time, Dean."

Which made…no frigign' sense when he wasn't allowed to change anything, but hey, nothing did anymore, so at least that was familiar territory (yeah, right).

"Great. So, do we just open the hellgate ourselves?" After all, the sooner Lilith was topside, the sooner they could kill her and de-rail the entire Apocalypse (including his soul deal) apparently. And, at least she already had Bela's contract, considering she'd made her deal when she was a child. Which meant all they needed now was the Colt or Ruby's knife.

Which…was a problem (and also hadn't worked all that well for them the first time, *remember?*)

"Or do we not fight Azazel when he goes for it?" Dean reasoned out loud, since it was the Yellow Eyed bastard who had the gun right now, and short of trying to bribe Crowley into getting it for them (which… yeah right, there probably wasn't enough gold in China to get that bastard to do anything so risky), they had no way of getting it except to wait for Yellow Eyes to show up with it. Of course, Azazel hadn't gone for Fossil Butte until after he'd had Sammy iced and guaranteed Hell its Righteous Man.

(Again, how exactly were they going to change that this time around? Cas wasn't actually answering *any* of Dean's questions, here and the circles were just giving him a headache.)

"No. You would never let the gate just open if you didn't know the future." The angel shook his head, and Dean kind of wanted to hit him for how calm he was. Did he not see that this was *insane* and *totally hopeless*? "It's best to act as you would if you don't know what will happen next."

"Except for when I'm trying to change it," Dean bit out caustically, because different versions of this angel kept telling him that and it *didn't make any damn sense*. He couldn't change anything if he acted the same exact way as last time. Couldn't do anything different if he *didn't do anything different*! How did they not see that?!

Cas shrugged, and this time Dean wanted to pull his hair out or punch his best friend in the face. He settled for draining his beer, which didn't do much to make him feel better at all when it immediately refilled itself. He glared down at the thing like he might just take his anger out on it instead.

"That's also kind of the point, Dean." The angel reached over to his forgotten beverage, passing it to Dean in exchange for his bottle, like Cas was somehow saving the beer from certain death. Like they were in the real world and Dean had drained his beer in exchange for another. Like…like Cas had known he'd needed some sort of normalcy right now. Which was really friggin' thoughtful, Den supposed, fidgety with the realization and the feels that came with it. Damnit.

Cas set Dean's beer down on the table and Dean took a sip from Cas's, frowning around the lip of the bottle. "You need to change it without acting any differently than you would if you didn't know what was coming and weren't trying to change it."

"How- *How* does that make any sense, Cas?" Dean threw his arms out to the side, beer and all, and was lucky when he didn't slosh the nearly full bottle all over the floor. Cas sent him an admonishing look, the one that said he wasn't thinking hard enough. He hated that look. It was like Sam was here and the two of them were tag-teaming him, all in one little look.

"Would you save Bela Talbot if you didn't know what was coming? Would you try to kill Lilith to free her from her contract, not knowing what Lilith's death might also save?"

Dean stilled, staring almost dumbly at his friend. That… Yeah, he would. He'd offered to do just that, once upon a million years ago, but by then it had been too late. There hadn't been time, but now…now there was. And Dean was starting to see what the angel – both angels – were talking about.

Okay, so there might be some wiggle room in the way he responded to events (if he was trying to respond in the 'same way' as last time). He could still do what needed to be done to change the future, but only if he could make it look like that wasn't what he was trying to do at all.

Great, it was technically possible but god, what a friggin' headache.

Dean drained Cas's beer too, handing it back to him (rather needlessly. He could set the bottle on the table just as easily as the angel could) even as it refilled itself. He'd had his fill of never-ending beer. Today, it just didn't have the same satisfaction as finishing one off. "How the hell am I supposed to do this without you, man? Don't suppose we could work on getting communication going between us that doesn'trequire the two of us being passed out? Cuz that's gonna make things difficult and I tried policing my actions and thinking every little

step through the first couple months here. It did *not* go well."

Although he said it mostly in jest (a bitter, self-deprecating, only-half joking sort of jest), Dean's grin dropped the second he realized Cas was looking at him with the kind of look that meant absolutely no good ever.

"Cas?" It was a warning tone. A warning that the angel better speak up pretty damn fast about what that look was about, and one that also said that look better be about abso-friggin-lutely *nothing at all*.

"You need to trust yourself more, Dean," the angel repeated without answering that warning in the slightest. "And stop overthinking it."

"*Cas*." Dean stepped up the warning as he stepped up to the angel, who lifted his head from his seated position to stare up at the hunter less than a foot in front of him.

Those blue eyes stayed locked on his, but eventually the angel sighed and Dean got the distinct impression of him looking away, even if his gaze never shifted. "I…may not always be here, Dean."

"What?" Dean blinked at him. And then he got angry. *"What*? The hell are you talking about, Cas?"

Cas finally dropped his gaze and Dean realized he was less than a foot from the guy and most definitely looming. Angrily, he flopped down into the chair next to Cas, eyes never leaving the angel who glanced at him but didn't hold his gaze.

"Eventually, this…*afterimage* will fade out."

His friend gestured almost offhandedly at himself, like he was nothing but an afterthought and Dean felt his blood boil. Not just at his friend casually referring to himself as a- a- what? A shadow? The human was freakin' sick of hearing people call the angel that. But also, to hear Cas (*again*) sound so- so- so *calm* about his own demise. It just- it *pissed* him off, is what it did.

"No." Dean shook his head, causing the angel to give him the side-eye for thinking he could change facts with a little adamancy and a whole lot of stubborn. But Dean had done more with a hell of a lot less. "No. I know enough about angels and grace to know you're like a nuclear power plant. You're self-sustaining or, you know, whatever."

The look got worse because Cas added a huff and some of that fond

exasperation into the mix. Dean was really starting to detest that combo. "Self-sustaining merely means you produce more or equal to the amount of energy you use, Dean."

Oh, good. There was that *Warrior-of-God-Eight-Years-After-Dealing-with-Dean-Winchester-so-Now-He's-a-Warrior-Who-Lectures-Like-a-Preschool-Teacher-Instead*. Dean sure hadn't missed *that* version of Cas.

"So?"

"*So*," Cas mimicked, nailing the impertinence perfectly, "that sliver in your chest is not producing more grace than it took to keep you alive in the hospital in Michigan, or aid Castiel in exorcising Azazel."

"Wait, what?" Dean pulled his head back, full frown in place as the words hit home. They- they'd been *killing* him doing those things? Granted, Dean had kind of already thought they'd killed him once, after Rivergrove, but Lady Cas had very clearly said that only an angel could kill another angel. Which meant Chest Cas would be *fine*. Was fine. Would *stay* fine, damnit.

"It's possible the power Castiel drew from me in Rivergrove has triggered a…end process of sorts." He said it casually. Casually like they were talking about the batting average of the New York Yankee's weakest player. Not that Dean knew anything about baseball. Or New York.

"Then friggin' reverse it!" the hunter yelled in retaliation, having absolutely none of this. He wasn't losing Cas after he'd just spent a week thinking the dude was already dead. He *wasn't*.

"It can't be reversed, Dean." His angel eyed him, still way too fucking calm.

"Then stop using your grace, damnit!"

The angel didn't say as much, but he was very certain that was the one thing Dean could ask of him that he simply couldn't agree to. Not if it meant saving Dean. Saving the people he loved. And the hunter could see it in his eyes.

"Come on, man, I can't…I can't lose you."

"If I am fading, which I believe I am, the process will still take time. Years, possibly." Cas tried for a smile, but it was weak and they both knew it. The words were supposed to be a comfort, but all Dean was

hearing was that he was going to lose his friend. *Again*. (*'Always'* a caustic voice whispered in his ear, bitter and dark and sounding like the Mark and a Damned soul all in one.) "I will stay for as long as I can, Dean, but…I'm hardly myself most days. That will get worse. Eventually, I won't be much help to you."

"Doesn't matter," Dean insisted adamantly. "I don't need you to help, Cas, I just…I…"

Dean hesitated for only a moment before he reached out. His initial aim was for Cas's hand, dangling next to his knees, but he aborted at the last moment and curled his fingers around Cas's forearm. The angel glanced down at the hand, smiling warmly at the contact, and Dean found himself swallowing through a giant lump in his throat.

"I need you, okay?" The words were like razor blades being pulled up through that lump and out his mouth, leaving nothing but wreckage behind. Why was just telling someone how he felt so damn hard? This was *Cas*, damnit. He deserved to know he was lo- needed, wanted. "I can't do this without you, Cas."

Those blue, blue eyes slid away from him, looking over his shoulder to the dormitory wing they'd left behind what already felt like a lifetime ago. Then that intense gaze slid back to focus solely on his charge. "You have me, Dean."

The other Cas. He was talking about the Castiel sleeping it off in the dormitory wing. Dean swallowed roughly again, for entirely different reasons, and slowly withdrew his hand from his friend's arm.

"She's not you," he muttered, not quite able to meet his eyes as he said it and feeling guilty as hell about it.

Because she wasn't. She was…she was fine, she was good, and Dean was glad to have her on their side. He knew they couldn't do this without the angel. But she wasn't *his* angel. She wasn't the Cas he knew, had gone through Hell with (had been pulled out of Hell *by*). And he didn't want to trade one for the other.

He knew it was selfish, but he wanted – he *needed* – both of them.

He needed the physical angel who would stand by his side, who would choose humanity over her home, her family, and everything she'd ever been told, everything she ever knew. He needed that loyalty, that stalwart support. That friendship.

But he needed his Cas, too. The one that knew him, the one that knew when to pull his head out of his ass and tell him he was being an idiot. Sam was good at that, but Dean didn't always listen to his brother. For some reason, the older Winchester had a better track record of actually hearing it when his angel said it in the same words. It might be because this was the same angel who'd told him to start respecting him or he'd get his ass thrown back in Hell. More likely, though, it was because Dean knew it was Cas who'd come charging in after him when he royally screwed up against their advice, the angel who'd end up pulling both him and Sam out of the fire (because of course Sam would be right there next to him), and likely the angel who'd come out injured because of it.

(Dude…that pattern sucked. Dean made a mental note to work on that with Lady Cas.)

"Not yet," Cas responded quietly, voice even in that gravelly way that usually spoke of things Dean wasn't gonna want to hear. "Maybe not ever. But she's still me. Give her time."

The hunter's gut clenched, realizing for the first time (in words, at least. He suspected he'd known for a while and didn't know how to put that tense feeling in his stomach into something identifiable), that Cas was right. If he waited, if he gave it time and kept doing what he was doing, if he stuck to the timeline (even an accelerated one), than he would have that version of his Cas back, or one that was pretty close to it. Maybe not the eight-years-and-how-many-ends-of-the-world-later friendship he had with the angel sitting next to him, but it would still be close. It would be the apocalypse version, this time without all of the ups and downs, betrayal and lies and mistakes they'd both made afterwards.

Maybe…it wouldn't be so bad not to have those other things. Yes, what they'd gone through together in Purgatory, what Cas had suffered under Naomi and Metatron, what Sam had suffered under Cas's hand… Maybe they could skip all that this time, and Dean could still have his friend. The one he needed, even if it wasn't the one he already had.

Somehow, Dean doubted he'd get all of it, simple and neat and tied up with a bow. He'd always been a selfish bastard when it came to Castiel. That hadn't changed with a ten year time jump.

"I…I shouldn't want her to," Dean finally admitted, the words dragged out of his mouth like sandpaper over a bed of tacky glue. "I shouldn't

want her to be you."

Cas stared at him for a moment and was quiet for even longer. In an abstract way, the angel could appreciate his friend recognizing the hardships he had faced over their years together. Better late than never, he knew, and Dean had done a lot of reflection in this past year, forging his way in another time, much of those months spent thinking he was alone. However, more than anything, Castiel wished he could convey how little those hardships mattered, in the scheme of things. Cas had been honest when he'd told Dean he could not picture this tale told any other way. But perhaps he should have been more specific; he could no longer picture a world without the Winchesters in his life.

He doubted any other version of himself would feel differently, given the opportunity.

Eventually, once the silence had stretched and the hunter beside him got fidgety, Castiel sighed softly. His hands were clasped lightly in front of him, fingers idly rubbing over one another.

"She won't regret it. It won't be easy, the road ahead, but…" Blue eyes met Dean's once more, and the human was taken back – like he was always taken back, something that ten years of friendship hadn't ever friggin' dulled – by being the sole focus of that attention. "It's a road worth traveling."

Dean hung his head. He knew, he already *knew* that he would ask her to travel it. Hell, he wouldn't even ask. That implied giving her the option not to, and like Dean had already said, he was friggin' selfish when it came to this particular angel, this particular friend.

"You confuse the hell out of me, man." The words slipped out before he could wrangle them back in, before he could realize he was saying them out loud. Beside him, Cas huffed something like a laugh and smiled at him with just the corner of his mouth.

"Just me, or us?" Like he knew what Dean was thinking and, fuck, they were in dreamland in Dean's head, for Christ's sake. Not to mention this damn angel was curled up to his friggin' soul, so hell, he might just. Double fuck.

"All of it. It's messing with my head. Putting things in my head!" And not just the Cas'es. But that was another topic Dean was *not* thinking about in dreamland sitting next to the angel curled up to his soul, damnit. His eyes flickered over to his friend, who just looked amused

at his personal struggle and…

Screw it.

If asked, Dean could not say why he did it. Why he let himself go there. But now that it was in his head, he couldn't let it rest. Not when he might have the answer sitting right next to him. Not when it was his friend, and…well, if Cas was right (which he *friggin*' wasn't, damnit), then there might be a number placed on how many of these conversations they had left.

(But he wasn't right, Dean was gonna make sure of it.)

"Cas…" The angel glanced over at him, his smile fading into concern at the weight and guilt of Dean's expression, and he straightened a little under the sudden shift. Dean could hardly keep eye contact. "Do I…look at you differently than everyone else?"

His friend went from straightening to stiffening, back rigid in his chair. It was all the answer Dean ever needed and not the one he remotely wanted (not that he'd really been expecting a different one, but he had *hoped*). That intense gaze shifted away. "You don't need to worry about that."

Shit. That most definitely was not a 'no.'

"Kinda feeling like I do." His friend's eyes flickered back to his briefly, and Dean's heart sunk somewhere into his toes, plowing right through his stomach and leaving a mess of shredded knots in its wake. "Shit, I-I never meant…"

"I know," Cas cut him off before he had to say the words (and what words, exactly? Dean didn't even know what he would say. He considered himself lucky his friend seemed to). The angel looked away again, staring off at the far wall in a distant, but not entirely absent way. "It used to confuse me. You always told me my stare was…'intense.' But you'd stare right back at me, so I didn't understand." The angel laughed, and something in Dean's shoulders – something he didn't know he was holding so tight his muscles were shaking and his back *ached* – loosened a little. "I like to think you did it for payback those first few years. A very Dean Winchester form of challenging my authority."

Dean snorted because, uh, yeah, that sounded like him. It even explained, somewhat, why he might be doing it all over again with Lady Cas. She was that same old Cas, stick-of-authority-and-holy-

righteousness-stuck-up-her-butt.

"I noticed it more once I became human. The first time, during the Apocalypse." Cas shrugged his shoulder a little, like a bad memory he was trying to flick away. He knocked his head towards Dean, meeting his eyes again. "I was trying to fit in. To belong. Poorly, I might had." Dean huffed but didn't argue. Cas had been…painfully awkward back then, even if the fault was hardly his own. "My observations of the humans I knew – you, Sam, Bobby – increased exponentially."

Inexplicably, Dean found himself struggling with that whole swallowing and breathing thing again. (Stupid, god damn, feely conversations.) He might not know the words that were coming next, but the curl in his stomach was not so different from sitting in the front seat of the Impala, Angela Garrett in the back, telling him he gave off *'I'm hot for an angel'* vibes to everyone within visual range of his friggin' eyeballs.

"You show your emotions in your eyes, Dean. You always have, though it took me many years to learn how to read them correctly."

Was the air getting increasingly drier in the bunker? Dean swallowed again, throat scratchy and sore. Allergies maybe? Could there be allergies in a dream? Hell yes, if he imagined them, then there could be and he'd have a reason for why he felt all hot and bothered and *feely* right now. Dean narrowed his eyes and thought about *pollen, pollen, pollen*.

Damn, but he could use another beer right now.

"You looked at me with anger a lot of the time." Dean flinched when Cas handed him a new beer, freshly uncapped, still cold and dewy like it had popped right out of an ad for the stuff, and he didn't know if the wince was from Cas's words or the fact that he could very clearly hear Dean's wants and needs right now (and that…that was so…so not okay.) "But often with you, anger hides something else. Something that makes you feel vulnerable."

The hunter flinched a second time, definitely from the embarrassing words this time. It was his turn to avoid eye contact, burying his attention into the bottle in his hand.

Cas wasn't trying to catch his eye, though. He had his thumbs hooked together, hands hanging loosely between his legs, as he stared at the floor a couple feet away from them with a distant expression. "I guess I never did find out what that was. If I had to call it anything, I would

say…expectation. But I never found out what it was you expected of me."

I was never able to fill that expectation.

Dean didn't hear it in so many words, but he remembered his last couple chats with the Cas that sat in his chest. The Cas that had almost died sending him back, that would have died if Dean's soul wasn't a clingy, life-saving mother effer. The same Cas that had volunteered to be Lucifer's vessel because he needed to be useful, because he hadn't expected to survive and was somehow *okay* with that.

The air around them might as well have been on fire for how Dean's blood boiled and skin burned, for how dry his throat was and how it seared with every swallow. The hunter sighed, fighting back a wave of anger with a wave of guilt instead, because the second one was so much easier.

"Maybe because I never realized I was expecting- uh, asking for anything." Angela seemed to think he had been asking (unintentionally!) for a lot more than he'd intended. Cas seemed to think Dean had wanted, well, everything else. A tool against the Apocalypse, against the Leviathans, against the Mark and the Darkness after that. Dean didn't know which was worse.

(A lie. A total lie. He sure as shit knew which one was worse, just like he knew which one made him the shittier friend and which one was just embarrassing.)

"How do I-" Dean's voice broke and he had to clear his throat, cheeks flushing with heat. He doubted it showed – he rarely blushed visibly anywhere but the tips of his ears (although, this was friggin' dreamland, so all bets were off) – but that didn't stop it from being embarrassing all the same. "How do I stop doing that with her? With, uh, Lad- I'm mean, erm, the other Cas?"

Because he couldn't put her through it, too. His hand to (a) God (he didn't believe in), he hadn't known he was doing it. Hadn't known he was leaving Cas to think he always wanted something more of him (or her). But he knew it now, and it wasn't fair to keep doing it, even if he had no idea how to stop it. Especially since everyone else interpreted that look entirely differently. He didn't want that either, even if was weirdly less embarrassing and more…just…inappropriate with Lady Cas.

(And it was not because he was homophobic. It *wasn't*, alright? Gays were *fine*. And damnit, calling them 'gays' probably wasn't helping his cause here. Man-on-man love was *fine*, just as long as he wasn't a part of it (damnit, he wasn't making this better, was he? Man-on-man love? *Really*?).)

"Don't worry about it, Dean." The hunter's head snapped up at that, going from berating himself internally for sounding like a dick who couldn't put two words together (like a ten year old boy. *Jesus*.) to staring at his best friend because…because that *couldn't* be right. But Cas met his stare evenly. "Don't do anything differently. Stick to the timeline."

Dean's stare faltered. His just-about-everything-else faltered too as he realized what Cas was saying. Dean's heart kind of sank somewhere into his only-barely-healed-up-from-the-last-heart-sinkage-disaster-of-a stomach. He was saying…if Dean wanted the younger version of Cas to turn into the one he knew – to be what Cas had been for him (*'still is, damnit. He's not dying. Not if I have anything to say about it.'*) – than he couldn't change anything.

And…and…he wanted that. God, but he did want that. He couldn't do this without Cas, his Cas.

Why? Why did he want that, when he wanted nothing but the opposite for Sam? He'd do anything, right this second, anything that was asked of him, to keep his brother from walking the path he'd seen him walk once before. To keep that light and innocence in his eyes, even if it faded a bit every day. To save him from all that pain and suffering coming straight at them like a freight train they had so, so little chance of de-railing? Even if it meant permanently losing the brother he loved, the one he knew that existed only nine years and some change from now. He'd sacrifice that brother to save this one.

Why didn't he want to save Cas, too?

Dean swallowed, dropping his eyes to floor.

Because this Sam, even though it wasn't the brother who lived ten years more with him, who knew everything about Dean, was still his brother. It was still a version of Sam that he knew well, and who knew him, even if he didn't know everything. He was still *Sam*. In so many ways, that brother was a better version; a version that still had hope for a future that wasn't constantly stained with blood and death and friggin' misery. A version before Dean screwed up the one job John

Winchester had ever given him. A version that wasn't broken, that didn't have the history of lies and the weight of Dean trying to make up for that mistake ever since.

But that's not what he had with Cas. He didn't have a Cas he knew. Who knew him. Castiel was trying and Dean appreciated that she was with them, had chosen them, repeatedly over the last several months, but they still only barely knew each other. The angel especially didn't know him and Dean, well, on more than one occasion he'd already stepped in it thinking he knew her. They had years to go – and more than a couple painful happenings in between – to get them to best friend status. And he'd need that best friend before the end, which meant Dean couldn't change any of those events, no matter the pain they caused, the home and family they cost, the life they altered.

If he was going to stop the Apocalypse, he needed *Cas*. Couldn't do it without him. He couldn't live without Cas. Like he couldn't live without Sam. Which he'd…he'd kind of known for years now. But his brain had never bothered to put it into *words*.

"Here." It seemed like Cas realized he was at his limit of thinking and feels for the day, because the angel reached his trenchcoat and pulled out an angel blade, offering it to Dean as a very efficient change of topic. Dean's eyebrows went up at the sight of it. Cas spun the blade, handing it over hilt first to the hunter. "Uriel's blade. You and Sam should keep it. It will give you a weapon to use against Lilith, once she's topside. And, I imagine Heaven will continue intervening."

Castiel knew both versions of himself would rest better knowing the Winchesters had the ability to defend themselves against whatever schemes Zachariah would surely come up with. Not to mention, the blade would suffice in any hunt. If Cas could not be present to keep them safe while she was healing, then at the very least they would be far better armed with this.

Dean reached for the blade automatically – that would be a hell of a thing to have on hunts this early in the game, not to mention it solved the whole Colt-slash-Demon-Blade dilemma with Lilith – only to pause when he remembered Cas (a different Cas) so hesitant to take it off her brother's corpse.

But this wasn't that angel. Dean knew instinctively that his Cas already understood. Otherwise, he wouldn't be offering the blade he'd clearly taken off his sleeping counterpart at some point (How…did that even work in dreamland?). That…that kind of sucked, actually.

For them both. All three of them, actually. Dean wrapped his hand around the sword, taking it none too lightly and tucking it inside his jacket.

"I'm sorry," he apologized and, given the confused look Cas sent his way, it must have seemed out of the blue for him. (Ouch. Not untrue, but still. Ouch.) "Not for killing Uriel – I'm not sorry that bastard's dead – but for… for the other you, uh…losing a brother." The human turned away, adding in a muttered, "Even if he was a total dick."

Cas seemed to understand both sentiments, smiling sadly (sweetly, not that Dean would ever admit to thinking that) at the hunter. "I appreciate that, Dean. You're right. Uriel was a…a 'winged dick.'"

Dean hid the practical flinch that rippled through him at the air quotes. God, the air quotes. How they could ruin the perfection that was his angel calling another angel a winged dick was…was…well, it was a goddamn tragedy, was what it was.

"And he needed to be taken care of. You should tell the other Castiel that, as well. It will….help. I'm afraid she has many more brothers to lose in the coming years."

Dean scowled at that, as well as the downturned gaze. The angel might not be wrong but that didn't make it *okay*. "Hey." He waited until he had that intense gaze locked on his. "None of that inevitably crap. We're Team Free Will! Right, man?"

He got a peak of that smile – sad and sweet again – and it was enough. Cas nodded, even if it was rather placating. "We're re-writing the book."

"Damn straight." Dean nudged him with his shoulder, having to scooch almost off the chair to do it. It wasn't like they were exactly side by side. It was worth it for the slight smirk he got in return, though. Which meant, of course, that his throat dried up like the damn Sahara. Goddamnit. "And…I'm not gonna let you die, Cas. I'll find a way to fix it. I swear."

The angel looked away, but only for a moment. When he looked back, he reached out and laid his hand directly on top of Deans. The hunter blinked, staring down at in in nothing short of confusion, tips of his ears burning red.

"Uh…Cas?"

"You might not be able to stop it this time, Dean. But if you can't, it's okay. Really." The hunter looked back up, frown firmly in place. "I'm just a shadow. There was never enough of me left to be here to begin with."

Dean's scowl instantly worsened, and he found himself scooting all the way to the end of chair, ass precariously perched right on the edge, but he didn't care. What mattered was getting right up in Cas's face to let him know he meant business, those big blue eyes wide and locked on his. "Bullshit. Sure feels real to me, Cas."

To prove his point, he flipped his hand over so he was practically entwining fingers with an Angel of the Friggin' Lord, and he gripped that hand hard enough for his friend to damn well feel it. Cas looked town between amused and annoyed, and Dean just stared and stared, having himself a point to prove, and thought, *'Deal with it. You're not getting rid of me easily.'*

Cas could doubt him all he wanted, but he was gonna find a way to save him. He always did.

Eventually, that look shifted completely into the amused category, and Cas glanced up at him with a raised eyebrow. "You're still holding my hand, Dean."

And now he was releasing it like a cursed object. "Shaddup."

But Cas was smiling affectionately as he took his hand back. So Dean counted that as the friggin' win it was and decided to ignore all the other stuff. Means to an end, and all that. "There's still time, Dean. Even if I am fading, it won't happen instantly. We have time."

He didn't know if the angel did it on purpose, using those same words he'd spoken a lifetime ago in a cemetery facing the end of the world before jettisoning one measly hunter back through time in a Hail Mary act of desperation, or if it was just a coincidence. And he honestly didn't know if hearing those words again should make him feel better or worse.

"Yeah, right. Time." Dean shook his head. "Speaking of…"

The hunter had to concentrate again to get another beer to appear, and he handed it over readily to his friend (okay, he could admit, *this* part of dreamland he could get used to). "You got some to spare?"

Cas reached out with the neck of his beer to meet Dean's mostly

undrunk one with a hearty clink. "For you? Always."

And hell, for once, Dean didn't even mind the dangerously chick-flick line, even if had been delivered more as a joke (and thank god for that). It sort of fit, actually (even if Cas was about as good as delivering a one-liner as he and Sam had been at acting that one time).

"Dude, can we talk about something happy for once? Like, anything. Anything at all, man. It can be depressing as shit and it would still be happier than-" he waved his hand between them and the silent revelation that Cas might be fading and the dreamworld around them that still made his heart ache with homesickness every time he dwelled on it for too long- "this."

He got another tentative grin out of the angel for that. "Did I imagine you and Sam teaching my younger self about Star Trek, or did that really happen?"

"Oh, man!" Dean lit up like the vacancy sign at a haunted hotel. "It was awesome. She lies like a Vulcan now! You shoulda seen her, man. A natural. And I got her to watch *Jaws*, too. Next on the list is Star Wars. I'm debating the order to show my young Padawan."

Cas seemed to give it actual thought for a second, which was ridiculous, because while Dean was completely serious, it really wasn't the sort of thing worthy of the strategic mind of an Angel of the Lord. "Start with the first three. Numerically."

Especially not when *that* was the answer he came up with.

The hunter speared his friend with narrowed-eyed suspicion. "Those're terrible, Cas."

Cas shrugged, that shy smile growing. "I liked them. She will too. They were very…shiny."

"Ugh." Dean hung his head back like he'd just found out his best friend was a fan of the first three Star Wars movies. Which, he had. "Of course you like them. You and Sammy, man. You two have *no* taste. How did you live with a guy for years and not rub off on him at least a *little*?"

The man from the future suddenly sat stick-straight up in his chair, spilling a bit of his beer and actually managing to make his angel look concerned.

"Holy shit." He grinned wide, turning to Cas who looked equally confused and wary. "Holy shit, Sam doesn't know there are gonna be three more movies! Oh, oh! Andy doesn't either!"

-o-o-o-

Dean woke up with warmth in his chest, an evil plan in his mind to ruin the next three Star Wars movies for his brothers (not that he'd gotten to see anything but the first of those three, but they didn't need to know that), and cold steel in his hand.

The hunter sucked in a slow breath, feeling his lungs expand almost to the point of pain before he let it back out. Uriel's angel blade was firmly gripped in his dominant hand, laying across his chest where Cas's hand had been before he'd fallen asleep. Dean raised his arm to stare at the silver, unearthly metal that still managed to glint in the low light.

He rolled his head to the side, staring at Angela and Lady Cas both sleeping soundly next to him, the dream still fresh in his mind. Dean blinked, suddenly realizing just how next to him the angel was. Like v*ery* next to him. Like…almost on top of him. And breathing away on a newly inserted ventilation tube (which was great, that meant someone had come in and finished the job he'd barely started), pooling body heat beneath the blanket that was draped over them both-

Wait. What?

Dean jerked upright, taking half that old quilt with him as he did, staring at the thing in horror. It hadn't been there when he'd fallen asleep. It most definitely had. Not. Been. There. Its presence now met someone else had been. There. In the room. With him and a cuddly Cas.

It didn't even matter whether it had been Sam, Bobby, or (god forbid) Andy. Because any of the three of them all meant the same thing. It meant *someone* had seen him practically spooning in the tiny twin hospital mattress with Cas. Which meant *everyone* in the housenow knew about it.

"Son of a bitch!"

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A/Ns: *Good god. This chapter fought me almost as hard as the last, only*

*this time it was trying to write itself in places I did not want it to go. That chat about Time and Bela was NOT in the blueprints (any of the, like, twelve that existed for this chapter, sheesh), and the Muse just typed it up and away. So I deleted it and told her we had a million other things to focus on. And she RE-WROTE IT on the next attempt. So I sidelined it for a deleted scene, reminding her we'd already *had* this chat with Chuck, we didn't need to repeat it with Cas. Yet, lo and behold, it made the chapter anyway. Because of course it did. The Muse always gets her way (why do I even bother?!)*

(The first ten pages, guys. The first TEN pages of a chapter that is usually only ten pages, and none of it was supposed to be there. SIGH.)

*(You guys remember Jo and Asa? Ava and Cold Oak? That thing we had going for us called a plot? Yeah, I do too. But the MUSE SURE DON'T. *head thud*)*

*It's not even that I don't like this chapter. I do (I think. Mostly, like, that very last end bit. *Head thud and a sigh*). It's just…I'm used to being very in control of what I'm writing (control freak) and having everything clearly laid out (OCD control freak). But ever since Quarantine, my brain has been foggy and totally unfocused. I'm writing in circles and it's leaving everything just…jumbled and all over the place. (Like, yes, Muse, that's a fascinating way to bring in Bela. Awesome sauce, let's totally use it. But do we have to use it RIGHT THIS INSTANT?! Yes. Yes, apparently we do.)*

So…yeah, I don't completely know how to feel about this chapter. It is a puddle of goo and feels and angst and, oh, yeah, also completely side-tracked by a plot about Time. I'm really hoping it didn't feel repetitive to you guys (the Chuck-Time-Chat was quite a while ago, at least). Sigh.

Ugh, whatever, it's fine!

Moving on!

***Requests:** I had several requests to shine some more light on how Dean might miss the Sam from his time and mourn the death of that version of his brother. I tried to sneak some of that into this chapter, along with (my personal viewpoint) on why Dean hasn't reacted as strongly to his dead-and-gone brother as he has to his dead-and-not-quite-gone angel (for reasons that aren't *just* Desitel, because I don't believe in over-balancing character interactions just to favor a ship XD)*

Please keep requesting things! I really do try to squeeze them in whenever they line up with the story :)

Star Wars *: I tend not to like when Authors interject their own opinions about Real World things (like movies) onto their characters because it feels faked/forced/and usually not on-character, so I usually avoid the kinds of discussions that involve opinions (because it's hard enough to nail a character's opinion, let alone keep yours out of it). But, once again, the Muse decided I don't get a say (*head thud*). So, personally, I don't really like the first three Star Wars (numerically), but I am a story snob and a romance-hater, so…I was never gonna like those movies XD Also, as someone who works in VFX, omg, Lucas went over the top. So…So shiny. So much shiny. So pretty but so, so much.*

*Anyway, hazarding a guess (because the show is much, much smarter than me and has STAYED OUT OF THIS by not having characters give their opinions on such things), I think Dean loves the originals, and begrudgingly accepts the prequels because he's a fanboy and it takes a lot to knock a hardcore fanboy/girl off his/her fandom (sure, he'll gripe and whine, but he's still loyal and was therefore excited when they announced three more), which is why he would insist on showing them to Lady Cas regardless of said griping. While Cas, who does not understanding fandom or fan-ning, would think the first three were acceptable forms of art and story-telling, he would not see why there was much difference between the first three and the second three, and he would marvel at the technology that humans had developed to create such visual virtual worlds from pure imagination (while also asking a thousand questions and pointing out fallacy or misplaced logic in every possible plot hole, but in a curious, I-don't-understand-what-am-I-missing-to-make-this-make-sense sort of innocent way that you would have to give him rather than get annoyed over because he's *Cas*)*

And all that could have been avoided if I'd just left the entire Star Wars chat out. Ugh. Stupid. Damn. Pushy. Muse. Stupid. Friggin'. Quarantine. Brain.

(Okay, but I did line it up for a future conversation in which Dean ruins the next three Star Wars movies for Sam XD Uh…whenever we get to that.)

Side Movie Note: *I have been trying to work in a scenario where lady Cas would say "I think we need a bigger boat" in the middle of a crisis and Dean would straight up stop and grin at her and be like "Did you just quote Jaws?!" and Sam, amid a hail of bullets or whatnot, would be yelling, "CAN WE PLEASE FOCUS?!" And Dean would return to the crisis but be all, "Sammy, I think I'm in love." And Sam would roll his eyes and mutter, "That's what clued you in?" and wonder how this became his life.*

Alas. Such a scenario has yet to line itself up. Le sigh.

***Up Next**: The Supernatural Family decide to hold an intervention (uh, sort of) where Sam's kind of clueless but onboard, Dean's in for some stubborn family members who have* opinions*, Asa Fox and Bucky Sims get dragged into it because, uh, they were there to be dragged? Jo and Andy re-unite (and Andy totally thinks he has a shot. Like a lost puppy), and, if there's time leftover after all that, we're gonna catch up with Hell, Chuck, and Persephone (but it's still not written yet, so tune in next week (possibly two weeks from now) to see the stunning conclusion! (Not a conclusion. Just… the next chapter…we're a loooong way from a conclusion. I- I really need to go to bed now.))*

*(That…that was a lot of author's notes. That was almost as long as the damn chapter. *HEAD THUD*)*

***Reviews:** Last thing, I swear. Please do not feel the need if you review to assuage my worries and fears and jumbled dislike of this chapter. I will be very pleased if you enjoyed it, but I mostly rant and rave because I like to babble, occasionally in all caps screaming, and we know this :D*

.

Night, Cheers, and 'Till Next Time,

Silence

Chapter 103: Season 2: Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

Prepare: for a looooot of author's notes. Lockdown's getting to me. I gotta talk. I gotta taaaaaaalk talk talk talktalktalk!

A/Ns: Guys. Guys guys guys. I needed to rewatch some season 2 for a couple Ash-related things and ended up letting Netflix play through like five episodes, including Folsom Prison Blues and The Djinn episode. (God, I missed American Netflix. Not all of it, cuz I'm already missing Canadian Netflix, but I missed easy access Supernatural soooo much) And I- I am *so* pumped right now. Like SO on board the Supernatural fan train. Funny how some episodes just get you :D

(I've been avoiding watching episodes past where I'm writing so I don't distract myself. Um. Oops?)

(**Side A/N:** I- I cannot *wait* to get to those episodes in this story XD)

(**Side Side A/N:** I…don't actually know if we'll manage Folsom Prison Blues. It's on the hopeful list, but also on the 'only if we have time and it works out' list of episodes I want to cover. So… no promises but man, after watching it again, I *so* wanna do it)

(**Side Side Side A/N:** Omg and now I want to write a story where Dean stayed in the Djinn dream and became that brother he should have been and totally let himself get lost in it, cuz it wasn't perfect but he knew he could make it perfect, he could make it right. And that means it's up to Sam to somehow wake him up. Ooooooooh.

((How lovely that this would all be so good for *this* story since I am conveniently doing a re-write. Only, 2016!Dean would not make that mistake. He especially wouldn't leave Sam to face an Apocalypse alone. SIGH.))

(((I can't…I can't start *another* story. There's already that friggin Little Mermaid Destiel parody that won't leave me alone that I absolutely do not have time for. DOUBLE SIGH.))))

Actual Story A/Ns: Alrighty then! Is it story time? Are we back

to regular plot now? Thank Chuck for that. I usually love the dreamscape and the feels and all the angst (*chef's kiss and one very bad French accent later* my favorite) but for some reason, my head is just not in that game right now. Luckily, I am doing way better now that I'm in the plot chatter rather than angst chatter.

Editing Quality: Uh, well I had all day today to edit, and I started off strong. Then, around one in the afternoon, my dad suggested a board game and…uh…then it was eleven thirty at night and I still had a whole half a chapter to edit (a chapter the length of two chapters. Yaaaaaaay). Soooo, the edit was a speedy one done through tired eyes and a brain that kept saying "can't we finish this in the morning?"

Translation: The grammatical side of this chapter may be a bit rough XD

(Somewhat) Important Timeline Note: It has been less than 24 hours in story time since Gordon Walker was arrested and Ava Wilson went missing.

Chapter Warnings: Well, we've definitely got nothing coming up that has anything to do with Gordon Walker or Ava Wilson. Not at all. We're just gonna have ourselves a little hunter's picnic and when that doesn't work out (cuz, really. You ever heard of a hunter's picnic? I didn't think so) we'll try an intervention instead, and the whole Scooby Gang's invited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 70

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Gordon was escorted from his holding cell at the Tippecanoe County Jail where he was awaiting arraignment for the weapons charge while Detectives at the LPD continued pressuring him for information concerning the photographs on his phone. The prison guard led him to an empty room, usually reserved for visitations but currently occupied by only one other person. Likely a cop from the Lafayette Police Department. Oh, sorry, *detective*. Gordon resisted the urge to snort. He

had been less than impressed or intimidated by the Lafayette Police Department's performance so far. He hardly doubted another interview would change that.

The guard pushed him another step further into the room (and he was lucky Gordon didn't want to deal with an assault charge on top of everything else, or he would have decked the guy just to teach him a lesson about keeping his hands to himself), and then closed the door, leaving Gordon alone with his newest interviewer. Holding back a sigh – this really was tedious – Gordon crossed over to the empty chair plastic chair across the table from the guy, waiting just for him. He reached for the back of it with handcuffed wrists, flipping the thing around so he could straddle the seat, arms over the back and metal cuffs clinking loudly on the table in front of the detective.

No, Gordon realized as he stared at the guy across from him with ever so slightly narrowed eyes. The clean, pressed white shirt, but not so clean or so pressed that it wasn't the shirt of a working man. Tie around his neck, loose enough that he wasn't a pencil-pusher or a stickler for rules. An air of authority behind the tight-lipped, grimace of a smile he presented the prisoner in front of him. That and the manila folder sitting just off to his right – a pretty thick one, Gordon noted, so unlikely to be his own – all suggested more than a detective.

A federal agent. Gordon wondered what about an illegal weapons possession charge and a couple of headless vamps could possibly be of interest to the FBI.

"Mr. Walker," the agent began with a small nod, but that little smile playing at his mouth reeked of condescension. Gordon ignored it. Feds were worse than cops. They didn't do their job any better, but they certainly had the attitudes that would make you think they did. "I hear you're in a tight spot."

Gordon resisted rolling his eyes, but it was a close thing. He tilted his head to the side, staring right back at the guy with the same smile mirrored on his face. "You gonna get me out of it, Fed?"

"Agent Henrisken," the man corrected. That tight-lipped smile got a little tighter. "And that depends."

"On what?" Gordon leaned forward into the back of the chair, cuffs scraping against the tabletop as he let his shoulders slump and settled his chin onto the plastic lip. Not a care in the world, really. At least, not one this Fed could do anything about.

"Dean Winchester."

Gordon picked his head up, for once actually surprised by something that had come out of a law enforcement official's mouth in this town. So, the FBI was here for the Winchesters. How did the Feds know about the brothers? Had they managed to get caught before they could get away? Didn't sound like the pair of hunters he'd dealt with.

Henriksen slid his little folder across the table until it rested in front of him, flipping it open and peeling a photograph off the top page. He spun it around to Gordon, pushing it towards his side of the table. The hunter sat up, actual interest piqued, and grabbed the photo with wide spread fingers, pulling it towards himself with the clink of chain links.

His intrigue immediately flat-lined. It was the photo he'd taken of Dean at the gas station, sprawled on the uneven cement. The green were eyes lifeless, blood pooled on black asphalt, single bullet to the head and resulting damage to prove it. Gordon pushed the glossy print back, returning to his bored slump, staring at the agent if only to dare him for something more interesting. Something better.

"You want to tell me where you got this photo?"

"I took it." Gordon shrugged his shoulders with every ounce of nonchalance in his body. No point lying about that; photography wasn't a crime. Not reporting a dead body was a slap on the wrist, at best, and his lawyer – a sleaze of a man he'd saved a couple years back from a female vamp posing as a prostitute to score her next meal – would easily get it dismissed.

"Where?"

The hunter stared at the Fed, contemplating why he wanted to know. So the FBI was after Dean Winchester, specifically. Sam remained only a maybe at the moment. Gordon was hardly surprised, although he did itch to know why. What was it in particular that this Fed was after? Agent Henriksen didn't seem particularly pleased Dean was dead. Ego, perhaps? Not being the one to catch the criminal himself? Well, there was still plenty of time for that, it turned out, because Dean wasn't dead.

He thought about lying, leading the guy on a goose chase, but it didn't feel like the right play. There was something about this that Gordon was sure he could spin to his advantage, something about the dark glint in this agent's eyes. Obsession maybe? Or just that deeply seated,

self-righteousness stick cops – sorry, *law enforcement* – always had stuck up their ass. No, lying wasn't the right angle to play here, Gordon just wasn't sure what was. Yet, at least.

"Gas station off 25, just past Shadeland road."

Agent Henriksen jotted that down on one of the papers in his little folder and Gordon's fingers twitched, wondering what else was in there. "And I'll find a body there?"

This time, he couldn't stop the snort. He shoved up off the table, sitting in his chair with his wrists resting against the back. The Fed looked less than amused at the physical power play Gordon was keeping up, but then, he'd looked like that since Gordon walked into the room. The hunter would look like that too, if he had to spend eight hours a day investigating the Winchesters.

"Oh, there's no body."

Henriksen's eyes narrowed and he leaned back, tossing his pen onto the open file. He looked annoyed, more than anything. Like he knew he was going to have to go through the steps of a game when he'd rather skip to the end. "What did you do with it?"

"Me? Nothing. Far as I know, Dean Winchester got up and walked away."

The Fed let out an exaggerated sigh, emphasizing his exasperation. Yeah, he definitely thought Gordon was playing a game. Probably the *I-didn't-kill-that-guy-honest-he-walked-away-unharmed* game a lot of cocky killers played with him. He gestured with his chin to the photograph, still lying in front of Gordon. "He looks pretty dead there."

"Yeah," Gordon agreed, letting some of that insincerity and sarcasm slide away, sounding pretty damn honest. His honesty had never been particularly endearing to others, though. Most people labeled it smug at best. He wondered what Agent Henriksen would do with it. "He looked pretty dead to me too when I took it."

The man across from him stared in silence, head falling a little to the side as he clearly contemplated Gordon's words. His angle, whatever it was. (At the moment, his angle was actual honesty. Go figure.) Finally, the Fed sat up, folding his hands on top of the table, over that open file and his forgotten pen. "Are you saying he faked his dead? And, what, someone helped? You, maybe? That the whole point of

these photos?"

Agent Henriksen spread out several more of the photos the LPD had recovered from his phone. Gordon barely even looked at them.

"Oh, it wasn't me." Gordon shook his head, letting all his disregard and disdain for Dean Winchester show openly. He didn't care if this Fed knew he wanted the man dead. In fact, he was pretty sure it was his 'in' with this particular agent. He just had to play it right. "But he's got someone on his side, alright."

A real monster, in Gordon's opinion. One that needed to be taken out right alongside Sam and Dean Winchester.

Henriksen appraised him again, looking him up and down as he took his time. Finally, he glanced around the interrogation room, making a play for detachment, but Gordon already had his number. "You got intel on any of this?"

Gordon smiled, all teeth and negotiation. "Depends. You gonna get me out of here?"

The FBI agent huffed, clearly amused in a not-good way. He closed the folder, capping his pen and setting it back on top. "You got yourself into this. Best I can do…minimum security prison, *if* your intel is good."

Oh, Gordon very much doubted that was all Henriksen could do. Big bad Fed like him? He could offer so much more. And he would. To catch the Winchesters, Gordon had no doubt. How convenient that their goals lined up so prettily.

But Gordon was nothing if not patient. The best hunters always were. You had to let your prey come to you.

The hunter leaned forward on his chair again, arms crossed, handcuffs jingling against the plastic backing. "Well, when you change your mind, you know where I'll be."

Henriksen let out a harsh laugh, head shaking in disbelief. He stood, gathering up the file and tucking the pen in his pocket. They were clearly done here. "What makes you think I need your help to do my job?"

Gordon just watched him, dark eyes glittering. "Because I know how the Winchesters think. I know how they work. I'm *one* of them."

The Fed stilled. He didn't quite pause and he hid it well, but Gordon knew he'd sunk that hook in. It wasn't time to reel in the fish yet, because he knew this one would come swimming to him freely. The Winchesters were too good at what they did for this man to ever catch them. Not without help.

"So. You're one of these so-called '*hunters*,' I take it?" It was obvious from the derision on his face that Henriksen had no idea who it was he was actually chasing. Who it was he stood in a room with. Probably thought they were crazy. Not that it mattered. Most people did. They were all idiots, lucky Gordon and others like him – even the Winchesters, regardless of whether or not they now needed to be taken out – were around to save their useless asses.

The hunter smiled widely, this time all teeth and charm, Ted Bundy charm though it may be. Gordon had lured plenty a pretty vamp girl to their deaths with that smile, playing their game right back at them. He could play Agent Henriksen's game too.

The agent smiled back, a biting, bitter thing. He shook his head again, tapping the edge of his folder on the table with another disbelieving laugh. Then he headed for the door back out of the prison without a word.

"Be seeing you, Agent." Gordon nodded, completely confident in his words, and that clean-shaven head turned his way, half a glance over a rigid shoulder. Then the Fed was gone, replaced with the guard who would escort Gordon back to his cell. But the hunter wasn't worried. He knew he was right. He would be seeing Agent Henriksen again. It was only a matter of time.

-o-o-o-

Dean scrambled out of the hospital bed the minute he realized that the light filtering in through the closed blinds of Bobby's guest bedroom was a hell of a lot lower than it had been when he'd first brought Angela and Cas in here. Which meant he'd been asleep for a lot longer than the hour he'd planned, and that meant they were already late meeting Jo in Cold Oak.

Climbing out of the bed wasn't as easy as he thought it'd be. Whoever had hooked Angela's body back up to the machines had done it *around* Dean, leaving the hunter in a weave of tubes and wires that he had to extricate himself from before he could be free (he'd already been paranoid enough about messing up all that technology keeping Angela

alive, and that was *before* he'd tried playing cat's cradle with it). Needless to say, it was several minutes before he was actually standing on his own two feet.

He took a moment to double check Angela was still breathing on her own – or, uh, well, the machines were breathing for her, at least – before he headed into the hallway, pulling the door mostly closed behind him. Figuring Sammy must have overslept as well (otherwise his brother would have come and woken him up), he headed for what they largely considered 'their' room in Bobby's house. The older hunter had warned them Andy had taken over one of the beds, but Dean figured Sam was probably catching z's in the other one.

Only the door was three quarters of the way open when he got there and there wasn't much inside except two empty beds; one neatly made up, the other one clearly Andy's. With a frown pulling between his eyebrows, Dean turned and headed for the stairs at a decent pace. Maybe Sam had slept on the couch in the Den.

Bobby's study was empty when he got to the bottom of the stairs and Dean started looking around with less certainly and more wariness. Nothing in his gut was screaming at him and he usually trusted that. But Sammy hadn't woken him up and obviously hadn't overslept himself, and Bobby wasn't at his desk surrounded by books. Which was weird enough to raise alarm.

Noise from the kitchen – the splash of water and clatter of dishes, along with the low background din of someone trying to keep their voice down – drew Dean to the kitchen. He was surprised to find Sammy, perfectly fine and upright, doing dishes at the sink with an energetic Andy waving his phone practically beneath the Winchester's nose trying to show him something.

Sam looked better. Rested, at least, not dead on his feet and pale from recovering blood loss. There was a new square of padded gauze taped across the skin just above the shoulder blade, peeking out of the neckline of his t-shirt. Dean assumed there was a matching one on his front, around his collar bone. Bobby had patched him up proper, at least, so that was good.

Still, though.

"What the hell, Sammy?" Dean groused, crossing his arms over his chest, because it was still way past the hour either brother had agreed upon for sleep. They needed to be on the road toward Cold Oak, not

playing Susy Homemaker in Bobby's kitchen.

The sudden interruption was enough to make both kids jump, Sam smacking the plate he was holding against the rim of the sink with a sharp clack (luckily not breaking it) and Andy spinning around with the kind of jitter that suggested a lot of caffeine and not a whole lot of sleep.

(Which, to be fair, was probably Sam and Dean's fault. Waking up in the middle of night to an angelic vessel – not the angel, but Angela – raising hell for a cell phone, followed by radio silence for hours would be enough to keep anyone up worrying.)

"Jeez, Dean, did you have to sneak up on us?" Sam whined right back even as Andy broke into a wide grin beside him while less-than-subtly hiding his phone from view behind his back.

"I'm not the one sneaking. Or letting people over-sleep while playing maid!"

Sam gave his brother a narrow-eyed look, which Dean only felt slightly bad for. Yeah, yeah, cleaning up after themselves in Bobby's house was a given (one they, uh, weren't always the best at) so he probably shouldn't be digging into his brother for doing the dishes. But seriously, what the hell! The clock on the oven said it was after four pm, which meant he'd slept a hell of a lot longer than just an hour. More like *six*.

"Relax, Dean," the younger Winchester went back to the dishes petulantly (okay, maybe only petulantly in Dean's version of events). "Jo called hours ago."

Dean frowned immediately, dropping his arms to his side. "She did? They alright? What'd they find?"

Sam put the last plate into the drying rack and turned off the water. The stillness in his shoulders despite all that movement was a dead giveaway that Dean wouldn't like the answer any more than Sammy had.

"Nothing."

Dean pulled his head back. "What?"

Sam turned around, shrugging his shoulder helplessly, and Dean could see the mix of anguish and anger in his brown eyes. "They didn't find

anything, Dean. There was no one at Cold Oak. They searched the whole town; it was empty."

"But, that doesn't-" Dean shook his head. That didn't make any sense. "Then where's Ava?"

His brother sighed, head dipping down until his chin practically rested against his chest. He shrugged again, and Dean could just picture that helpless look, even if he couldn't see Sam's face. Helpless and *angry*. "She's missing."

Just like last time. His fingers curled into fists by his side and Dean clenched his jaw till his teeth creaked in his mouth. They'd changed *nothing. Again*.

Beside them, Andy, who'd so far stayed out of the conversation, having been caught up by Sam on the events in Lafayette as well as having been in the room when Jo called, now waved his arms to get their attention. He made a series of motions with his hands that meant absolutely nothing to Dean, though Sam at least followed the gestures like he was maybe picking up one or two here and there. Andy didn't wait for the two of them to tell him they didn't understand (that much was obvious pretty much from the get-go) and switched over to mental images almost in tandem.

Flashing red and blue lights, police tape, and a newspaper article about the bodies found at Cold Oak.

"Yeah, you're probably right, Andy." Sam nodded, crossing his arms over his chest with slumped shoulders. "The police activity could have tipped the demons off that we'd found their dumping ground. They know Cold Oak is compromised now."

Andy hid the flinch well, but Sam winced regardless, realizing all on his own how the words had likely affected Andy, who'd lost two friends to that graveyard. He sent an apologetic look his way, but their resident Jedi waved it off.

"Which means they'll have picked somewhere new. Somewhere we don't know about." Dean said it through teeth that were still creaking and Sam met his gaze briefly – half in assessment, half in warning – but it didn't matter. His anger still boiled over and Dean lashed out, knocking the nearest thing – a heavy book lying open, little post it notes acting as bookmarks – off the kitchen table and onto the floor with a thud. "Damnit! We should have burned that town to the ground, Sammy."

"We don't know what that would have done, Dean. What it would have changed. We stilldon't!"

"If yer gonna be destroying things, better do it in your own damn house, boy."

All three boys turned to find Bobby standing behind them at the entrance to the kitchen with two armfuls of groceries and a narrow set to his eyes beneath the ever-present ball cap. He very pointedly looked at Dean and then down to the book still lying on the floor. The older Winchester looked away guiltily, sighing as he bent over to pick the tome back up and replace it on the table.

"Sorry, Bobby."

The old hunter harrumphed, but apparently deemed the apology and fix good enough because he pushed past the boys to set his grocery bag full of food on the counter next to Andy. The kid started digging into it immediately. It earned his hand a swat and glare from Bobby, at least until Andy glared right back and gestured with the box of butter sticks towards the fridge.

"Use your words, kid," Bobby growled, already pulling the rest of the stuff from the bag.

Andy glared and set the butter down on the counter a little harder than necessary to use both hands to tell the old hunter off. Dean had no idea what was said, but by the way Bobby nodded in concession and started handing the kid more stuff to go in the fridge, it was clear Andy's intention had been to help put things away the entire time.

Well, those two seemed to be getting along like two old hens in a henhouse. Which was a terrifying thought, really. At Least they hadn't killed each other.

"That's enough food to feed an army, Bobby," Dean commented on the two stuffed bags for lack of something better to say in a kitchen filled with tension (that he'd more than helped put there). "You expecting company?"

Bobby huffed. "Your brother didn't tell you?"

Green eyes shot over to Sam, narrow and accusatory. The younger Winchester just shrugged as Andy tossed him two bags of potato chips that he tossed into the upper cabinets over the fridge.

"You didn't exactly let me get there." Sam turned back to his brother, one arm still closing the open cabinet door, and gave him a minor bitchface. Not strong enough to make the numbered charts, but a bitchface all the same. "Jo, Asa and Bucky are headed this way."

Dean straightened in surprise. "They are?"

"I told them we'd still meet them at Cold Oak, but they were pretty insistent it was a waste of time. I, uh," Sam pulled a sheepish look, gigantor shoulders twitching, "I think Ellen might have told them we were trying to catch some sleep, because they said they'd come to us rather than meet halfway."

Well, Dean would definitely be having words with Ellen about that shit, because it was so not okay (and total bull). He and Sam would have been fine on an hour of sleep (only, no, they really wouldn't have and Dean knew it) and this was their case, their responsibility, so they would have handled it (only it would have sucked and been potentially dangerous on that little sleep, and Dean *had* been the one to argue for acting responsibly here in the first place since they couldn't afford any more careless slip ups to the timeline).

"They'll be here in an hour or two," Bobby picked up the stream of conversation since it had died off. He handed the last of the groceries to Andy to put away, folding the bag up all neatly and sliding it under the sink. Too neatly. Dean's eyed the three of them suspiciously. "Asa says he owes you boys a drink, so he's bringing the beer and we're providing the grub."

How…strangely domestic, Dean thought with a blink. Bobby and the boys, having friends over for dinner. That hadn't happened…uh, well, outside of 'last night on Earth' gatherings, Dean could probably count on one hand the number of times he could remember company in the house.

(Jody didn't count. Half the times she'd been over, even after she got in on the hunting gig, it had been for half-assed attempts to arrest Bobby on something or other that they all knew she'd never actually follow through on.)

If they didn't have a missing woman to find, proof Azazel was starting to gather his special kids, and hadn't just lost their only leg up in this whole damn thing, Dean might even be excited about a little get-together. Unfortunately for them, they were Winchesters, so this was going to be all business. The fun would have to wait until after they

stopped the Apocalypse.

-o-o-o-

It was halfway through Bobby cooking up dinner (a couple racks of ribs out on the barbeque with some potato salad he'd picked up from the store (and regular old salad at Sam's insistence that there be a least one vegetable present (ugh))), that Andy finally made the mistake of leaving his phone unattended. Dean, who hadn't forgotten the scene he'd walked in on earlier and how the kid had conveniently put the device away only once Dean was in the room, swiped it off the counter while Andy was busy helping Sam cut vegetables (to put on the salad. Vegetables…on top of vegetables. His brother wasn'thuman. He was a rabbit possessing a human. Dean was sure of it).

Andy made an aborted swipe for his phone the moment he realized what was happening, but by then it was way too late. Dean was into the device (and, really, Apple kind of had a point about lock screens being standard. He'd never have been able to do this so easily in 2016), pulling open the kid's camera app. He had a pretty good idea of just what Andy had been so gleefully trying to show his brother.

Yep. Sure enough, the last photo taken was one of him and Cas in that hospital bed, snoozing away, curled up all honkey-dory beneath Bobby's old quilted blanket, before any of Angela's equipment had been put in place. They looked like a snuggly, happy, sleepy little couple (god. Friggin'. Damnit. Dean was gonna murder someone. Anyone. Probably everyone at this point. But most definitely Andy). The hunter glared his truly scary glare at the kid, who shrunk beneath it, ducking physically behind Sam. The Sasquatch arched a particularly amused-but-still-very-judgemental-and-just-why-do-you-think-*that's*-going-to-save-you look over his shoulder at the kid.

Dean got a flash of the board game *Sorry* across the inside of his skull, a fairly familiar image by now (one of Andy's go-to's for sure), but since there was most definitely an after image of the word 'not' stamped all over the damn thing, flickering in and out like a ghost of a thought Andy had no hope of controlling, the message didn't exactly ring out with sincerity.

The older Winchester deleted the photo with a series of key strokes that the phone was lucky to survive. Andy winced with each one even as he made a valiant attempt to steal his phone back before the deed could be done. Said valiant attempt ended with Andy on the floor in a partial headlock, Dean now manipulating the device literally in front

of his face while he pinned him to the ground (kid should have known better than to tackle a Winchester. Even a former Jedi).

"Don't bother," Sam said to Dean at the same time as the older Winchester cried out triumphantly, photo gone forever. That death glare transferred from the phone in his hand (and the top of its owners head) to the beanstalk still cutting up carrots like there wasn't a wrestling match going down on the linoleum behind him.

"What do you mean, 'don't bother'?" Dean growled. This photo was an attack on…on…well, on his person! (His manliness. It was an attack on his manliness, let's be honest). Such an attack warranted – no, *demanded* – retribution. His reputation would stand for nothing less! He tightened his grip around Andy's neck and the kid let out what could probably pass for "meep!" through his damaged vocal chords.

For a guy stuck in a headlock, pinned to the floor by his much larger (and stronger, and more experienced, and far, far more dangerous) surrogate brother, Andy was still way too smug for his own good. Sam looked utterly unsurprised by that fact, or by the series of images that assaulted both Winchesters shortly thereafter.

There was a flash of the standard digital icon for e-mailing and texting, then a smiling shot (like a polaroid that moved along the edges; a not quite still photo, but the nanoseconds of captured time just before the picture was taken) of Sam, one of Andy himself curtesy of the reflection of the upstairs bathroom mirror, and a third of Bobby, definitely less than smiling and all grump and gruff.

Dean, reeling from the rapid fire images, lost his grip on Andy and the kid scrambled away (making sure to 'accidentally' deliver a good kick to the solar plexus in his mad dash for freedom). Now wheezing as well as reeling, the older Winchester wasn't in the best of states to play Pictionary, so Sam did the translations for him.

"He already e-mailed the photo to himself, as well as me and Bobby." Sam swept all his chopped carrots into the large bowl of salad with a quick scrape of his knife along the cutting board. Because he was a rabbit in the shape of a man. Dean just glared and wheezed. "Texted it to us, too."

That glare transferred to Andy even as a sixth image came through. This one was a flash of memory, not unlike the bathroom mirror clip of Andy. It probably came from the kid exploring the house since it was an old but familiar picture in Bobby's den, one of the few

photographs sitting on his many bookshelves. He, Ellen, and another man Dean could only assume was Jo's dad, were all smiling, standing close enough for arms to be slung over shoulders, in front of the Singer house. Between their hair, clothes, and Ellen's baby bump, the photo was clearly from the eighties.

Sam glanced over at the former Jedi, who was leaning against the counter now, victorious smile firmly in place despite the fact that he was breathing like he'd just taken on the best WWE had to offer (and barely escaped with his life). The Samsquatch had his Samsquatch eyebrow game going strong. "Ellen too?"

Andy nodded, all proud of himself, and Dean sat upright, all wheezing one hundred and ten percent in the past, replaced with a growing redness that could only be described as apoplectic and the sudden need to choke on pure air.

"You sent that photo to *Ellen*?"

In the blink of an eye and the span of one very angry question, the former Jedi was once again hiding behind Sam, cowering for his life. He was kind of wondering if he should make a run for it (and just how far he'd make it) when Sam asked how he even knew Ellen Harvelle. Andy shrugged, miming a phone to his ear with one hand, the other pointing to Bobby's row of phones from behind the safety of Sam's very broad shoulders.

Both Winchesters followed the gesture, staring at the bank of phones and then back at Andy. Dean blinked at them, then their Jedi, while Sam frowned curiously. Ellen must have called using one of Bobby's 'supervisor' aliases for some reason or another, and Andy had been the one to pick up.

Which…

"How the hell did that even work?" Dean groused, climbing off the floor with a grunt. He was getting old, and that was coming from a body ten years younger than he'd gotten used to.

Andy made some quick gestures with his hands that meant absolute squat to Dean, but Sam's frown turned into mollified surprise.

"Huh," the younger Winchester said with a tone just shy of indifference, turning back to his vegetables. "Ellen knows Morse Code."

Andy smiled, Dean glared, Sam chopped. Then Dean chucked the kid's phone at his head (the delay had come as Dean decided whether to throw it at Sam, who was way to calm and unaffected by this, or Andy, who had started it. Starting it won). The kid managed to fumble-catch the device with minimal damage done to his face (pity, Dean thought) and the older Winchester dusted himself off and cracked his back, satisfied by the way Andy ducked back behind Sam in an abundance of caution and fear at the mere motion.

Dean decided heading out to the grill to see if he could help Bobby was a better use of his time than staying in the kitchen with Mr. Doesn't-Care-About-the-Destruction-and-Mortification-of-his-Brother's-Reputation-as-a-Manly-Man and the One-Who-Started-It. Both of whom he might just murder if he thought any further on the fact that there was no recovering from *Ellen Harvelle* having a picture of him and an angel cuddling in a home hospice bed. At least she didn't know Cas was an angel. Although…honestly, that might make it worse because it would bring up a lot more questions on just who that woman was that had gotten Dean all soft and snuggle-tastic (all accusations and word-choices that Dean would be firmly, *firmly* objecting to. People would be hearing from his lawyers. Just you wait). Not to mention that if Ellen had the photo, it was a damn downright certainty that *Jo* had seen it by now too. Jo, who was on her way to Bobby's house right that very minute. So, yes, he was going to go help Bobby outside with the grilling so he didn't go to federal prison for patricide.

Dean and Bobby made small talk about the weather and sports games neither of 'em actually knew or cared that much about (because Dean knew Bobby had been the one to put that blanket on him and Cas. Any other blanket and Dean might have had reason to think it was Andy, acting on that soft heart that actually did exist beneath the pranking, evil, underhanded little brother persona. That or he'd just been properly set dressing his blackmail scheme. But no, that blanket in particular meant something to Bobby. He was the only one who ever dragged it down from the top of the linen closet. Dean suspected why, but he'd never asked. Just knew it meant something over the years when he or Sammy or the both of them together woke up tucked under that old, hand-made quilt. (He was trying *not* to think about it meaning anything now. Nope. Not at all. He had enough of that going on in his head thanks to Angela Garrett. He did not need to add Bobby's opinions or hints into the mix.) So, Bobby had definitely seen him and Cas sharing a bed and was probably the one who'd gotten Angela set up on the machines. Which meant he'd gotten an up close and personal view of the angel, curled on her side, spooning Dean

with her hand tucked up *under* his shirt. And *that* was why they were now making small talk about the weather) until the ribs were declared done. They were just pulling them off when the sound of two cars – engines rumbling and tires crunching packed dirt and small rocks – came from around front.

Jo and her entourage had arrived.

"Good timing," Bobby said neutrally. Dean liked to think it was neutral because hewas feeling anything but, trying not to moan and groan about having to face Jo Harvelle when she'd most definitely seen photographic proof of him cuddling with a mystery woman. She would definitely *not* be making small talk about the weather.

The older Winchester picked up the platter of ribs – an old ceramic dish that looked like it'd survived from the eighties right along with that picture of the Harvelles – and headed for door to the kitchen. "I'll, uh, get these cut up. You and Sammy go greet the invaders."

The plate of meat was lifted off his hands faster than Dean could blink, Bobby holding it and the back door open already, leaving Dean to stare and wonder how the hell he'd moved that quickly (or smoothly). The expression on the old hunter's face wasn't letting him off easy, either. Bobby easily saw through that magnanimous, *'oh, but* you *first, sir!'* bullshit like he hadn't been born yesterday (which, he *hadn't*, thanks very much). He gestured with his ball-capped head for Dean to get his butt moving inside. "*You* can go mingle since they're here for you, ya idjit, and *I'll* serve up dinner."

Dean definitely went for a frown, though given the raised, unimpressed eyebrow he got in return, it was probably closer to a defeated pout. Still, the hunter headed inside, already hearing his brother's deep voice coming from the front of the house. Accepting his fate (bracing for it, more like), Dean headed for the front door, walking into the narrow foyer of the Singer house in time to reel back at the nothing-short-of girly-ass squeal.

"Andy!"

Jo had the kid pulled down into a hug. The girliest friggin' hug Dean had ever seen. Her arms were wrapped around his neck, smothering his face into her shoulder. Mother frigign' hell, she even had one leg tucked right up off the ground, bent at the knee like a goddamn damsel in distress as she hung off him like arm candy. Dean could only stare, wondering if he should get the holy water, because there

was no way *that*, in any way, shape, or form, Joanna Harvelle. None. Not any version Dean had ever gotten to see.

(Although that wasn't entirely true. Dean had seen that same look in her eye before. That teasing smile like she'd found a puppy to take home and spoil rotten. It was the same look Jo had after she'd been introduced to Cas and gotten over the 'yeah, right, an *angel*' phase. It was that look that had taken over her face when Cas downed about twelve shots and thought he might finally feeling a tingle. It was the look of a woman who had got their manicured claws around something they found *adorable*.)

(It was a scary look. A look to be feared by sane men everywhere.)

Andy, meanwhile, flailed in her arms with meagre fight, largely for show, but otherwise was doing absolutely nothing to free himself from Jo's octopus arms. He actually looked like he was enjoying himself. Which meant Dean was gonna murder him, soon as he figured out how to detach the two from their newly merged hips.

"My favorite Jedi! It's good to see you," Jo announced with a wide smile as she finally pulled away, leaving Andy to gasp a breath of free air and grin right back, still half bent over to make up their three and a half inch height difference. Jo's smile, though, started to turn down at the corners when Andy didn't say anything back. He just kept smiling wanly, straightening up with a self-conscious shrug when Jo's grin turned into a confused frown and she unfurled from him, stepping back. Her eyes flickered down to his neck, ever wrapped as it was these days in several layers of clean, white bandaging. "What's wrong? What happened?"

The last question was directed at Sam and Dean, both standing to the side, with increasingly somber expressions. Andy drew her attention back to him with a shrug of his shoulders and a larger, more confident swipe of his hand across his neck; a pretty standard symbol for muteness. And, as it turned out, one that also worked as an explanation for his injury. At least for Sam and Dean, who knew that the kid's throat had been slashed.

Though, given the stormy look taking over Jo's eye as she glanced between the three men again, she'd picked up the gist of it. After all, she knew what Andy could do with his voice. It wasn't a giant leap to assume someone – or something – might have been interested in taking that away.

"Bad hunt," Dean answered, though, since the silence stretched and he knew Andy couldn't actually do it for himself. He kept his voice stoically neutral, more than aware of Asa Fox and Bucky Sims standing just inside the front doorway. They'd come in behind Jo, jovial enough, each with a bag slung over one arm and a case of beer tucked under the other, but they'd quickly noticed the shift in mood.

Jo was frowning worse, now, but Andy bumped her in the shoulder with a loosely clenched fist and smiled widely, delivering two thumbs up. He was alright. Everything was alright. He followed it up with the actual words, signed messily, but with growing confidence at least. He didn't expect the blonde to understand, but he was starting to get (and, oh-the-horror, even *agree* with Bobby) that learning ASL was important.

To his surprise – and that of at least three other people in the room – Asa Fox signed back.

'Dude!' Andy all but exclaimed with his hands, eyes wide and grin ear-to-ear. He had to spell the word out, since after *three hours* of searching on the web, it had become depressingly obvious there wasn't a dedicated ASL sign for one of his all-time favorite words (which was, frankly, unacceptable in Andy's book. He was currently thinking up his own, but such an awesome word required an awesome sign, so he was taking his time). *'You sign?'*

Asa pointed at himself with his free hand, then raised it to his forehead, palm curled, and tapped his fingers against his skull twice. That same hand lowered, intent to form another word, but with a grimace, Asa floundered, forgetting the sign for what he was trying to say. He ended up waving his hand side to side, which was definitely not the official way to tell someone you only knew a little ASL.

If Andy had a voice left to do it, he would have laughed. He liked this guy already.

Asa shrugged sheepishly and said to the group, "I only know a couple words. Dated a girl a while back who had deaf parents. She taught me a little. It sorta stuck with me, don't know why."

Even as he spoke, Asa's dominant hand was running through the ASL alphabet almost absentmindedly. It was clear most of the movement was muscle memory now. He screwed up every couple of letters and had to actually think to get the sign right. It was something he'd probably run through the motions of when bored, lying in bed trying

to fall asleep. Or maybe he'd done it with his lover, curled up against her warm, naked body as she giggled into his neck, tickling the sweat-cooled skin there with every breath as she fixed his hand positions, again and again, for many nights until his muscles remembered every slide of her fingers against his skin, ever position they had formed with her assistance.

(Or, it was possible, Andy watched way, *way,* too much television and far too much of that much was trashy romance flicks and teenage dramas.)

Andy left Jo's side to clap the guy on the shoulder. Asa had himself a new fan. Which was ridiculous, Dean thought, watching from the sidelines. Because everyone talked legend of how Asa Fox could win anyone to his side in the span of about six heartbeats – usually with a smile alone – but seeing it in person was something else. (It was not fair, is what it was. No one should be that charismatic and cool and stupidly perfect.)

(And Dean's inner fanboy was *losing* its *shit* right about now. Seriously, the older Winchester was fighting a smile, pulling his face repeatedly back down into the serious frown that this serious discussion about a serious, devastating injury deserved. Given the way Sam was looking at him with distorted concern and Jo was giving him the unimpressed eyebrows, he probably just looked constipated.)

Then Andy tugged Jo's bag off her shoulder like the gentleman he was and, with a sweeping gesture, beckoned them further into the house. (Also not fair. If Dean had tried to pull that move with Jo, she'd have elbowed him right in the belly and called him a chauvinist. But Andy got away with it because he looked like a kicked puppy that was physically incapable of hurting a fly let alone judging it based on gender.)

(Andy. Their Andy. The *Sith Lord* and punk little brother extrodiare, who could fry your brain with his mind. But yeah, no, he was *totally* harmless. Uh-huh.)

As Jo entered Bobby's Den, Asa and Bucky following behind (they'd clearly been in the Singer house before given the confidence with which they navigated past the piles of books and clutter of occult), Andy turned to the Winchester brothers. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively Dean's way and the older Winchester rolled his eyes on default. He stepped into Andy's space, the kid tilting his head up to stare at the taller hunter, eyebrows still going, and Dean took the

strap of Jo's bag from where he held it over his shoulder like some suave suit jacket or something.

"Dude. She thinks of you as a puppy."

Sam walked past them with a head shake and nothing to say. Andy's face fell momentarily, digesting the words, then it scrunched up in thought. He tilted his head back and forth, like he was debating his options. Then, with a shrug, the kid's face spread back into that wide, open grin and he gave Dean two thumbs up, eyebrows back to waggling.

'I can work with that.'

Dean rolled his eyes with a grunt – why did he bother?! – and walked away shaking his head too, leaving the Sith Puppy Lord to follow, grinning like an idiot.

-o-o-o-

They made it as far as the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Bobby was serving up the ribs, sides, and salad (ugh, *Sam*) onto an assortment plates while Asa got the beer in the fridge and Bucky, Jo, and Andy started rounding up chairs and extra table-slash-any-surface-will-do space. They all paused briefly at the noise, but no one but Sam and Dean looked surprised, glancing at each other and then Bobby. It became clear by the fact they were the only ones to do so, that everyone else had been whatever new company had just shown up.

Dean deadpan glared at his surrogate family, Bobby pointedly not looking and Jo busy taking a sip of her beer, before he stomped his way to the front door. He wasn't entirely surprised to find Ellen standing on the other side of it, a twenty-four pack in one hand and a grocery bag of what looked like pretzels and snacks in the other.

"What is this, an intervention?" Dean growled somewhat low in his throat. Cuz it sure wasn't a hunter's picnic. Those weren't a *thing*.

"Jo called me." Ellen shrugged one shoulder. "Seemed important."

"Nice of you to give us the heads up." Dean stepped aside to let her in, though the pointed look he leveled her way was returned with nothing but a 'mom' smile.

"Would you have stuck around if I had?"

Dean frowned, all narrowed eyes and affronted brow, because yeah, he would have. Probably. Maybe.

The older Winchester grunted as Ellen bodily handed him the case of beer as she walked past, right to his stomach. He dutifully followed with a grimace once he 1) was sure he wasn't going to drop the case and B) could breathe into his stomach again.

"Hi, mom," Jo called from the kitchen. Asa was pulling another two beers from the fridge – presumably for Ellen and Dean, since everyone else already had one. Andy was doling out the plates of food, passing it over shoulders as most of the crew settled in seats around the table or kitchen. Asa passed Ellen her beer with a charming smile and a wink.

"Ellen."

"Asa."

Dean set the case of beer on Bobby's desk and did *not* think about those two together. Asa was only a handful of years older than him (less than a decade), which, in comparison, put Ellen closer to his mom's age, a connection Dean did *not* want to think about. So he decidedly did not. Bobby apparently agreed with him, making a harrumphing sound of sheer disapproval and *'best watch yourself in my house, boy'* that had Asa laughing. Ellen swatted the old flirt with her free hand, then took an offered plate loaded with ribs and chips and multiple salad types (only one of them actually consisting of lettuce). She decided to settle in a chair next to Bobby (conveniently vacated by Bucky only seconds earlier, who happened to like living and knew better than to get on Ellen or Bobby's bad side in any way, shape or form. Unlike his idiotic best friend). Bobby seemed all sorts of pleased with this, if you knew where to look past the gruff and the grump and the glare.

Dean actually had to look away for a moment, eyes dropping to the rug in the den as he remembered another timeline for those two – one with a happier ending for them both – that would never exist because, last he checked, the Titanic had hit an iceberg and sunk in the middle of the North Atlantic. Which was a stunningly depressive thought for an entirely different reason than the hundreds of souls lost at sea.

A beer popped into his vision and Dean's head snapped up. Asa was standing in front of him with that friendly smile of his. The older Winchester cleared his throat and took the beer with an appreciative

nod, stowing his crap as far back in his head as he could manage.

"Thanks, man."

"Sure thing. Gonna join us?" Asa tilted his head back to the kitchen, and Dean realized that he'd been hovering on the edge of the room, still in the den, note quite joining the congregation of hunters as they started chowing down and clinking bottle necks like it was a regular family together with beer and grub and maybe even a ballgame later.

Not that the Winchesters had much experience with those sorts of things.

Sam was watching him from the table, his gigantor frame hunched over in a chair half his size, sitting kitty corner with cricket legs bunched up around the leg of the table. His look said something comically caught between, *'I understand your plight and sympathize,'* and *'Don't you dare leave me in here alone with them, Dean, I will murder you.'* The older Winchester huffed, shook his head, and took a swig of beer.

"Course," he answered casually, Winchester smile back in place as he sauntered into the kitchen behind Asa Fox. He tried (and failed) to shove down the dread knotted tight in his stomach over what this was probably all about.

(There were only so many possibilities, really, and almost all of them pointed right back to him and Sam. Given the way Sam kept glancing to him, the younger Winchester knew it too.)

Ellen rapped the back of her hand against the table beside her, a clear indication for Dean to take the only empty seat left, right next to her. Dean glanced over at Asa, thinking of offering it to him (maybe as an out for sitting next to the woman who was clearly about to interrogate the hell out of him, but more so just because turnabout was fair play and Ellen had made the first move). But Asa was already settling himself against the kitchen counter beside Andy, who'd jumped up and was now sitting cross-legged beside the stove (ignoring Bobby's pointed looks to get down. Dean realized this likely a common battle). So, reluctantly, the man from the future took the corner seat across from his brother, Bucky stuck between them, and accepted a plate of food passed over his shoulder rather precariously by Andy, who hadn't moved from his spot on the counter, just leaned *really* far forward.

It sat completely untouched in front of him. Those knots in his stomach hadn't exactly left much room for an appetite.

"So." Ellen decided to take the reins of this intervention (it was really more like a battle charge: infantry in first, cavalry on reserve, ready to flank on their general's orders). She'd gotten a call from Jo once they were back on the road out of Cold Oak, updating her on the situation and their new destination of the Singer Salvage yard. The single mother had had a choice to make; whatever was going on, she knew it was bigger than Dean or Sam were letting on and now her daughter was a part of it. Which left Ellen with a decision to make. And she'd chosen to show up. "You gonna tell us what the hell's going on, boys?"

There was a long beat of silence, filled mostly with Sam and Dean exchanging a silent conversation held entirely in worried looks, dark eyes, and raised eyebrows. Occasionally, they included Bobby in the chat. He seemed as talkative as ever, face hardly moving, and yet he got his meaning across, clear as ever.

"Before we get into that…" Dean purposefully turned away from Ellen to nod at Bucky, Asa and Jo, his eyes settling on the last of the three. Jo straightened a little under the attention, game face pulled on. Asa had likely taken lead on the hunt, but it was Ellen they'd called for help and her daughter she'd picked to do the job. Besides, Jo was his friend and deserved the recognition. "Cold Oak was empty?"

Her pretty brown eyes glanced towards Asa and Bucky, but they both gave her the lead and with that her confidence was sufficiently bolstered. She met Sam and Dean's gaze each in turn before nodded solemnly at the older of the two. "We searched the whole town, Dean. Found nothing. Well, nothing living. Some old police tape, what looked like blood stains in a couple places." No one missed the way Andy rubbued absently at the bandage around his neck, but most didn't see the reaction for what it was. "That was it. We searched the woods too. Nothing. No girl, no psychic kids. Just, a lot of restless spirits and that Acheri demon."

"Thanks for the heads up on that, by the way," Asa piped in, tipping his beer in the boys' direction. "Ran into that bastard about fifteen minutes into our search."

"Red ribbon 'round the neck worked like a charm," Bucky added with a smile, lips stained with barbeque sauce from the rib in his hand.

On top of the counter, Andy smiled bitterly, dropping his hand from his neck, but only Bobby and Ellen were facing him well enough to notice. Bobby gave the kid a sympathetic nod, which Jo caught, following over her shoulder to her cross-legged friend. Her eyes

dipped down to his neck and then snapped back to his face in shock. She turned fully around in her chair, white-knuckled fingers gripping the back of it.

"The Acheri did that?" Her gaze darted down again and Andy raised his hand almost self-consciously, fingers barely skirting the edge of the bandages once more before he dropped his hand. He still didn't like to touch it, not consciously, at least. He couldn't shake the expectation of pain every time he did, even if it was healing well enough and only hurt on the bad days.

Andy shook his head, gaze locked on his lap, even as Dean said, "It's a long story."

"You got somewhere else to be?" Ellen challenged, all heads snapping her direction at the sharp words.

Dean ground his teeth, biting back his own retort. Because yeah, he did. Out looking for Ava Wilson (although he knew they'd never find her). Or the new haunt Azazel was using for his battle royale (they'd never find that, either. Not without help. Not until it was too late). Or trying to stop Hell, in general, from unleashing the goddamn apocalypse. Or, shit, how about just letting everyone finish a nice meal with some halfway decent company for once instead ofruining everyone's appetite and the almost-pleasant evening?

But he couldn't come out and say any of that, now could he?

Sam shared a sympathetic look with him, but neither Winchester answered her question, or her daughter's. Ellen glanced between the two of them, then turned her head to the left to look expectantly at Bobby. The gruff hunter, friendly as the two of them might be, just shrugged his shoulders.

"Not my story to tell."

Ellen huffed with (admittedly fond) annoyance, but loyalty wasn't a fault she'd hold against anyone, especially Bobby Singer. So she turned those mama-bear, demanding eyes back on John Winchester's boys and tried a different tactic: some tough love. "Look, we know something's happening. Something big. A demon kidnapping psychics, dropping them in a ghost town in the middle of nowhere? That's not your everyday hunt, boys. And you know more than you're letting on. Now, far as I knew before showing up here, we were all on the same side."

She speared each of them in turn with that terrifying Harvelle look, daring them to tell her that had changed or she was wrong. No one spoke a word.

"Which means it's us versus them and far as I can tell, there side holds all the cards. 'Cept for whatever you've got that you're playing close to the chest." She didn't miss the way Dean winced and tried to hide it, or absently rubbed at his chest before dropping his hand once he caught his brother's eye. She didn't understand it, but damnit, she didn't like being on the outside of a bunch of secrets. Secrets got people killed in their business. She said as much, sharp and bitter, with a throat that was too closed up and water too close to her eyes, thinking of a husband and father long gone.

Jo's gaze lowered to her food, now left untouched. So did Dean's and Ellen knew they were both in the same headspace with her.

The barkeep cleared her throat, pulling on that shield of badassery that had let her keep her bar for so many years after Bill had passed on. "So spill. We got questions and we're not leaving without answers, boys."

Dean's eyes tracked to his brother and it was obvious that, despite him being the older one and, as Ellen suspected, the ringleader of all those secrets, they were in this together. Sam shrugged one shoulder, picking at his salad with a plastic fork. His food was barely touched either. Still, even with the obvious trepidation about this, he looked like the more optimistic of the two. Which wasn't hard, really, since Dean looked like a man on Death Row.

Damn, but did he not want to do this again. He didn't want to drag them into it. Not Jo and Ellen. Not when he'd promised he'd keep them out of it.

(An empty promise. One he'd always known had nothing backing it. There was no way he could keep them out. No more than he'd been able to keep out Sam or Bobby or Cas.)

"You said they were like family, Dean," Sam spoke quietly, well aware everyone could hear him, but there was no other way this conversation would – or could – go down. Of course, Dean had been talking about Jo and Ellen. Neither of them knew Asa or Bucky from Jack, regardless of what legend and hearsay had to say about their character.

Dean had thought well enough of Roy Dabb and Walter Loflin, at least

as far as hunters and reputations had gone. (They were, arguably, idiots, but that was neither here nor there.) And those sons of bitches had deposited a shotgun round each to his and Sammy's chests when they found out about the Apocalypse. So, yeah, Dean was sure as hell playing those secrets 'closer to his chest' this time around.

"Hey, man," Asa interrupted, raising his hands, one holding his beer. He was clearly picking up on the elephant in the space that existed between the two brothers. "Bucky and me can peace out. It's no big deal, we'll grab a hotel in town and meet up tomorrow."

Bucky looked put out by his buddy's offer. He was obviously curious about what was going on and probably had more than a passing opinion on what sticking their necks out by going to Cold Oak ought to get them in return. But Dean had the feeling Bucky was the type to follow Asa's lead, no matter what.

True to form, the guy didn't speak up and Asa continued with his offer. "This seems like a family thing and we only got an invite because we were escorting a pretty lady here."

He winked Jo's way. She rolled her eyes but also looked over to Dean, opening her mouth to protest. But those lips thinned into a line before she said anything, realizing that Asa had a reason to say what he had. She knew him well, him and Bucky, but the Winchesters didn't. Asa was just nice enough – nicer than the rest of them – to bow out tactfully. Jo looked down for a second, rethinking her words. She'd go into a firefight with Asa Fox any day, and she thought Dean would too, if he got to know him.

Jo looked up, locking onto Dean's gaze with a steadfast promise of her own. "They're good people, Dean. You can trust them."

The older Winchester wanted to fold to those soft eyes, the only part of Jo that wouldn't be hardened in the future by her dreams of becoming a hunter. But Dean didn't know if he could – if he was ready to – risk his brother, risk the angel sleeping upstairs or any of their friends, on a pair of hunters he didn't know. Even if they had been keeping Jo safe for months now.

Sam met his eyes, but the younger Winchester was deferring to him. His story to tell, his call to make. No matter how much of a role Sam had to play in that tale. He did, however, glance at Bobby for support either way, and Dean followed his gaze.

The older hunter mirrored the same shrug Sam had given when it

came to the Harvelles, one of the only ones at the table still eating the meal he'd bothered to cook. He tugged on the cap of his hat with the hand not covered in barbeque sauce, pushing it a little further back on his head. His gaze met Dean's with a mix of support and *'it's up to you*.'

"I trust 'em," is what he said aloud, nodding towards Asa and Bucky. "Besides, you two are gonna need all the help you can get."

Green eyes shuttered closed, not completely sure that's the answer he'd wanted. It was probably the answer he and Sam needed, but it meant this intervention train was going right on ahead, full steam.

Dean ran a hand over his face, then scrubbed it through his hair. Damnit, Bobby had a point. And his gut (and inner fanboy, admittedly) wanted to trust Asa Fox. He didn't know much about Bucky, other than that the pair had always been just that – a pair – but his hunter instincts weren't screaming to run away, either. His head sure was, but since when had Dean Winchester ever listened to that? No, he would trust Bobby and Ellen and Jo's word over his own brain any day of the week.

"Alright," Dean muttered on the release of a deep breath. He nodded, head bob jittery but decision already made. He met Sam's eyes first, then pinned a hardened look – the one not quite made in Hell but definitely influenced by it – on each of the hunters gathered in Bobby's kitchen, one by one. "Alright, but *nothing* that's said here tonight leaves this house."

Jo and Ellen exchanged glances. Asa held his gaze despite Bucky checking his way. But Dean wasn't playing here, and he wasn't about to spill ten years of secrets, some quite literally out of this world, to anyone who thought he might be.

"I'm serious. You're gonna hear some crazy shit and you don't have to be in – you can walk away from this at any point – but you don't breathe a word of what you heard here, either way. Everyone agrees to that right now or we're done."

There were plenty more glances exchanged, some of them hesitant, some suspicious, but no one moved. No one called it quits or opted out. That might have been because Bobby's glare was enough to pin them all in place, daring them to walk out on hunters in need. But mostly it was because hunters were damn near suicidal to start with and loyal sons of bitches to boot.

"Think we're all alright with that," Asa finally said, if only because no

one else was saying it. The guy even smiled in the middle of what was clearly about to be a shit show. "Gotta say, I owe Mary Winchester everything. So I'm in."

"We're not our mom," Dean countered immediately, and his tone might have sounded like a challenge, but his words were an out for a promise Asa didn't even know the details of.

Though he appreciated the offer as much as his brother, Sam added quietly, "You don't owe us anything, Asa."

"Maybe not, but you're her kids," Asa replied with a wide grin, one that said there was no way in hell one of Mary Winchester's boys was ever gonna talk him out of something he'd made his mind up about, years and years ago. Dean could relate. That smile slipped a little with his next words, though. "I'm too late to repay her – by years, it sounds like – so paying it forward to you is the next best thing I can do. I'd be proud to help, whatever you need."

"I won't hold you to that," Dean muttered, not loud enough for most to hear, because it was highly unlikely Asa had any clue what he was volunteering for. But Dean took in a deep breath at the lack of argument from anyone else, regardless. Because now he had to follow through, and he didn't want to. The breath he let back out wasn't shaky by sheer force of will alone. "Okay."

Now where to start. He'd really been hoping people would argue – flip the metaphorical table – so he didn't have to start anywhere. But when was that ever his kind of luck? Guess he'd tackle it like he had with Bobby: at the beginning. Only problem was, *which* beginning? Ah, hell. Probably the lie that had started all this and would need to be fixed before they could tell the rest.

'Okay, here goes.'

"Sam and Andy are psychics."

That statement hadn't even settled in the room before Ellen was jumping on it, spotting the lie it uncovered faster than a honey bear on a bee's hive.

"Just Sam and Andy?" she interrupted immediately, eyes narrowed.

Dean met her stony stare, hard as it was. In for a penny, in for a pound. "Yeah, Ellen. Just Sam and Andy."

-o-o-o-

She woke with a gasp, completely surrounded by darkness and a smell that reminded her of cleaning out her grandmother's house last year, only hours after the beloved woman's funeral. Ava sat upright with a jolt, but smashed her nose into a paneled surface right in front of her face. Not that she could see it. Everything was pitch black around her. Ava hissed, rubbing at the sharp sting of physical trauma, and reached out with her other hand to define the space around her.

It was small. Really small.

Oh god. She was in a closet. A closet with no light, given the dangling string she finally found that did nothing but make infuriating clicking noises every time she tugged it in desperate, near-hyperventilating panic.

"Okay, okay, breathe. Just breathe. You can do that." Ava Wilson searched every wall for a hint, an exit, a weapon, a light, *anything*. She found the latter, which was her last choice out of all of the others, but she'd take it. It was the hunting knife Sam had given to her, sans the leather sheath. It had been in her purse when she…. Her purse that she had dropped in shock when she'd come home to a dark house, no lights, and yellow eyes waiting for her in the shadows. She'd reached for the knife, even managed to unsheathe it, but that…that was the last thing she remembered.

"Oh god," Ava whispered, pressing her back to what she assumed was the back of the closet, though she couldn't exactly tell in the darkness. She clutched the knife to her chest and it felt like an untethered flotation device in the middle of the ocean. A life-saver, maybe, but how temporary of one?

Shaking, Ava reached out and started her search again. Sitting there clutching a knife wasn't going to get her out of this. Wherever *this* was. There were no nobs or handles to indicate doors, no lines of light to define an exit. Everything was just so dark.

So, naturally, her brain went right back to panicking.

"Let me out of here!" Ava screamed, not thinking enough to worry about who might be on the other side of any one of these walls. At best, maybe someone would hear and rescue her. At worst, at least she would give her kidnapper a headache. Ava banged on every surface she could find, kicking out once her hands started to hurt from hitting and slapping the sturdy, wooden surfaces.

"Hey, hey, hold on!"

Ava stilled at the other voice in the darkness, muffled by one of walls. She faced that one, hoping it was the way out. "Hello? Hello! Get me out of here! I'm trapped!"

"Yeah, I can see that," came the slightly huffy, annoyed voice of another woman just on the other side of what Ava prayed was a closet door (it was possible, after all, that this wasn't a closet but an upright coffin or, or…something else equally terrifying and horrible and not worth thinking about right now, she had enough to panic about, thank you very much!) "Hold on, I'm trying to get it open. It's dark as shit out here."

Ava didn't really care about the quality of 'out there' just so long as it was not 'in here'. Although, once the woman currently rescuing her did get the door open after a loud thud of something heavy toppling over and the horrible creaking and splintering of wood that had been nailed shut, Ava stumbled out into almost equal darkness to what had been the interior of the closet. Then, and only then, did she care about the quality of 'out there' and wish that it was not, as it indeed was, dark as shit.

"Oh god," she whispered into the jacket of her rescuer, who had caught her as she stumbled out of the closet. The woman was stiff as a board while Ava clung to her, arms held up and out wide to the sides, like she couldn't stand the fact she was being touched. Ava was too busy being relieved to be properly offended, though she did manage to upright herself and step away from the clearly uncomfortable woman. "Thank you. Thank you for getting me out of there."

"Uh, yeah, sure. No…no worries." The woman, no older than Ava herself, had blonde hair, or what Ava thought was probably blonde. It was really hard to tell in the dim lighting. In fact, the only light source seemed to be coming from a phone clutched in the woman's hand, the flashlight component on the back shining towards the ground.

"You have a cell phone?" Ava asked rather dumbly. Hers had been in her purse. It had been one of the first things she realized while trapped in that darkness, searching for a light or a way out. Now Ava turned around to the space she'd come barreling out of only seconds ago. It was a closet, and looking at it now, she was surprised it had held her at all. The door was old, the wood splintered and paint peeling, the hinges rusty. The walls surrounding it were covered in old, dirty wallpaper that was peeling back in some places and missing

entirely in others.

They…they were in a house of some sort and it had seen much better days. More of it was falling apart than wasn't and the furnishings that were left were few and far between (as were any signs of life other than Ava and her new friend).

"Where are we?" Ava asked, spinning around to complete a little tour of what was quickly becoming the world's least fun funhouse. Everything was old and dark, windows boarded up so that the only light came from the phone clutched in her rescuer's hand. Ava darted forward for a light switch as soon as she saw one. It was an old style one, probably installed in the forties or earlier, like the rest of the house. It flipped up with a loud, sharp click, but nothing happened. Ava tried not to let the disappointment drown her and she clutched that flotation device – Sam's knife – tighter to her chest as she backed away from the wall and its useless light switch.

"There's no electricity," the huffy woman spoke up from behind her, though she sounded mostly scared, despite the attitude. "I already tried."

"Have you tried calling for help?" Ava asked instead, taking deep and even breaths to keep from hyperventilating. Brady had always encouraged her to breathe through her panic attacks. Lord knew they'd had plenty of practice while trying to plan a wedding.

Oh god, Brady. Her fiancé would be panicking right now. He hadn't answered when she'd come home, but in the dark Ava hadn't even been sure he'd been there. He'd be so worried when he realized she was missing.

"No signal," the other woman answered, glancing down at the phone with a glare that was probably regret and terror, but mostly looked like moody anger. Ava tried to ignore all that. This woman had rescued her from a closet. She was right up there with Jesus and Taylor Swift right now.

Except…. Except hadn't Sam warned her about being kidnapped and waking up somewhere with other people like her? That's why he'd insisted she take the knife. Because those other people…those other people were going to kill her.

Ava took about six immediate and hasty steps away from the woman, even though she was the only light source in the creepy old house. She…she didn't look like a killer. Heck, Ava was the one with the

knife. And if this lady wanted to murder her, wouldn't she have just left her in the closet? Or done it when Ava had been clinging to her like a drowning woman?

She eyed her supposed rescuer cautiously, realizing she was getting an equally wary look in return. Well, she had just leapt across the room like realized the lady had fleas or something. Ava cleared her throat and tried to clear her panicking mind. "Uh…I'm, um, Ava."

"Lily," came the simple reply, filled with suspicion and something Ava wasn't sure what to make of. Attitude, for sure, like an angsty teenager.

Ava swallowed, fingering the knife she was still clutching to her chest. "Um, do you know how- how we got here?"

Lily shook her head, looking away and shining the light from her phone around the house. There really wasn't much to see. It looked like a pretty big house. They were in a hallway of sorts, the closet Ava had been trapped in was the under-the-stairs sort (no wonder she'd smashed her face on the angled, low-hanging ceiling). There were at least three rooms visible just from where they stood, along with an upstairs, obviously. The whole place looked like one of those big mansions from that TV show Brady liked to watch. The one about hunting ghosts.

Oh god. Ava shoved that thought as far from her head as she possibly could. There was no such things as ghosts, she reminded herself and then said it two more times just for good measure. There was no use in putting *that* kind of thought in her head right now. She and Lily clearly had enough to worry about.

"I don't know," Lily answered the question Ava had already forgotten she'd asked. "I woke up over in that room."

She gestured with the light to what might have once been a parlor. There was only half a chaise left now, and the windows were boarded up behind incredibly sorry excuses for curtains. "I was in my house, alone last night. I have *no* idea how I got here."

The woman sounded both petulant and pissed about that, and Ava took some heart in their shared predicament. Maybe that meant Lily wasn't here to kill her (oh, she hoped not, but she also kept that knife close. Sam had been pretty adamant).

"The only doors I can find are locked and I bounced a fucking *chair* off

one of the windows once I got a couple of the boards off. They're, like, safety glass or something. I don't know." Lily turned in a slow half circle, light catching on holes in walls, threadbare rugs and crooked sconces that wouldn't light anyway. Ava didn't like this place, wherever they were. "I was trying to find another way out when I heard you scream."

Ava blushed slightly at that but quickly put her embarrassment aside. She'd been terrified (fairly, in her opinion) and there was no shame in that. She was *still* terrified. "Well, maybe we should try-"

There was a flickering of light – Lily's phone suddenly cutting out, then blinking back on, then off and on again – and a shift in the air, like the room wasn't as big as it had been a minute ago. Or maybe they were suddenly smaller? Ava didn't know. All she knew was that one minute she was turning towards Lily, staring wide-eyed at the phone and praying the battery wasn't dying, and the next there was a third person in the house with them.

Lily screamed and Ava raised Sam's knife on instinct, scrambling back from the man who'd literally *appeared* out of *nowhere* between the two women.

He was older, middle aged, dark-haired and…kinda dirty. His coat was rumpled and stained. He swayed back and forth, like he was trying to keep himself up right. The guy looked…drunk, staring unseeing, not even looking at either woman that he stood less than five feet from.

"H-Hey," Ava tried but it came out weak and quiet. She was still holding the knife out in front of her but the thing was shaking as badly as she was. Realizing that was hardly going to save her if this man was a threat (and, honestly, he looked more likely to fall over all on his own than do any real damage attacking them), Ava stiffened her grip and steeled her nerves. "I said, hey!"

She practically screamed it, sourcing all that fear and terror, trying to funnel it into confidence. Mostly it came out sounding like anger, but she'd take it. The guy, however, didn't even move. Was he deaf? Well, Ava supposed that wasn't entirely accurate; he did keep swaying like a drunken fool.

"What the hell…?" Lily asked, phone raised to light the guy. The sudden sound of a train horn blaring in the distance caused all three of them to jump. The man in front of them spun around, looking far

beyond them with red-rimmed, bleary eyes.

"Did you hear that?" Ava asked, suddenly hopeful. Train meant tracks and tracks meant a road to civilization. If they could just get out of here-

"What the-!" the sharp intake of Lily's breath and abrupt cut off of her words turned Ava back around. The guy in front of them was lit up like he was standing in front of a damn searchlight. Like, *right* in front of one. Lily checked her phone around, twisting it around until the beam of her flashlight lit up her own face, then back to the guy who was still lit up like a Christmas tree (in more ways than one). It was very obviously not her flashlight doing it. For one, he seemed to be the only thing lit up by it.

"What-" Ava took a step forward when the man's eyes suddenly went wide and that train sounded again, only a hell of a lot closer. Close enough to shake the house and deafen the two women. They clapped their hands to their ears.

And then the guy went flying. Flying back like he'd been hit by something traveling a thousand miles an hour, his face pancaked and front blossoming with blood. Then he was gone and the house was back to near pitch black and a terrible, awful silence.

Lily screamed. She dropped the phone, the beam of the flashlight bouncing in the fall, landing on its side and blinking out permanently with a shatter of plastic and glass.

"No, wait!" Ava tried to stop her, but Lily was already gone, bolting down the hallway they were in and disappearing into the darkness that filled the rest of the house. Ava tried to breathe through the panic that was building its way up and out of her stomach, overtaking her lungs and chest, clawing up her throat. "Oh god."

Oh god. Oh god, oh god, oh god oh godohgod.

She stared at the space where the man had been, the space where he'd gone…flying. After…after being hit…by a train. In the middle of a house. An invisible train in the middle of a…a…*haunted* house.

"Oh god," Ava whispered, staggering back in the darkness, knife clutched to her chest, utterly alone. Only not really. Because that… that had been a ghost. She'd just seen a ghost. Oh god. She was locked – trapped – in a haunted house and very, very much not alone.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Pop quiz time, guys! Where's Ava! XD

The Titanic: This was a reference to an episode in Season 6 where Balthazar unsank the Titanic (Cuz, ya know, he didn't like the movie), which changed a whole bunch of things, including Ellen and Jo's deaths. Instead, Ellen was alive and living a (ridiculously sweet, stupidly heart-tuggy, sickeningly wonderful) domestic life married to Bobby.

Roy Dabb and Walter Loflin: This was a reference to 5.16 The Dark Side of the Moon. Roy and Walter were the two hunters who killed Sam and Dean with shotguns, and they wake up in Heaven and go looking for Joshua and the Garden. The show did not give the hunters last names so I took the last names off the two writers of that particular episode as tribute.

Random Ramblings: So, for some reason I'm not entirely sure of, I totally lost confidence in my ability to write Jo (it was Andy. Throwing in her squealing-like-a-teenage-girl-over-a-cute-puppy reaction to Andy made me doubt myself, even though just-how-*not*-Jo-it-was was entirely the point. Still. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh right!) So I decided it was time for a refresher and watched 5.10 Abandon All Hope (also an excuse to re-watch a later season. I, admittedly, am a little tired of the early ones with all my re-watches and research) Anyway, *again* long story short, that is the episode where we meet Crowley for the first time. And oh. Oooooh, I forgot just how much I love Crowley/ Mark Sheppard. And his intro scene ends with a narrow eyed Cas a hundred feet away going, "Got him." And…and guys…I think I gotta write a Cas 'N Crowley buddy cop story. I don't have a plot, I don't have anything, but I have a pair of buddy cops without the buddy and they need my attention. And I gotta get Cas a pair of sunglasses that Crowley tells him to take off constantly

("No, not like that, kitten. You have to take them off slowly, like what you're about to say is a monumentally important moment." "How is a poorly timed pun important-" "Don't ruin this for me. You ruin everything for me. Give me this." "…..sigh. What is the line you wanted me to say?")

Where were we? Oh right! Author's notes!

(Okay, I have a slight plot. Buddy cop up until they get into

trouble, and then Crowley bolts (because he's Crowley and he saves his own skin first almost on instinct) and *then*, here's the best part, he's gotta go to the boys and tell him he lost their angel…(and beg for their help to get him back) ('Beg' here meaning try-to-point-out-that-Dean-really-wants-to-save-his-trench-coated-lover-boy-more-than-he-wants-to-murder-one-measly-demon-(king)-right?) XD I can work on this. I can totally tackle two stories at once (*quickly shushes any readers of any other story I currently have going on, all of which are incomplete because, and I quote from my own author's notes: "I can't write two stories at once"*) Pffft, I so goooot this!)

(Did I already mention I can't start *another* story, guys?! What is with my brain? It went from no-creativity-we're-on-lockdown-time to LET'S-WRITE-EVERY-STORY-EVER-COME-ON-LETS-GO-GO-GOGOGOGO! *head thud*)

Up Next: Our little intervention-slash-sharing-chat-slash-Dean's-worst-nightmare-(Oh-the-shiver-shake-feels-of-emotional-support!) continues, while Persephone pokes at Chuck and "Chuck" pokes right back. Azazel has a few choice things to say about Hell, Lilith has a few choice things to say about him, and Crowley just has a few choice words in general about all of this and his unfortunate role in it. Lucky him.

Chapter 104: Season 2: Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: That's right, it's the MORTON HOUSE! First, kudos to **Lullyanne**, who guessed the new location several chapters ago from Tom's leap year reference! That is some sharp sleuthing, friend, and I was ecstatic to see someone catch that hint ;D Second, kudos to everyone who remembered the poor train-pulverized Death Echo from the Morton house episode! Third, bonus kudos to those who identified the location not by name, not by episode, not even by the presence of the Ghostfacers, but by "the place where gay love pierced the veil of death." I just about died, so extra kudos to **Vaesse**, and **Colored Blue** for very nearly killing my computer via spit-take.

Chapter Reference – God's a Penguin (he's really not)**:** When Persephone disappeared for a weekend (to be dragged on a road trip to Minnesota with her favorite road trip buddy, Tom!), Chuck started feeling a little lonely, and gave himself a pep-talk about how he wasn't lonely, he was a Lone Wolf. Okay, well, maybe not a lone wolf. Penguin? How about a penguin. Penguins moved in groups but were also independent, got to where cute little tuxedos, and mated for life. Yeah, Chuck was totally a penguin. (Don't worry, it didn't make sense then and it won't make sense below, either.) See the end of **Chapter 68** for a refresher.

Chapter Reference – Azazel revealing what he did to Sam as a kid: Quick reminder that in this story, Azazel was the one to tell Sam how he got his powers. The words he specifically used were, "Bled in your mouth, tiger, and now you've got super powers! Not a bad trade, right?" For a refresher, see **Chapter 17** (Holy crap that was so long ago…)

Chapter Warnings: Boy do we have a lot to cover! Chuck and Persephone are discussing whether penguins come in packs or herds (they're really not, but Chuck can dream). Dean and Sam are discussing the merits of demon blood in baby formula (they're also really not, but I'm on a roll here), and Lilith, Azazel, and Crowley are discussing plans that largely involve screwing either each other or the Winchesters. Or both? Why not both!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 71

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A flash of paper covered in squiggles of black appeared rather abruptly in his field vision, obscuring everything else, including the digitized version on his laptop screen that had been at a far more readable distance before the interruption. Man, he'd been mid-sentence, too. Now he'd already forgotten his train of thought. Chuck blinked until the paper under his nose came into focus. It was the last three pages of his latest chapter, printed out for Stephanie to read an hour ago and now shoved in front of his face by said editorial assistant. He stretched his neck to see just over the top of the paper, where his laptop still sat, that unfinished sentence of the next part of the story – the beginnings of Dean's attempt to explain himself to his friends and family – just sitting there, waiting to be completed.

"Where is this?"

Chuck sighed, resigned to finishing that sentence later (when he'd have to sit, staring at it, trying to remember his train of thought and the words he'd been about to write because they, of course, had been perfect *then* and were nowhere to be seen now) and turned his attention to what his editorial assistant was pointing to. Steph's finger was tapping the last paragraph on the page, detailing Ava Wilson's unfortunate plight.

"Oh, the haunted house?" Chuck asked almost rhetorically. It became actually rhetorical when Steph didn't answer, just continued staring at him with those scary eyes, and Chuck remembered his editorial assistant wasn't much for unnecessary questions. "Uh, don't know, yet. I'll probably have to do some research, find a haunted house somewhere in the States I can borrow. Kinda sounds fun, actually."

Steph turned away from him, drawing the papers back towards herself with a customary frowny-glare focused on them instead of Chuck for once. She gave a noncommittal, absent-minded, "Mm," in return and the writer, already turning back to his laptop with the excitement of someone who might just catch that train of thought before it left the station (unlikely, but he could hope and dream), paused at the irregularity. He pulled his fingers off the keyboard (the resignation and regret of that lost train more distant this time) and instead turned

his full attention to his assistant, who seemed distracted. Which was unlike her.

"Did you…did you have an idea for where it should be?" He fiddled with his hands in his lap. He'd never asked for Steph's advice before, despite the fact that that was, hypothetically, the whole point of having an editorial assistant in the first place.

(He just kind of assumed other editorial assistants were less terrifying to talk to and therefore of more actual help. That, or other authors were braver than him. He was definitely going with the first one, even if the second was more likely.)

(It was at this point that Chuck reminded himself that he was a penguin. Penguins didn't have to be brave. Lone wolves had to be brave, but not penguins. Penguins had packs. Of course, Chuck didn't have a pack, so this analogy was quickly losing all steam and confidence. Herds? Did penguins have packs or herds? Gaggles? His fingers itched and the writer was halfway to turning back to the computer to Google-)

"No." Steph's refusal was sharp and pointed and made Chuck wince, fingers immediately withdrawing from the laptop once again despite the fact that he hadn't actually gotten anywhere near it and she was just answering his question (which he'd already forgotten he asked). Steph didn't seem as angry as the terse reply suggested, just thoughtful (okay, maybe a word slightly more negative than thoughtful. Perplexed? Oooh, *pensive!* Chuck reminded himself to jot that down when they were done. No use going for the keyboard now, he'd never make it). Stephanie was reading through those several paragraphs again, finger tracing along the page, that frown still pulling at her face in a way Chuck secretly found cute but would never even dream of voicing aloud for fear of a painful, slow, miserable death. "Although, given what we know of Aza- uh, the yellow eyed demon's plans from your writing so far…I imagine someplace secluded. Not easily gotten to."

The volume of her words dropped significantly, and Chuck found himself staring, distracted thoughts of penguins and laptops long gone, brain now laser focused on his editorial assistant. The writer would swear, up and down, right and left, that Steph sounded genuinely, actually honest-to-god *invested.* Which was more than he'd gotten out of her so far. Chuck's heartrate picked up. Could…could she actually be starting to…*like* his work? Is that- could that be what this was about?!

Stephanie dropped her arm, papers following, and turned back to him with that brisk formality that always made Chuck straighten up like he was in the Armed Forces. "The location must be far enough away from the Winchesters that when Sam is taken by the demon-" at Chuck's raised eyebrows, Steph merely raised hers right back, daring him to tell her she was wrong about what was coming for his protagonist down the road- "and relocated to this haunted house, it will be difficult for Dean to find him in time for whatever Yellow Eyes is planning."

The prophet swallowed a little roughly because, uh, yeah, those…uh, those were all good points. He should probably write them down. But mostly because Steph sounded *displeased*. (Maybe she, uh, was getting a little *too* invested? That certainly didn't sound like his editorial assistant, though.)

"Chuck…" His assistant paused as if weighing her words, which was a foreign sight on his regular weekday houseguest, who was sometimes so disciplined and in control that Chuck found himself wondering if she even had thoughts in those moments or was just executing internal programming like a robot. A cute, scary robot. Who liked to read books.

Maybe that could be his next series, if he survived this one intact.

The look she leveled his way seemed far too serious for their current conversation and he gulped. Scary, *scary* robot. Chuck's already wayward thoughts turned to the laundry. Had he done it recently? Did he have a clean pair of boxers to change into when this was all over and he'd soaked through the ones he was currently wearing which were *definitely* more than a day old? He honestly couldn't remember. He probably had a stick of deodorant lying around somewhere, at the very least. Well, he'd definitely paid the water bill last month, so at least he could shower if it came down to that.

Movement next to him drew Chuck's attention back to his assistant. Her hand was on his desk, her weight shifting into him with a subtle slide of those curvy hips. It was probably supposed to come off as innocent curiosity. Maybe a little incentivizing even. Chuck just found it *incredibly* intimidating and leaned away.

"What *is* Yellow Eyes planning?"

"Ah, ha ha." The writer suddenly laughed: a little sheepish, a lot relieved. That had not been what he'd been expecting her to ask. He…

okay, to be honest, Chuck hadn't really been expecting anything, because he hadn't had a clue what was going on other than his editorial assistant was really confusing sometimes and very scary all the time. Now, though, he felt back on somewhat familiar ground. Steph was always trying to wheedle what came next out of him, no matter how she denied it. (Chuck liked to think it was because Steph *was* invested in the story, but he knew it was more likely her way of reporting back to his publisher that he was actually working.)

The writer blushed and grinned all in one go and waggled a finger at her like she was a naughty kid with one hand in the cookie jar. He'd gotten away with it a time or two, and now he was (probably overly) confident in the tactic. "You'll have to read to find out."

Steph stared at him long enough to make him nervous, despite that confidence (which was now nowhere to be found). When he finally looked away, she sighed in that judgmental way of hers that went right to the heart of his creative soul, withering it to dust, and also sent pure panic to that admittedly tiny part of his brain that worried about things like deadlines, paychecks, bills, and job security. So, yeah, absolutely familiar ground again.

"You don't know, do you?" Oh, the judgement was tangible. He could feel it in the air. His soul (and his wallet) kept right on withering.

"It's still…uh, formulating!" Chuck leaned back in his chair, tilting it off the ground a little with a sheepish smile. He waved away her perceived concern with a flopping hand. "It'll come together, don't you worry."

She smacked the stapled pages of her chapter into his open palm with the brisk formality of a middle school principle delivering a detention slip. "I do not worry."

Chuck took the papers with a teasing smile and a glint of something older in his eyes that he wasn't even aware was there most days. "But you are, aren't you? Worried for Sam? And Dean, I mean."

Stephanie's eyes narrowed dangerously, that same school principle now considering full-blown suspension and a parent teacher conference (Chuck tried not to let his nerves show. She'd yet to actually get mad at him so, he figured his chances were good she was more bark than bite. Or, you know, scary glares and judgmental silences.)

"It's okay, you know," the writer stumbled on, those nerves showing

with a hesitant chuckle, which was then swallowed halfway through as her murderous look only increased. "Getting attached to characters and worrying about them is kind of the point of reading books in the first place. Isn't it?"

"I am a professional, Mr. Shurley. I do not worry," she repeated before turning on her heel (really, she was just missing the square-framed glasses, a so-tight-your-scalp-hurt-just-looking-at-it bun, and about six inches in stature and she'd have the whole principle thing nailed). Stephanie retreated to her chair near the window and, once settled, added (like a puffed up peacock defending its territory (nothing at all like a penguin, Chuck thought with a little sadness he couldn't place and definitely shook off because his thoughts were getting *weird* today)), "And I certainly do not get *attached*."

The writer stared at her, a little hapless and lost for moment (because he'd been *sure* that had been worry he'd heard in her voice…), before his look shifted into *more*. It morphed into the wisdom of someone far older who saw much more than they simply wrote down, into the petulant pout of a creator whose creations had just very much been insulted, and most certainly into the narrowed eyes of a challenge accepted.

"Yeah, well," Chuck put his fingers back to his keys, striking them with harsh determination as he muttered, "we'll just see about that."

-o-o-o-

"Sam and Andy are psychics."

Sam's eyes widened at his brother's words, his spine straightening, shoulders drawing back, all reflexively. He'd known Dean was going to tell everyone the truth about Azazel: what that demonic bastard had done to Sammy as a kid, about his plans and the shitstorm that was going to rain down on them in the next three or four years. But Sam hadn't realized Dean was going for broke; he was going to tell them *all* of it. Including the bit about time travel, which would also mean the part about angels, particularly the one sleeping upstairs.

(Okay, knowing his brother like he did, Dean would manage to leave out a lot of that anyway.)

"Just Sam and Andy?"

At Ellen's sharp question – the woman didn't miss a thing – Sam's gaze flitted to his brother, who looked a little green around the gills, but

was holding the elder Harvelle's stare with a rather convincing one of his own. The silence stretched. For just a moment, Sam wondered if Dean would take the out, throw himself into the group of psychics and freaks and kids with demon blood just to keep from having to explain that an *angel*, which no hunter here currently believed in (at least, none to Sam's knowledge) had sent him *back in time* to save the world.

Dean swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing with the movement, but his eyes didn't waver like the rest of him did. "Yeah, Ellen. Just Sam and Andy."

Jo shifted in her seat, face drawn down into what Sam privately thought was an incredibly cute frown as she stared at the older Winchester from across the table. "But Dean, I thought you said-"

"From birth?" Asa asked at the same time, his question far louder than Jo's, who'd spoken hesitantly to begin with.

Dean glanced between the two of them, but Jo didn't finish her thought or even seem to know fully what she'd been about to ask. So the focus of the conversation tilted Asa's way. It was obvious from his question that he was thinking about Mary Winchester, wondering if his personal hero had been a psychic as well.

Sam ducked his head a little, voice tinged with a bitterness he hid well, but not quite well enough. "Not exactly."

Before he said anything else, Sam turned in his chair towards the two leaning against the kitchen counter (or, in Andy's case, sitting on top of). It wasn't Asa Sam's eyes sought out, but the Jedi's. This wasn't just his story, after all. It was Andy's too, and he and Dean hadn't exactly had time to chat with their friend about this little secret council (in part because it was a surprise council to the people keeping the secrets. '*Thanks for that, surrogate family*'). Andy lolled his head side to side, an easy shrug on his shoulders that suggested he didn't mind being a part of the story being told, but Sam would have to do all the talking (the joke about his inability to do so was fully implied with a smirk, of course).

"What does that mean?" Bucky Sims broke the tense silence at the table, glancing between the two supposed psychics as they had a silent conversation. Sam turned back, eyes not quite meeting anyone's (which wasn't reassuring). It was proving difficult not to like Sam Winchester, though, even with the clear tension in the room and whatever craziness was going down with him and his brother and

these psychics. The younger Winchester was downright bashful, despite his six and a half feet of pure bulk and what was clearly skill backing it. Bucky had heard his fair share of Winchester stories and not all of them were about John. But Sam looked less likely to hurt a fly than he was to be some dangerous psychic (Bucky didn't assume most psychics were dangerous, but given the current feel of the room, it wasn't hard to put two and two together and get five.)

The kid (and he wasn't really a kid, although with his head ducked like that, shoulders slumped, and big brown eyes looking so damn down, Bucky was having trouble thinking of him any other way. Plus, he was *only* twenty something to Bucky's late thirties, so, yeah, the *kid*) sighed, like he was bracing for a beating. "I get death premonitions."

While only a revelation to Asa and Bucky (and that's what all this tension was about? Premonitions?! Bucky had a grandmother that was more dangerous than a psychic who happened to see death a little prematurely), the kitchen remained thick with unspoken questions. The Harvelles didn't know if there was more to Sam's abilities than they'd previously been told and were now starting to wonder. Given the little black raincloud hovering over the Winchester's heads (and Bobby's too, though it was hard sometimes to tell what was new raincloud versus the usual grumpy raincloud always floating over his ball-capped head), it seemed likely there was more to this story. After all, both boys had kept the details of their powers (or just Sam's powers now? Who knew what was going on with Dean or the game he was playing) largely to themselves. And neither Harvelle woman had ever been told the origin of those abilities. With the implication that Andy was somehow a similar case, maybe even linked…. Well, the hunting gears were turning and churning out nothing good.

"I…see people before they die," Sam clarified somewhat unnecessarily, but he was used to telling non-hunters, people who wouldn't necessarily believe him right off the bat, and he had *that* spiel somewhat memorized. "Sometimes in time to save them, sometimes, um…not." The younger Winchester looked away, whether from guilt or a replay of bad memories – or both – didn't matter much. It was obvious the weight the kid carried in tandem with this secret. A weight that wasn't getting any lighter with its divulgence. "But all my visions have been linked back to the yellow-eyed demon."

"Azazel." Seven pairs of eyes turned to Jo, who glanced around with more self-doubt than her confident voice had suggested. She still wasn't used to commanding attention among hunters. Most of them

ignored her or hit on her. She could get used to it, though. "That's… his name, right? The demon that killed your mom?"

"Mary was killed by a demon?" Asa straightened from where he'd been leaning against the kitchen counter. His hand was tight around his beer and the look in his eye was nothing short of anguish. Anguish and anger.

Briefly, because they really didn't have time at the moment, Dean wondered just what the story was between this guy and his mom. Whatever Mary had done saving Asa as a kid, it left one hell of an impression.

"Yeah," the older Winchester answered, voice catching ever so slightly on the admission. Even years – years and years – later, it was still so hard talking about Mom. So damn hard. Never seemed to get easier.

"Andy's mom, too," Sam added, confirming what the crew gathered around them had all started to suspect. Whatever was going on, the two of them being psychics was closer tied together than just a gift for the supernatural.

"Adopted mom, actually," Bobby said with his gruff voice, drawing the attention of the room to himself, but his eyes were locked on Andy. The kid was gesturing away, with still-bandaged hands (but no longer penguin fins, at least. He had five fully functional fingers, just wrapped in a collage of gauze, Band-Aids, and medical tape) forming clumsy Sign that was only understood by Bobby and Sam (mostly Bobby). "Kid says he never met his biological mother."

Andy nodded at the acceptable translation, dropping his hands to lean back on them, feet swinging against the counter cabinets. Despite the purposefully casual posture, there was a dark look in his eyes, distant but readable to those looking for it. After all, it was hard not to think of Weber, given the current conversation, and what his evil twin brother had done to their supposedly biological mother. It didn't matter if whether or not she'd meant anything to Andy; dousing someone in gasoline and setting them on fire just *wasn't okay*, abandonment issues or no.

"Why?" Asa asked, glancing between Andy and Sam, then briefly at Dean, who was obviously the head of this *Show-and-Tell*, even if Sam was the one doing the sharing. "What was the demon after?"

"Me." Sam's answer was curt, an anger buried beneath it that wasn't intended for anyone in the room. No one would blame him for it,

either. "Us, I mean. Andy and me. Kids, with, um, powers like ours. He, he finds them, found *us*, before we- when we were still young, and, and, um…"

"He finds kids – normal, human kids – who are six months old and bleeds in their mouth." Dean's sharp words, taking over when his brother started to flounder, silenced the room so completely that not even the chairs creaked beneath their occupants.

"What?"

"He does *what*?"

"Why!?"

The room erupted in questions. Asa pushed away from the counter, the concern and horror in his eyes earning him bonus points in Dean's book (not that Asa freakin' Fox needed more points in his – or anybody's – book). Bucky was white as a sheet, glancing between Bobby and Ellen like they might call the whole thing out as a bad prank. Ellen was shaking her head.

"That don't make any sense, kid," she argued, but Dean could see she just didn't want it to be true. He could relate. "Why the hell would a demon do that?"

"Because it gives you super powers," Sam muttered under his breath, the bitter and callous cut to his tone made Jo flinch beside him. He didn't notice, mind's eye stuck in the past, in the parking lot of a Faith Healer's church with a yellow-eyed murderer offering him a jar of blood for the first time.

"He's looking for someone," Dean said loudly over Sam's mumbling. They did not need anyone in this group thinking either of them were pleased about what Sam could do. What Andy could do either. Kid might have liked his abilities before, but Dean was pretty sure he had a different opinion of his luck now that his throat had been friggin' slashed because of 'em. "Someone special. One 'very special child."

The way the man said it, each word emphasized with distaste and frustration, was enough to clue any of the doubters in that this conversation, wherever it was going, was nowhere good.

"What child?" Bucky asked, but it was Ellen, staring narrow-eyed at the older Winchester, who realized what he was getting at.

"How special?"

Dean smiled at her, all teeth and no mirth. "The prophecy-fulfilling, world-ending kind of special."

"Well that doesn't sound good," Bucky muttered under his breath.

"Oh, it's not." That grin remained stretched, tight and ugly, across Dean's face.

Jo took a deep breath, spine straightening and hands splayed out on the table in front of her. Cataloguing the information and processing it to move forward. Hell of a hunter she'd be, Dean thought. Already was. "How bad?"

That smile-that-wasn't-a-smile dropped an inch as Dean met her eyes. God, he wanted to keep her out of it this time. He wanted that so damn badly. He was sure his eyes said as much, especially with the way hers narrowed, just daring him to keep her out of it. That was a Harvelle woman for you.

"Apocalyptic."

The silence that followed, thick and heavy as a dead body, was eventually interrupted by Bobby clearing his throat, garnering everyone's stunned attention. "Any of you ever been to Sunday School?"

The implication of the question, even in jest, was a dozen times heavier than that dead body in the space between them. It was an entire world of soon-to-be dead bodies, hanging in the air, just waiting to see what they'd do next.

Asa let out a slow whistle, startling a couple of the others. It was the needle that popped the balloon of tension; Ellen swore and Bucky slumped in his chair, hand fiddling nervously with his beer. Jo glanced between her mom and the two Winchesters, gauging how serious Bobby was.

"Are we-" she cut herself off with a headshake, blonde waves tossed back and forth. A short huff followed. Whether she didn't believe it or simply couldn't was unclear in her expression. "Are we talking about *the* Apocalypse, here?"

When no one answered in the following breath, Bucky, still slumped, took up the charge. It was clear from the fidgeting of his fingers

around his beer bottle that he was nervous, but the skepticism in his voice bordered on the edge of this all being a bad joke. "What, like raining hellfire? The four horseman? Oceans turning to blood and half the world going up in flames?"

"The damn devil walking the earth," Bobby confirmed with a stiff, unhappy nod. "That's the one."

It was interesting for those already in the know to watch, actually, having the distance and experience to watch it all objectively. It was clear Bucky didn't believe them. Jo didn't want to, but she knew better than to think her mom or Bobby or even Asa would pull this kind of joke. She didn't think Dean or Sam would either, which left only really bad options as to what this actually was. Ellen, though. Ellen was sharp as a tack and Dean should have known she was the one they should be most wary of in all this.

The Harvelle woman leaned forward, one arm braced on the table in front of her, Dean utterly trapped under her gaze with nowhere to run. "How do you know all this?"

Green eyes darted to his brother, but they were a bit too far down the rabbit hole to escape now. She'd given him an out at the start and he hadn't taken it. He probably still wouldn't if she offered it again, but damnit, Dean was really starting to wish he'd taken the red pill. Sam looked sympathetic, a little too pale, but as supportive as he could considering he wanted a role in this conversation about as much as Dean did. But in for a penny, in for a pound. Dean had started this, and he couldn't exactly call it quits just because he wanted to.

"Because I've seen it all before."

"In your visions?" Jo asked, not tentative but quite. She was as sharp as her mom, only less suspicious. She'd been stabbed in the back fewer times, seen less of the world – less of life – and lost less to it to be so wary and jaded.

"Thought you said Sam and Andy were the only psychics." Damn, but Ellen wasn't going to give him an inch on this, was she?

"They are," Dean parroted, trying not to snap back at the attack. She was only on the attack because he wasn't being a hundred percent straightforward. And he wasn't being that because this was friggin' *hard*, alright? He took a deep breath and tried to shove the frustration and dread down to his feet in equal parts.

'In for a penny…'

"I'm not psychic," he insisted, and the fact he managed to do so through clenched teeth without sounding like it was said through clenched teeth oughta have earned him a damn Oscar. "I know what's coming cuz I've lived through it. I've done this all once already."

He let the silence fall, the words sink in, the questions on their faces all go unanswered. He let them stare: at him, at each other, at Bobby and Sam, looking for the same answers. No one asked, and this time, Dean didn't stand a chance with those clenched teeth.

"I'm from the future," he ground out.

Bucky straight up snorted. Didn't even try to hide it, which earned him one hell of a glare in return. Asa turned to the closest person, Andy, if for no other reason than to read another's reaction. But Andy had a tight-lipped smile of his own and shrugged his shoulders haplessly. It had taken him a while to believe it, too, and he'd had the added benefit of knowing Dean wasn't lying because of his own powers. It wasn't like Andy could expect any of their new friends to nod along, all 'keep calm and carry on'. He'd be more worried if they did that than if they freaked or just flat out refused to believe.

"I'm…sorry, what?" Jo asked, another little head shake as she kept checking between her mom and the others. Like someone would tell her she was being *Punk'ed* any second now. Ashton Kutcher was in the other room with the camera crew, right?

"It's true, Jo." Sam's words were quiet and he didn't turn to look at her, just sort of glanced out of the side of his eye. Jo opened her mouth, then closed it again, brown eyes wide and blinking.

"I'm from 2016," Dean continued before their confusion and disbelief derailed the conversation any further (not like anything could derail it as wholly or completely as the conversation itself was a derailment). "An angel sent me back."

An angel that he, conveniently, would forget to mention was upstairs.

"An *angel*," Bucky echoed, the disbelief definitely on the side of mockery rather than shock. It was funny how that part had actually been easier to admit than the time travel. Probably because he could prove one a hell of a lot more easily than the other.

Bucky chuckled, glancing to Asa to support his disbelief, only to find

his friend staring contemplatively at the older Winchester. Bucky frowned, incredulous and concerned. "Come on, tell me you're not buying this? Asa?"

But Asa didn't take his eyes off Dean and the man from the future met that gaze with a hardened stare the other man couldn't find a lie in. "…Why?"

Dean didn't have a clue if Asa Fox believed him, but he appreciated the fact the guy wasn't outright calling him a liar like his buddy all but was.

"What, we're just not gonna talked about the *'Touched By An Angel'* part of this ridiculous joke?" Bucky added on the in-between breath, another snort following. Bobby was giving him the kind of warning glance that suggested he wasn't gonna be welcome in the Singer house much longer if he kept up the attitude, but Bucky didn't catch it.

Asa was still staring at Dean, ignoring his friend for the time being, and the older Winchester took that as a cue to answer him first.

"To try and save the world?" He said it sarcastically enough to garner a few weak laughs from the others. At least until they realized that, sarcasm aside, he wasn't joking. None of the others – not Bobby or Sam or Andy – were laughing.

Jo stared at them, something ugly and cold pooling in her stomach, eyes widening as she realized they were *serious*. Asa looked as grim as she'd ever seen them, and the fact that her mom had stopped with the third degree… Holy shit, they all *believed* him.

She stared at each of them, then back to Dean, who looked like the bearer of bad news if bad news was the end of the world. He met her gaze briefly and it was all Jo could do to blink and form words of any sort at all.

"Holy shit."

-o-o-o-

It took Azazel years. *Years* wasted down in the Pit – the equivalent of weeks topside, at a bare minimum, if he was *lucky* – trudging, wading, slogging through the depths of Hell, the roiling masses of the damned and the demons torturing them. Shoving, gutting, barreling his way through, layer after layer, level after level. *Years*. All to reach Lilith, who damn well should have been on her way up, preparing for the

opening of a Hellgate, not whining down in the lowest layers, still making backups of her backup plans. They were well past the time for planning.

"This is your fault, Azazel!" she screeched, not a full minute after he had finally made it, irate and furious and, even for one as old and strong as he, *tired*.

"It was a calculated risk," the demon replied, seething. "It happens when you go up against an *angel*."

"A risk you shouldn't have taken!" The little girl Lilith wore, even here in the deepest depths of Hell, stomped her foot, tiny hands balled up at her sides, skinny limbs shaking in a fury far too big for her tiny body. "At least not without consulting me!"

"We do not have time to converse about every little detail of this plan," Azazel snapped back, quickly losing his patience. "*My* plan, Lilith."

He usually took the time – the effort and energy and sheer will – to remain calm and level-headed in the presence of Hell's Princess. She was the key to all of this and if he wanted to succeed, he had to keep her placated. But they were now approaching the point of no return – they may have already passed it – and the time for bribing and pandering was over. They were in this together, to the bitter end.

True to form of a spoiled brat who liked to play with dolls and dress-up, Lilith crossed her arms over her diminutive chest and jutted out her chin. "Without me, 'your' plan is useless."

"Without you, Lucifer will never rise," Azazel confirmed, though his tone hardly sounded accommodating, spoken through clenched teeth. "Which do you actually care about, Lilith? Getting your way? Being the 'Queen of Hell'?"

The title was obviously a mockery. A name given to her by those who toiled in the pit, those who looked up a ladder they'd spent their entire lives trying to climb only to end up on the lowest rung of the afterlife. Those who needed leadership. Demons like Lilith and Azazel had always found them, their need for guidance, for *royalty* and riches to pander after and dream of, truly pathetic.

The yellow-eyed demon pinned her with that gaze now, challenging what she had always stomped her foot about he'd messed up and gotten himself stuck back in the Pit. The two of them had been a pair,

as close to agreeance and getting along as a pair of demons actually could. He knew what she was doing now (panicking, or at least as close to as a creature of her caliber ever came) and he would set her straight. They could not afford carelessness or ego, now.

Something he, himself, would also bite his tongue and swallow, no matter how it burned on the way down.

"Or setting him free?" Azazel dropped his voice, a speck of the closest thing to kindness demons were capable of: tolerance. The little girl in front of him still looked pissed, but those curled fingers loosened at least a little. He knew her answer; she wanted what he wanted. She wanted their creator, their father, their *God*. Far more than she wanted anything else, including clinging to pride and ego. "I had a chance to take down the angel helping the Winchesters. I took it and I lost. It was worth the attempt, but now my schedule cannot afford any more delays. So you'll get no more risks from me, Lilith. Well, none that are optional to the plan, at least."

Lilith bit her lip, fury still radiating off of her, but some of it had been placated.

"Your schedule on the other hand." Azazel managed to keep that tolerance ongoing in his tone, despite the abundance of irritation still more-than present in his system. "You still have quite some flexibility for risks and dalliances. And while those are yours to do with as you see fit, I don't recommend chancing the Hellgate – your *only* chance to make it topside this century – as *one of them*."

His voice rose at the end, unable to keep the biting reprimand in check. Lilith narrowed her eyes and tapped her shiny, black shoe against the steaming rock beneath them.

"I was planning on leaving," she snapped back, but the snide comeback was less than intimidating given that *she hadn't left*. "But I had to wait around for *you*. Once word came that you were on you way here, it was pointless to start upward."

"I would have caught up," Azazel seethed, annoyed all over again that he was her excuse for not having left a year ago. It took *time* to move through hell. The stronger you were, the harder movement became. You dragged the very essence of the Pit with you, bending and curving behind you, bogging you down like mire. And with it came all of the demons and damned souls caught in your wake. It was exhausting and *tedious*, and time was not one of the things they had much wiggle

room to be risking.

The look she gave him called him on his bullshit. He knew she wasn't necessarily wrong, even though it grated on his nerves like a knife on the flayed edges of a wound. Lilith would take a quarter of Hell with her on her way up. She'd leave with nothing more than the lightest of entourages – a handful of her closest people – but by the time she reached the top level of Hell, the plane that rested cheek to cheek with the land of the living, her wake would clog the hole for months, regardless of the fact that the gate would only be open for minutes, at most. The flotsam and jetsam of thousands of damned souls alone would ensure Azazel never reached the surface in time to escape the Hellgate while it remained open.

But that 'calculated risk' of taking on the angel had not included the possibility of him being permanently stuck in Hell. He had too much to do. The plan could not afford his absence. So he would have found another way – had one of his many children find him another opening, a smaller one he could sneak through alone – and so Lilith should *not* have waited.

But, as he'd noted before, the Princess was as close to panicking as one of their kind came. Which meant arguing with her only got more stomped feet and crossed arms and a stubbornness that could rival the actual child she was wearing. So Azazel let it go.

Too much of their plan had been compromised, too many challenges that should have been simple to overcome had steamrolled into massive delays. He understood her worry. It felt like Time itself was against them. Not something a demon down in the deepest pits of Hell had ever had to worry about before.

Admittedly, it was why Azazel had taken on the angel. If he could eliminate the unknown variable – the spanner in the works – than maybe they could get back on schedule, retain the upper hand.

They would only have one real shot at this, after all, and if the full force of Heaven stood as their opposition, they would not succeed. They had to get Lilith topside without the angels knowing about it. The opening of a Hellgate was perfect cover. Thousands of smaller demons and a handful of stronger ones (her hand-picked entourage), would muddy the water, masking Lilith's presence. If Heaven learned of her presence on Earth, they would launch a manhunt for her. It wouldn't stop them, of course – they were far too prepared for that – but it would be a nuisance and a risk to their plans down the road.

They had to get the true Righteous Man in hell. John Winchester had proven a poor choice (which they'd all suspected was the case, but why waste the opportunity to torture the hunter into submission, one way or the other?) but his eldest son was lining up quite nicely. Once they had Dean in hell, there would be no way of hiding their intentions any longer. Heaven would know exactly what they were up to when a Righteous soul didn't turn up on their doorstep like it should, and then it would become a battle of the seals. Hell had the upper hand there. They would have the numbers from the Hellgate, the element of surprise, and, most importantly, time. They had been planning this for centuries in Hell. They knew all of the seals, which ones were lined up for breaking this century, which would be easy to crack, which would be easy to defend, and which to not even bother going for. Heaven would spend the first few precious days – maybe even weeks – just playing catch up. It would be a fight, but Hell had stacked the deck with all the right cards, and a couple more hidden up some sleeves for special occasions.

But the key to all of that – *all of it* – was that Heaven stay in the dark until the time was right. None of this worked without the element of surprise. And that one stupid angel sitting on Dean Winchester's shoulder – for all that Azazel was sure she was working alone (even if he could not figure out *why*) – was putting it all at risk.

She had to be dealt with. Azazel had made the first move and taken the first blow. He would have to make sure, no matter what it cost, that the second was to the angel. It would have to be a large enough strike to take her *head*.

"Well?" Lilith was tapping her shoe again, staring expectantly, arms still crossed over her chest but now in petulance rather than anger.

"After you." Azazel swept his hand past, but Lilith didn't move. He raised an eyebrow at her, straightening back up, ready for the next tantrum they didn't have time for.

"I want a word with Crowley before we leave."

The yellow-eyed demon all but rolled his eyes at the request. Not a request. Lilith didn't make requests, she made demands. "Crowley?"

"Yes." That little chin jutted up once more, as if to ask what he was waiting for. "The next step is getting the Righteous Man to make a deal. Don't you think talking to the *'king'* of the crossroads is pertinent?"

"You've had plenty of time to talk with him while you 'waited' for me," Azazel growled, partially under his breath, though he didn't much care if Lilith heard him.

"Go get him for me. And wait outside while we talk."

Azazel stared. He just stared at the peevish little child standing in front of him where a millennia old, incredibly powerful, cunning and devious and wickedly smart *demon* should be. That chin tilted up further and the Prince of Hell wanted to start throwing things. A temper tantrum of his own, and it would be damn well *warranted* at this point.

"You get your secrets, Azazel – your *calculated risks* – and I get mine."

He did want to throw things. Namely, one princess of Hell clear out the nearest window. Not that Hell's architecture had too many of those.

"And you're taking that risk with *Crowley*."

It wasn't a question. It wasn't even a statement. It was disgust, mostly. But her chin stayed jutted out and Azazel knew there was more going on in that little girl's brain then the petty mask of a spoiled brat she'd wrapped herself in for decades, now. He just hoped it *was* the cunning demon behind it.

It likely was, for all his anger and annoyance. Lilith was more than competent. If she was taking risks and didn't want him to know about it, she likely had her reasons. No matter how they annoyed him. She was Lucifer's first born (the key to *all* of this, made by *his* hand) for a reason.

"Fine," Azazel spoke through gritted teeth, bared through what might be called a smile if you stretched the word as far as it could go. "I'll get you the crossroads demon, but then we're *leaving*."

Lilith watched him go with the same smugness of a child who'd won the right to set her own bedtime through sheer obnoxiousness, but smiled slyly the moment he was gone. Well, until she realized that she had to talk to Crowley of all demons. That took the smile right off her pretty little face.

-o-o-o-

"You summoned me, Oh Queen?" Crowley scuffed his shoe along the

rock floor, ignoring the way the Zegna Italian leather melted against the boiling heat of the stone. How he both loved and loathed Hell. He would have to fix the shoes up once he was topside or put a call in to his tailor to place another custom order.

"I have a task for you," Lilith said it with the air of authority of a true leader, something she actually wasn't half bad at. It was always spoiled by the look she chose, though. Authority on a preteen just sounded like overreaching contempt. Rather ruined the whole leadership bit, in Crowley's oh-so humble opinion.

"Shoot," he returned and wasn't entirely sure he meant metaphorically. There was something about the scheming Princess of Hell's presence that made him, literally, want to shoot himself. Or someone else. Perhaps he should start making those sneaky inquiries about the whereabouts of the Colt. He was fairly sure Azazel had it, the yellow-eyed bastard. But one didn't make plans based on assumptions. Well, not good plans anyway.

"As you know, it's almost time for the Righteous Man's deal."

"I have my best girl already lined up for it," Crowley tossed out easily enough, partially because he knew Lilith was about to ask him to handle it personally. He wouldn't want to volunteer such a service, if only because he never volunteered for anything. Even if it would work out far better for him should he handle the deal himself, he wouldn't want to give that away. With all of the mishaps going on lately, Lilith would request it personally. Better for everyone if she thought it as her own idea.

Not that it would be, of course. Ever since the Winchesters had summoned him with the most preposterous, insane, and frankly suicidal idea of helping them avert the apocalypse, Crowley had been placing the chess pieces to make sure he was the one negotiating the Righteous Man's deal. If he was the one handling the transaction, it would be far easier to spin it to his own needs while screwing Hell (without them realizing it) and likely Dean Winchester as well (if he felt like it. Crowley hadn't made up his mind on whether or not he wanted to risk being on that hunter's wrong side yet.)

Or he could botch the thing up so completely that Hell never got it's Righteous Man. That one would be harder to talk his way out of, but he'd weaseled out of worse. He was fairly confident he could do it. However, Crowley hadn't quite decided which would be his play yet. But he knew he wanted to be the one calling the shots when it came

time make that decision.

"Fine, fine," Lilith agreed so offhandedly that Crowley actually blinked. "I want you somewhere else anyhow."

Surely he'd…misheard? The King of the Crossroads stood there like a baffled idiot, staring and blinking as the Queen of Hell agreed to one of his *minions* handling the most important trade deal of the millennia.

"You…what?" Crowley physically shook himself, reminding his disquieted brain to pull its shit together before he blew his only cover. He wrapped affronted confusion over him like a cloak of invisibility and hid his racing thoughts safely beneath. "Where?"

"With Ruby."

"Ruby?"

There'd been rumors going around Hell, only whispers for now but Crowley could tell they were getting louder and would eventually make the full rounds. Ruby was on the outs with Lilith. Maybe even a deserter. No one had seen her for years and there'd been the quietest of hints, not quite ready to be spoken but certainly implied, that she might have made her way topside. That she might be the spanner in the works for whatever Azazel and Lilith were cooking up that hadn't quite been working the way they planned it to.

Last Crowley had seen her had been half a century ago, at least. Not long before those whispers had gotten started, actually. She'd come asking questions about Lilith's plan, the seals, and the…

Crowley straightened, a trill of discomfort worming its way down his spine.

There was something here that he was missing and he did *not* like it. He was no assassin, he was in sales for crying out loud! So why in Hell's own name would Lilith want him going after Ruby? The discussion they'd had sixty, maybe seventy years ago – chump change in topside's currency – suggested those rumors were true. Ruby was on the outs, trying to put a wrench in Hell's apocalypse plan and she'd used Crowley as her source of information. The King of the Crossroads had never followed up because he didn't care. He had his own plans, and they didn't include allying with anyone but himself, regardless of others out there who might also want to avert the end of the world.

(Okay, the Winchesters had put a bit of a kink in that original plan,

but Crowley was nothing if not adaptable. His plans didn't include allying with anyone *else.*)

But if Lilith was sending *him* after Ruby…. Well, that suggested maybe, just maybe, Ruby wasn't on the outs as the rumor mill suspected, but instead was working for Lilith in secret. A triple cross, if you would. Hardly unheard of among demons. Hell, by the time they really go going, the double crossing was usually in the *double digits*. Which meant whatever those rumors might say, wherever they had come from, there was something not entirely accurate about them. Trouble was, Crowley didn't know which part was wrong, and Lilith was unlikely to tell him. Which was *problematic* considering he was working on a double or triple cross of his own.

One did *not* make plans based on assumptions, damnit.

"And where is Ruby?" Crowley tried for nonchalance, unsure if he hit his mark.

The little princess's smile was full of teeth and did not particularly lend credence to substantiating or disproving those pesky rumors, one way or the other. In fact, it only made everything that much worse.

Crowley felt another thread of discomfort weave through his twisted essence. He was behind the curve, one of his least favorite positions to be in, and would now have to play catchup. Only question was, who to go to for the information and how long would it take to obtain in relation to whatever plan Lilith was oh-so-very-clearly cooking up.

And…was he part of that plan? Or it's intended target?

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Dun Dun Duuuuuuun!

Penguins: For your Jeopardy stockpile, a group of penguins is called a 'rookery'. You are now that much more knowledgeable (and currently one step ahead of God. Good for you)

Up Next: Dean gets to explain time travel and angels to a group of hunters who have mixed reactions to their entire world views being rocked. Go figure.

Up Next Timing: I'm going to have to keep the two week posting schedule for now. I am just not getting a chapter out a week in Covid Land. In the meantime, I'm purposefully making each of

these chapters longer than a normal one, to at least make up for missed weekly content.

Till next time,

Silence

Chapter 105: Season 2: Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I hope everyone is staying safe as they can right now. The world is a mess and the States is busy adding extra special crazy sprinkles right on top (I am so, so frustrated with the state of my country right now. I don't often bring politics into this forum because I rarely agree that it's the place for it, but to any readers out there of color: ***you*** ***matter*** to me. I stand with you, even if I can't understand what you go through). To any of you in cities with protests and riots right now, please stay safe. Do what you gotta do, but do it as safely as possible and help others stay safe as well!

Mental Health Note: During all of this, please, please, **please** pay attention to your mental health. These are really trying and dangerous times for mental and emotional well-being for us all. Talk to someone if you can (I highly recommend a trained professional, but if not that then a friend, a guardian, someone you can hopefully be open with and who is supportive in return). Stick with your friends; stay up to date with them, talk with them in any fashion you can if it can't be in person. Making sure we maintain our support pillars in a world where we can't physically see them anymore is really important. (Remember, family don't end in blood.)

And now, please enjoy what I am oh-so-happy to serve up just for you: a lengthy distraction from the world and weary woes!

Chapter References: Oh boy. Um…there's a lot. The whole story? [insert weak grin here] We're definitely bringing up the whole original Apocalypse timeline from the show (and a specific reference to 3.1 The Magnificent Seven), the Baku's Dreamland where Sam realized Dean was older than he should be (see **Chapters 20-22**), Meg's death right after that (see **Chapter 21**), John's death (see **Chapters 36-37**), the fight between Cas and Azazel in Rivergrove (see **Chapter 77**), and Uriel's death (see **Chapters 94-95**). Uh, I think that's it…

Chapter Warnings: Prepare for the world's longest chapter. Seriously, I think I beat my previous record. And this one is *all* chatter. It's, oh boy, it's a lot. We got tons to cover, from the apocalypse and angels to Dean's humiliation, to memes and

killing Lilith, then back to Dean's humiliation, with panic attacks and a comatose Cas upstairs (and did we mention Dean's humiliation? We did? Oh, good.)

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 72

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The ribs went back in the fridge, packed away in a handy little Tupperware container that Dean stared at for a good thirty seconds, not quite believing Bobby had something so domestic lying about his house, just awaiting use. It looked fairly new, too, not something he'd had since the dinosaur age before he'd become a hunter. (Bobby had eventually pulled it out of his hands with one hell of a *look*.) About half the rack was left uneaten, right along with the rest of the food and most everyone's plates, and it all went into the fridge. No one had much of an appetite after hearing the world was right along on its way to ending. It would get eaten later, at least by those who weren't having the rug pulled out from under them this evening. (The Winchester-Singer-Gallagher rug was long gone by that point, nothing left to pull or even tug at.)

Andy helped Sam with the dishes diligently while Bobby and Dean packed it all up, the others trying to step in and help on occasion, but Dean knew why the four of them were hiding behind the supposed 'host' role that not a one of them had ever taken a particular liking to before. If they were too busy cleaning up, they weren't talking or taking questions. Dean could argue they were letting the information sink in for the Harvelles, Asa, and Bucky, but he also knew it was just as good an excuse to stall dropping any more bombshells (or, possibly worse in Dean's book: explain further on the ones he'd already dropped).

But eventually the dishes were done, the food was packed up, the kitchen was cleaner than it had been before dinner (or possibly ever), and their four guests were milling about the kitchen, scattered along the table or resting hips against counter tops or fridges. They were waiting, like sharks in the water, for the eventual chum they knew they'd get.

Ellen didn't even bother with preamble, looking right at Dean as soon as the sink was shut off and the last of the dishes dry. She nailed him

with those sharp eyes of hers, demanding (although not in an unkind tone), "Start at the beginning."

"It's *time* travel, Ellen," Dean sighed, running a hand down his face and settling where he was against the kitchen counter, right in front of the sink, ankles crossed and arms following over his chest. "There's a lot of beginnings."

"Start with yer angel," Bobby suggested gruffly (less of a suggestion that way, really) from the table next to Ellen. "Can't talk about angelic DeLoreans without explaining that part first."

Dean didn't even bother telling the old man that Cas wasn't *his* angel. Not like anyone ever listened anyway.

"So, you're serious about the time travel?" Jo asked, the hesitant lilt of her voice and smile suggesting she was still expecting a joke out of it, even though she seemed to know it wasn't one. She was leaning against the counter as well, right next to Dean. He liked to think it was for support and not the opportunity to get more out of him by being, literally, right next to him.

(He swallowed a little roughly. Yeah, sure, it was totally about support. Cuz Jo didn't know how to play the innocent, naïve woman in need of comfort, who could then wheedle just about anything out some poor, dumb schmuck. Nope. She didn't know how to play that role at all. Not at all. Totally about support, here.)

"Yeah," Sam answered for his brother. Whether it was because he saw what Jo was doing (more like he saw what Jo was doing *to* Dean, who was inching his way down the counter to put that much more space between them) or he knew that one guy could only repeat himself so many times with less and less effect with each go. "I, uh, I don't know how we can prove it to you right now, but I've seen it." Sam's gaze flickered to his twenty-seven year old brother, thinking about the much older man approaching his forties that he'd seen in their dad's dream. "He really did travel about ten years back in time."

"I've seen it too," Bobby agreed, speaking more to the evidence they'd encountered since that unfortunate incident with the Baku. Dean knew things no man – psychic or not – could ever know, and acted on them with the confidence of someone who'd done it before. Besides, the man leaning against his kitchen counter now was so clearly their Dean, and so clearly *not* their Dean, that the honest-to-God truth was time travel made more sense than anything else at this point. Bobby

believed it, believed *him*, which should be enough for anyone sitting at his table.

He eyed them each in turn, daring any of them to disrespect him in his own home. The truth of it was, there weren't many hunters alive who didn't respect Bobby Singer as an authority of all things supernatural and hunting, and Bobby knew it. If the boys needed that kind of clout in their corner, then he was sure as hell gonna be there to give it.

His gaze ended on Ellen, who was watching him with that scary, intense gaze of hers but no real heat or retaliation. She knew exactly what he was doing, and she'd stand by it. Something in Bobby twinged, somewhere in the vicinity of his heart. God, he sorta loved that woman. The corner of her mouth quirked up in a tease of a smirk, like she could hear his thoughts.

Bobby cleared his throat and turned back to the rest of the table. "Boy's a time traveler. Just don't ask him lotto numbers. He doesn't remember any of the important stuff."

He got a chuckle around the room for that, some a little forced, some a little too eager for the excuse to laugh, but it did help diffuse the tension all the same.

"How is that possible?" Asa asked once the last of the chuckles faded. His voice was even and almost pragmatic, like the vocal equivalent of having his hands up and offering to play referee. Putting aside Dean's inner fanboy, the serious-when-it-was-actually-necessary man from the future was starting to respect Asa Fox for how he'd handled this conversation so far.

"It's not."

His friend on the other hand…

Bucky had spent the last thirty minutes while everyone else cleaned up, processed, or pried for further information, sitting at the table with a cynical smile, nursing a beer with the kind of overconfident nonchalance that suggested he wasn't buying a word of this. Dean hadn't cared at first – he hadn't actually expected all of them to believe – but the smug attitude Bucky Sims was bringing along with it had rubbed him the wrong way minute after minute until he found his shoulders ratcheted up around his ears and his irritation levels climbing right alongside them.

Asa was ignoring his buddy for the most part, though. On occasion he would spear Buck with a warning look, but otherwise the two weren't engaging much on the topic. Asa was clearly willing to suspend some disbelief to hear the Winchesters out. Bucky thought the only reason he was bothering was an overly exaggerated loyalty to a woman he'd met only once, more than two decades ago.

"So, thing about angels," Dean started, deciding to follow Asa's lead and ignore Bucky (it was his friend, his call, after all, at least for now.). He aimed for calm and collected, like they were talking about any other topic any other day. That's what he was going for, anyway. Whether or not his brain caught on, at least his mouth seemed to have gotten the memo. "They can apparently bend time. Not often and not always well-" Bobby snorted and Dean tried not to look his way- "but they can do it when it's necessary. I don't know how it works, I never asked for details. Trust me, just getting a handle on the groundwork spins your head enough."

The groundwork didn't come with non-linear, overgrown gardens and ripples in a pool that was somehow not a pool and oh, yeah, those weren't ripples either, because fuck your life. Groundwork was *simple*. Pretty much: *'follow the rules from Back to the Future and you'll be fine.'* Groundwork was *good*. Dean really didn't want to get into anything more complicated than that because he knew his tongue would mess it up even more than his brain already had (it wasn't like the whole time concept was a clear, logical thing up there to start with. Cas shoulda sent Sam back. He was the smartone). If he tried anything more complicated than the basics, Dean would just sound even crazier than he already did, and that was plenty crazy enough, even for a group of hunters.

"Wait, you've done this more than once? Time traveled?" Jo's eyes were both narrowed on him and also somehow wide. Women, man. How did they even *do* that? The look wasn't one of suspicion, at least. More along the line of incredulity with just a dash of more-playful-than-not sarcasm, just for extra flavor.

"Uh…couple times," Dean admitted, feeling embarrassed about that though not entirely sure why. Probably because there was no way they'd believe him. Traveling through time once was already asking a lot for people to believe. Four trips, though? Like time travel was a ride at the amusement park you had to be yei high to ride and you did it just for kicks. Yeah, he probably should have lied about that part. Dean rubbed the back of his neck (cuz, *too late now*). "Cas sent me back three times before this. Those trips were nothing like this

though."

First, because he'd always *returned.* But this trip had always been a one-way ticket, even before he knew he was taking a trip at all.

"The other trips, they weren't about changing or stopping anything." Or learning that he *couldn't* stop things, like his mother's deal or her death. Which was too much of a reminder most days and turned his stomach. Cas had promised they could change things.
They *had* changed things. Dean cleared his throat and fought to focus on the present (which was equally "fun". One catastrophe at a time, he supposed). "Once of 'em was to get Phoenix ashes to, uh, well, for, uh…for a thing. It's not important."

Dean waved away the explanation that was Eve, realizing he'd dug himself a deep enough grave as was and should probably quit while he was already behind.

"But they're extinct." Asa was rocking the frowny face hard from his spot leaning against the counter on the other side of Jo. "No one's seen a Phoenix in centuries."

"If they ever existed in the first place," Bucky muttered into his beer but was, for the most part, ignored.

"Hence the need for time travel, buddy." Dean's smile was a tight one, more teeth than mirth, but it wasn't as caustic as it otherwise could be. Asa's eyes widened further as his brain made the connection it had previously missed. Yeah, it took time (ironically) to wrap your brain around time travel.

"Cas?"

Dean turned back to Jo, his arms tightening over his chest subconsciously. It had nothing to do with her or even her question. More of a protective instinct he couldn't shake. A need to feel that warmth in his chest (which still hadn't returned since Rivergrove) and keep the angel right where he was (a need that had only increased since learning his friend was possibly fading in there).

"Yeah, Cast-" Dean cut himself off, realizing even as he spoke that names had power, and maybe he shouldn't be handing that power out so freely. He trusted Jo and Ellen. Trusted that they would trust him or, at the very least, trust Bobby. But Asa and Bucky were unknown. Despite the slow-building trust and respect he had for the former, there was something distinctly uncomfortable (sitting in Dean's

stomach, right below the angel in his chest) about giving Bucky the guy's full name.

At least…for now. Maybe Bucky would change his tune or Asa would bring him around, but Dean wasn't risking the only angel on their side (not to mention his (future?) best friend) on a maybe.

(Of course, none of these hunters knew Enochian warding or spells yet enough to know the power of having an angel's name, but they all knew how to research and were versed well enough with demons and pagans to understand the concept and go from there. So Dean was going to play it safe.)

"Cas," he repeated a little more firmly. If anyone suspected there was more to the angel's name, they didn't say anything. "Angel of the Lord, if you can believe it. He helped us with the apocalypse the first time. Kinda gave up everything to make sure our side won."

"Our side?" Ellen echoed, eyebrows up. "And whose side is that exactly?"

"Humans'," Sam picked up on the next beat, almost before Ellen was done asking the question. "The apocalypse is a showdown between Heaven and Hell, and neither of them seem to care what happens to those of us caught in the middle."

"You're telling me Heaven-"

"Doesn't care who lives or dies. Yeah, that's exactly what we're telling you." Dean's harsh words cut through Asa's abruptly. Given the lack of discussion on Heaven being real or not, it looked like they had a semi-believer, at least, on their hands. Another hunter like Sammy, who didn't have a problem believing in Heaven, maybe even angels and God. Asa Fox wouldn't be the first or the last hunter to do so, though each one still struck Dean as so damn weird. Dean had to remember to sort of pull his punches here, though. "Turns out, angels are winged dicks."

Only sort of, of course. Jo snorted, even as Sammy gave his brother a *look*.

"*Most* of them," Sam emphasized snidely from the far side of the table, still glaring at Dean, who rolled his eyes (because of course he hadn't meant *Cas*. Just every other angel). "Cas thinks there might be other angels who'll stand with us. If she can get to them first, she might be able to convince some of the angels to join our side."

"Don't count on it, Sammy," Dean grumbled under his breath, arms still crossed tight across his chest. There was a dull ache there that was, for once, all his own.

"Uh…she?" Jo glanced between the two brothers, one eyebrow elegantly raised in that oh-so-judgmental Harvelle way. "Dean called him a 'he' a minute ago."

Oh goody. And they were on to his favorite part of the 'angels are real' talk.

"Uh…yeah." Dean cleared his throat, scratching just beneath his ear in nothing short of stalling while Sam, conveniently, decided he didn't want a part of this conversation after all. "Angels don't actually have a gender. They take on the, uh, appearance of whatever vessel they're using."

Three of the four hunters new to angel lore stiffened (Bucky was still busy snorting softly into his beer every other sentence) and Dean tried not to tense in response. This might have been why he wasn't bringing up Cas's full name or the fact that she was currently asleep upstairs. There wasn't a hunter alive who handled the vessel concept with elegance or ease.

"Vessels?" Ellen's voice was tight. Anyone used to dealing with demons, or at least having heard the horrors of possession, would be. She glanced at Bobby, who gave her the kind of look that suggested patience was a virtue. The look he got back was anything but virtuous.

"Angels true forms are, uh, kinda hard for most people to see without…erm…exploding." Dean frowned at the word choice. Probably not helping Cas's case here. "So they have to possess a human to interact with us. *But*," and Dean definitely stressed the exception before people could start casting stones, "unlike demons, they have to have permission."

"They seek out the devout," Sam added, standing in Cas's corner with his brother, even knowing it wasn't the easiest corner to defend. But that was Sam Winchester for you.

The corner of Dean's mouth twitched up, remembering how Sammy had just accepted him at his word when he'd told the kid Cas wasn't a demon. That he was an *angel,* of all things. He'd trusted it because he trusted Dean. Damn, but Dean didn't deserve his kid brother.

The younger Winchester had as much of a sympathetic, I-understand-

this-is-hard-to-believe-and-feel-for-your-situation, puppy dog look as he could get right now, hands spread out on the table in a placating, understanding way. Dean wanted to shake his head but didn't dare. Sammy was going to get these people to listen. He always did. And Dean wasn't about to interrupt that.

"They look for people who have faith in God and, well, angels, and they request permission to use their bodies for their work on earth."

"So, what? It's a *noble* possession?" Bucky snorted, finishing off the last of his beer. However, since he didn't believe angels were real to start with or that one sent Dean back in time, his opinion on the matter was disqualified. At least in Dean's book.

"It's not great," Dean admitted, ignoring Bucky Sims to look between the Harvelle women because, while not voicing their doubt quite so disrespectfully, he knew it was still there. Dean could see it in their faces. "Even Cas knows it's not an ideal situation. My Cas- uh, the one from 2016-" Dean winced, realizing he was now just as guilty of calling the angel 'his' and would forever face backlash anytime he told everyone else to stop doing it- "he had a male vessel, Jimmy, and he always regretted taking the guy away from his family, alright? So this time, Cas found- uh, the Cas from this timeline that's helping us now, I mean, found a woman in a coma, braindead with no surviving family. He's- um, *she's* trying to minimize the collateral damage."

But there would be some. This was the apocalypse, with Heaven and Hell raging on either side. There was going to be collateral damage. A lot of it.

Jo raised a hand to her forehead and buried her eyes behind it temporarily. With a heavy breath, she ran her fingers up and through her hair, turning towards Dean as she did with an almost pained expression. "This all sounds really crazy, Dean. I'm not saying I don't believe it-" she held up that same hand before he could respond- "I'm just saying. It's crazy."

"It sure as shit is," Bobby huffed, giving the kid a wry look that ended up with Jo's lips curling into a slow, crooked smile. She shook her head in disbelief, but Dean could see that it was more about the circumstances than the truth they were claiming.

"The only crazy here is all of you believing it," Bucky sniped. He was still going for that laid-back, Margaretville vibe of taking in a bad joke, but it was clear he was starting to get annoyed at being the odd

man out. Not to mention ignored.

"Buck, come on." Asa nudged the leg of his friend's chair with one of his long legs, never leaving his spot against the counter. "You really think all o' these guys – some of the best hunters in the country – would make this up? Joke about it?"

Bucky stared at his friend with something between surprise and annoyance. "You can't really be buying this, Asa. The apocalypse? *Time travel*?"

"I may not be all on board at the drop of a hat," Asa replied, eyes narrowed at his friend, seemingly offended by something Bucky had said. "But that's the job. Believing in things no one else does. How often have we run into a hunt we couldn't explain? It's always something new, something we hadn't heard of or thought didn't exist. How's this any different?"

Bucky set his empty bottle down on the table a little harder than strictly necessary. "Because it's *time travel*! It's not real. It's- it's movie magic at best."

"So are vampires to the rest of the world, Buck."

"You don't have to believe me, pal," Dean cut in, voice on the edge of a warning, "but I'm not gonna stand here listening to you call me a liar much longer, either."

The room grew quiet at that. Not a threat, but a promise. The cold, dark kind that was more than frightening, more than real. It was that moment, oddly enough, that cemented Dean's story as fact in Ellen's mind. She'd met John's boys only once before that day they walked into the Roadhouse, where Dean sat at her bar and claimed to be psychic. Before that, John had only brought 'em around once, a long time ago now, when they were just kids. They'd been too young for her to be judging much of the men they'd turn into, but the one sitting before her now, with that look in his eyes, that promise of action on the tip of his tongue… That sure as shit wasn't coming off some twenty-something year old. That was older. Way older. Someone who'd been around not just the block but half a dozen more to boot. In that moment, Ellen more than believed this kid was a good ten years older than he looked, at least. Something in that look told her, though she couldn't explain it, that it might be more than just ten years, too.

Bucky broke eye contact first, looking away. He didn't answer, didn't

so much as nod, but he didn't keep on with the disrespect, either. He got sullenly quiet after that, and Dean took it as the silent acceptance between hunters. The others took it as the defusing of a bomb.

"Look," Dean started again – tried again – with a punishing run of his fingers over his short hair, resettling his arms over his chest once he was done, "forget about the time travel. It's over and done with. Not even a big deal."

Someone at the table snorted and he'd bet money it was Bobby.

"What matters now," Dean emphasized with a glare to all occupants, since they were all pissing him off considering it was because of them he was here having this wonderful little chat that was going so damn well, "is the apocalypse."

"Okay," Jo reasoned, leaning back against the counter, elbows on the tile and hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans in a move caught somewhere between relaxed and defensive. But her face was set; she was on board for the Crazy Train and apparently happy to help it get moving forward. "How do we stop it?"

Dean opened his mouth to reply only to shut it immediately, brain sparking with that guilt-ridden, pessimistic little voice that was always there to remind him that he didn't actually know how they were going to stop it. If they even could. Kill Lilith, the Casses had said. Yeah, like it was just that easy.

Yet, he had to be the bearer of positive news, like it really could be that easy. Because no one wanted to hear the real truth; that they stood less than half a chance of pulling this off with any better results than the last go around. And that's if they were lucky. With the kind of shit luck the Winchesters were used to, they'd be lucky if they didn't make the whole thing go down *worse*.

Dean sighed, scratching at the base of his scalp and wishing this wasn't his life. Wishing he was back in 2016 dying in a graveyard beside his brother and best friend. Would certainly be easy.

(What was the line? Dying's easy, living's harder?)

Okay. So one step at a time, then. Dean forced his limbs to uncross, to leave that little sliver of angel in his chest open (vulnerable) (No, not vulnerable. At least, no more than the one upstairs) and instead braced his palms on the counter behind him, letting his upper body lean on locked elbows.

"We have to kill Lilith."

Said like that, it seemed so simple. Easy as pie. But the statement still carried the weight of the entire room and a whole world beyond. Dean could feel it, reverberating through his chest even as it left his mouth. Could see the way it settled around the others like a physical thing. A task they were all taking up just by sitting there.

God, he hoped they knew that wasn't true. They could all walk away, right here, right now, and any time after. They *should* all walk away.

"Who's Lilith?" Ellen was the first to ask and Dean quietly loved her for the way she didn't even blink. They were talking about the apocalypse but Ellen Harvelle was going to break it down, step by step, into any other hunt. Just like that. Just like she had in Carthage.

And how had that turned out, again? Dean's stomach tightened, turning to cement. He turned away from her.

"Demon. First one Lucifer ever turned. His 'first born' is what they call her. Princess o' Hell," Bobby answered for the older Winchester when he didn't speak up. He was eyeing Dean with a look of concern carefully hidden under gruffness and raised eyebrows. "She's the key to the whole damn thing. The Final Seal."

"Seal?" Jo looked between Bobby and the others, shaking her head a little. "What's that?"

"They're like locks on a door to Lucifer's cage." Dean cleared his throat and carried on, having buried every bit of that bitter voice that told him he was killing the Harvelle women all over again just having this conversation with them. They could still walk away from this. He'd *make* them walk away after this. "There are six hundred and sixty-six of 'em. Hell only has to break sixty-six, doesn't matter which, except for the first and the last. Those are set. Lilith's death is the final one, but it only unlocks the cage if the other sixty-five have been broken."

Bucky muttered something too under his breath to make out, but Dean's gaze snapped to him regardless. His carefully controlled nerves, already on edge and reaching their breaking point, snapped with it.

"Hey, pal, I didn't make this shit up, okay? So back off." Dean's voice was sharp – feral sharp – and he felt more than saw Andy and Sam both flinch at it. It was probably the only thing in the room that could have made him swallow his own words and back off too. He resettled

against the counter, pointedly ignoring Bucky, who was glaring at the beer sitting in front of him and not meeting anyone's gaze in the silent, tension-filled room.

"Why don't we just stop the first seal?"

Ellen was the first to break that silence (again earning Dean's undying love and gratitude. At least until her question registered). She glanced between the boys as that broken silence shifted into a different kind. Less tension, more dread. A lot more dread, she reckoned, by the way they *all* immediately grew shifty, squirming in their seats like elementary school kids caught doing bad by the teacher. She raised her eyebrows, wondering what sort of ant hill she'd just gone and poked. "Wouldn't that be easier?"

"Trust me, it's not," Dean muttered, still not looking her way.

"The first seal's a mess," Bobby answered a little more directly, though no less vaguely. "Demons got a million ways of making it happen. We're working on it-" here he looked over at Dean, who pointedly glared at a spot on the kitchen floor and nowhere else- "but we can't be stupid about this. No point putting all our eggs in one rickety basket."

"Okay," Ellen agreed, despite not being entirely sure what was going on between Bobby and the eldest Winchester. Whatever it was, it clearly had to do with this seal business. Still, she let it go for now. Lord knew they had enough on their plate without internal drama to boot. "How do we kill Lilith? I'm guessing something that big and that old ain't gonna be easy?"

"Can't we just exorcise her?" Jo jumped in, sitting up a little with the idea. "You said she's a demon, so…?"

"She is, but it's not going to be that easy." Sam shook his head, sending an apologetic look her way. "We're not even sure we *can* exorcise a demon that powerful. And if it does work, all she has to do to put the apocalypse back on track is get topside again."

Which wouldn't be the easiest of things – Azazel still hadn't shown his face and it had been more than two weeks since they'd managed to send that bastard back – but it was more than possible. And with what was riding on her getting topside, Dean bet they'd manage it pretty quick. No, an exorcism wouldn't be enough. They had to take her out before Hell found out a way to make Sam – or someone else that fit whatever fucked up rules the damn last seal required – to do it.

That reminded him; he needed to have a chat with Cas when she was back on her feet about the exact requirements of those seals. Make sure they weren't going to stumble right into any loopholes they hadn't thought to cover.

"We gotta kill her dead. Sucks, but it's the only way," Dean cut in with a tight-lipped grimace. "Holy water won't do jack squat to her. A devil's trap should keep her down, but it won't be for long."

Powers like hers? Even if they got her into the trap, it would take her minutes, at most, to break it wide open. Meg had managed it once, and she'd been way lower on the power ladder than *Lilith*.

Asa let out another whistle, shaking his head minutely. This was big fish they were talking about. Real big fish if a devil's trap wouldn't be enough. "How are we even supposed to kill her, if we *do* somehow manage to get her in a trap? Only thing I know that can kill a demon is Kurdish blade-"

"Yeah, a demon-killing knife. We'll get one of those eventually," Dean interrupted out of habit more so than impatience. He was still annoyed that they didn't have Ruby's blade, and more annoyed that they'd have to voluntarily play nice with Ruby in order to get it. "What we really need is the damn Colt."

It might not have killed Lucifer, but Dean was betting Lilith was a few tiers down the food chain and a lot closer to that *'evil'* part of the Latin inscription on the gun. Lucifer might be the devil himself, but he'd started out as an angel. Something that, in hindsight, they probably should have considered before marching into Carthage.

"The Colt?" Ellen's eyebrows were back near her hairline. She checked with Bobby and back again. "As in *the* Colt? Samuel Colt's magical gun that can kill anything?"

Sam opened his mouth, most likely to say, *'Well, not* anything *it turns out-'* but Dean caught his brother's eye and shook his head. Story for another time. Any other time.

"That would be the one," Bobby mumbled, getting up from his chair to grab a beer from the fridge. Andy, perched on the counter next to it, practically bumping shoulders with Asa (and wasn't that budding friendship adorable?), helpfully opened the door with his sneakered foot before the old hunter could even get to it. He got a glare for his efforts, which was returned with the sunniest smile imaginable. Bobby, while he was up and there, grabbed a round for everyone else

as well, using Andy to pass them around since the kid was so eager to help. He finally got a glare in return, but it quickly morphed back into the classic Andy Smile when the kid got around to handing Jo hers.

"No one's seen hide or hair of that thing in at least a century," Asa picked up from where Ellen dropped off, clearly thinking along the same lines as she was as he accepted his beer from Andy. He did a double take Dean's way, one eyebrow up. "Unless this is another time travel thing?"

Dean actually huffed at that, shaking his head. "No. We know where it is, but we can't get our hands on it yet."

"Why's that?"

Sam and Dean exchanged a guilty look before Sam turned that look Ellen's way and answered, "We think Azazel has it."

The '*ah, I see. Is that all?'* look that crossed Ellen's face only somewhat sarcastically (and rather matched the looks on Asa and Jo's faces too), pretty much ended that conversation before it had to get any more complicated. (Like, just *how* the magical gun that could kill anything ended up in the hands of the yellow-eyed demon.)

Eager to make sure that conversation stayed dead on arrival, Dean offered another solution. "An angel blade would work too."

"An angel blade?" Jo's eyebrows perfectly matched her mother's, both up near their hairlines.

"A divine sword made from an angel's grace," Sam offered with a weak smile, remembering how defensive Castiel had been about hers. All he'd done was ask to look at it one time. That hadn't gone all that well for him, while Dean just sat on the sidelines grinning his head off in what looked like long-awaited retribution. Sam had a feeling last time around it had been Dean getting lectured for even thinking himself worthy to touch an angel's blade. Looking back on it now, and knowing Cas better, Sam could almost see why his brother found the whole thing so hilarious. "It's their go-to weapon. It can kill almost anything."

"Well, great!" Bucky's voice was too loud and half the table winced with it. In part because it wasn't obvious whether he was serious or still the outlier at the table. The ring of sarcasm just underneath the words didn't bode well. If it was the latter, and it certainly seemed more likely to be, the rest of the room didn't really want to see how

Dean responded (or Bobby, for that matter, who had made it clear he had the kid's back). "Why don't you get your angel buddy to fork over one of those and we're all set?"

"Each angel only has one, far as I know," Dean answered through, sure enough, clenched teeth and a tight expression. Otherwise Cas would have been handing them out to the boys like candy last go around No, even just the memory of Cas's face when Dean had taken Uriel's blade from the center of his burnt out wing prints was enough to make Dean's jaw ache with tension. "I'm not taking the only defense Cas has away from her. She's got her own enemies to worry about."

He conveniently didn't mention that they *had* a second angel blade, tucked away in his duffle bag upstairs, stolen from the corpse of an angel killed by the very same weapon. Bucky Sims of all people did not need to know there was a method for killing angels.

(Dean actually doubted Bucky was any real sort of threat. He wasn't coming across as the type of hunter who learned about a new Supernatural badass and thought, *'I gotta go kill that*.' At the moment, it sure sounded more like he didn't even believe angels were real. So Dean wasn't all that worried about what he might do with the knowledge of how to kill one. Well, other than run his mouth to some hunter who might be a bit more willing to believe (and a lot more inclined to kill). Which is why, regardless of Bucky Sim's threat level (which was pathetically low in Dean's book and sinking with every word the guy spoke), Dean would not be mentioning Uriel's blade.)

"Buck," Asa cut in, not quite sharply but definitely with an edge of warning. "Come on, man. You don't gotta buy into this, but either stow it till we leave or take the jeep and I'll meet up with you tomorrow."

Asa tossed the man a set of keys and Bucky caught them with the sort of wide-eyed look of a follower who'd just been ordered off by the guy he swore to always follow. Which, given the stories Dean had heard about Asa and the similar lack of tales about Bucky, who always seemed to be with the guy and yet didn't feature prominently in the legends, was probably exactly what was going on here. Bucky looked almost hurt that his buddy wasn't backing him, but Dean couldn't call up much sympathy for the guy. He certainly wasn't reading the room well enough to know that wasn't going to be the case, here.

Bucky dropped his eyes to the keys in his hand, chancing a glance around the table but not meeting anyone's eyes long enough to gauge

a reaction. With a squared jaw and a huff of air, he tossed the keys back to Asa, who caught them effortlessly, like he'd expected that to be his buddy's play.

"Yeah, alright, fine." Bucky slumped in his chair, not quite meeting Dean's gaze as he nodded his way. "Sorry."

"You don't gotta apologize," Dean answered after a beat, finally getting Bucky to actually look up and lock eyes. It wasn't often Dean was able to reign in the anger that seemed to fill every inch of his being, even on the good days. So he was trying, here, long as he could, to be civil. And he got it. He really did. He got where Bucky was coming from, so he said as much. "This shit's insane, man. Trust me, I wish I was lying. I really do."

After a prolonged moment in which Bucky Sims stared Dean Winchester dead in the eye, the older man dropped his head with a nod. He settled back in his seat, intent to stay quiet for the time being rather than make enemies of the relatively dangerous collection of people sitting around Bobby Singer's kitchen table.

Asa caught Dean's eye over the top of Jo's head and nodded to the man. Which, sure, sent Dean's inner fanboy flipping and flailing his shit, but the actual adult residing in there, too, nodded back solemnly. He understood Asa's appreciation for not kicking his buddy out just because he was acting like an ass at the moment. Dean certainly had his own such faults. He knew what it was like for Sam to stick by him anyway, regardless of how much of an ass he'd made of himself.

Ellen cleared her throat, more than happy to be the wrangler of conversational direction, here. (Men.) "So, if we can't get a blade off this angel of yours-"

"She's not *mine*-" Dean grumbled, while no one listened.

"-Is she willing to join us in the fight?"

Dean almost laughed at the question, which was ridiculous to anyone who knew Cas. But these people didn't. And he shouldn't take for granted that they were willing to believe him – believe in angels and even believe in the possibility of this one angel working with them – so he hunkered down that urge to joke and nodded, solemn as possible. "Yeah. She's down."

Ellen waited a beat, watching the oldest Winchester boy, before her daughter beat her to the next obvious question.

"So…I take it we're waiting for something?" Jo glanced around for confirmation. If they had an angel and an angel blade, and all it took to stop the apocalypse was killing this one demon…there had to be a reason they were sitting around Bobby Singer's table chatting after a partially eaten meal of ribs and beer.

"Yeah," Sam answered with a weak smile. "Lilith's not on Earth right now."

Bucky snorted, calling the room's attention to himself once more, and this time he actually looked contrite about it. He raised a halfway apologetic hand. "Sorry, it…uh, it sounded…like an alien thing."

He trailed off at the end, realizing how stupid that sounded out loud, and shook his head, muttering a second apology.

Jo actually chuckled though, seeing what Bucky was on about. Sam shared a quirked grin with her while Bobby rolled his eyes. For once, though, Bucky hadn't been disrespecting his guests, so there wasn't much heat in the action.

Dean actually laughed. He grinned conspiratorially at Sam, raising his hands about a foot apart and said, with half-lidded eyes, "Aliens."

Sam chuckled back, but it was with a look of confusion, shaking his head back and forth with the Mother of all Furled Brows. "Dude, what?"

The man from the future dropped his hands. "Damnit, you're telling me the Alien meme's not a thing yet?"

Jo snickered as well, though it was clear she thought Dean might be losing his mind by the way her forehead furled right along with Sam's and she stared at him like she was definitely so much better (debatable, but not without merit, Dean thought). "What's a 'meem?'"

Dean's face went slack. "No. *No*, you're messing with me right?" He glanced around the table, but a couple of slow headshakes and more than one look of confusion sealed the deal. The horrifying deal. He slumped back against the counter, shell-shocked. "*Memes* aren't a thing yet?"

When the looks just continued, Dean threw his arms out. "*How* did I travel back to the friggin' *stone age*!"

Jo sniggered next to him and she, at least, got a conspiratorial grin out

of him, annoyed as he was (because seriously. How the *hell* was ten years such a friggin' *long* time?!)

"Oh, cry me a river," Bobby groused with absolutely no sympathy, eying the kid with the kind of stink eye that reminded everyone they had better things to be talking about. "If yer done whining, can we get back to Lilith and the *apocalypse*?"

Ducking his head with an appropriate level of contrition, Dean cleared his throat. Even with his head down, though, he managed to catch Jo's eye again. She was staring sidelong at him and once she had his attention, she mouthed, *'I want to know what a 'meem' is.'* Dean had to bite back the chuckle, but grinned her way anyway. Like kids playing under the table while the adults ordered *another* round of coffee and talked about boring, adult things.

Sam sent Dean a look, a kid-brother-who-sees-what's-going-on-here look, and then Dean truly did look contrite, despite the reddening of his cheeks. He and Jo weren't like that. Couldn't be like that. Even if sometimes (pretty much any time he was actually around her), a part of Dean thought otherwise.

"So, Lilith's in Hell." There was something in the way Ellen said it that had Dean looking up, and he had to fight off a second round of reddening (and he did, because he was a *boss*) at the very blatant look on the older Harvelle woman's face. Like she knew exactly what those kids under the table were doing while the adults sipped their coffee.

Dean cleared his throat, suddenly quite happy to move the conversation along. "Yeah. She, uh, she comes topside through a hellgate that's supposed to open later this year. In May."

Not that they could count on dates. Not only because Dean couldn't always remember the exact one, but more so because Time seemed to change shit up on them all the time, despite '*wanting to stay the same'* like everyone kept friggin' telling him. His dad had died almost two months early, so no, Dean didn't really put much faith in dates anymore.

"Well, if you know when and where a hellgate's going to open," Asa reasoned, straightening up against the counter as it occurred to him just how incredibly *handy* having someone from the future might be, "we gotta make sure it stays closed."

Dean and Bobby exchanged a less than happy look. It was Dean who cleared his throat, though, and glanced to his left, meeting Asa's

expectant look head on. "It's not that simple."

"I'm starting to get that's a theme, here," Ellen muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear but not with enough to heat or intent to derail the conversation. Bobby sent her a look he got right back in return.

"It oughta be," Asa countered, tone firm for the first time since this whole confab started. He stared at Dean, broad shoulders only getting broader. Jesus, but the guy really was huge. "Dean, that's *hundreds* of demons we're talking about-"

"Trust me, I *know*," the man from the future countered right back. He'd been the one to deal with it the first time. The one to bear the guilt of a hunter dead at the hands of seven of those demons, and his wife hell bent on getting herself killed avenging him.

For half a year after that hellgate opened, right up until his own impending death became his total focus, he'd asked any hunter they bumped into for news on Tamara. On the surface, Dean was doing it to check in on her, but deep down he knew what it was really about. He expected her to meet the short end of some monster's claws. Not out of lack of skill or stupidity, but because he'd seen the look in her eye after Isaac was killed. He'd been her rock; hunting with him was what had kept her going after the death of their daughter. Without him… Well. It was only a matter of time.

(It wasn't until years later he found out what happened to her, but he hadn't been wrong.)

"-we can't just stand back and let it happen." Asa's words weren't forceful. He didn't seem the type to yell. But he sure as hell had a commanding voice, confident and solid like stone.

"That's not what we're talking about doing!" Sam came to his brother's defense, his own defensive nature and indignation on Dean's behalf making his voice not unlike Asa's in immovability. The only difference was that his came with rising anger.

(He might not remember being blamed for letting that hellgate open, for being responsible for hundreds of demons loosed on the world, but Dean had told him enough of future events for him to imagine plenty of self-blame.)

Dean waved him off, though. He wasn't a damsel in need of defending, much as he appreciated Sam having his back. Before he could get into the complications of even attempting to change the timeline and all

that came with it (even the smallest of shit, and keeping a hellgate from opening was far from *small*), Jo spoke up from between him and Asa.

"Look, I'm not trying to play sides between you two, but I'm with Asa on this one. Letting a hellgate open sounds, you know," she shrugged her shoulders, hands still in her pockets as she met Dean's eyes, "*bad*?"

The older Winchester sighed and wished, not for the first time, definitely not for the last, that he wasn't having this conversation. "I'm not saying we let it open."

"Then what are you saying, Dean?" Ellen's tone was even, her eyes hard as ever but not unkind.

Dean wanted to sigh again. Instead, he scrubbed one hand over his face, shifted his weight against the counter and went right back to crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't care if it was defensive, it was *familiar* and (he'd never admit it out loud) comforting.

"I…I don't know," he answered honestly, trying not to let it sound like he didn't have a clue what he was doing, even if that's exactly what was happening here. What had been happening for a whole friggin' year now. At least the group around him didn't react much to it. Didn't exchange worried looks full of doubt and accusation. They kept their eyes on him, waiting and patient, and he kind of loved them all for it. At least as much as he hated them for getting together in Bobby Singer's kitchen to play *Twenty Questions* with the impending apocalypse.

"Look, this time shit is *complicated*. There's…a bunch of crap that Cas says is gonna happen whether we try to stop it or not. And the more we try to stop..." Dean shook his head. "This isn't just about letting Lilith topside so we can gank her. For starters, Cas is pretty sure Hell will just open a different gate if we keep this one closed. But more than that-"

"If we keep acting on stuff we ain't supposed to know," Bobby took over, for which Dean wanted to friggin' kiss him, "the more demons are gonna start asking questions. Like how and why. And I don't know about you-" he eyed each of them in turn, "-but I don't really want *Hell* starting to think creatively. It'll cost us the one advantage we have in all this mess."

The silence that settled after that declaration was pretty solidifying. It sank over the others, the factor they hadn't been considering. The

more Hell realized something was up, the more their plans were likely to change.

'Welcome to our world,' Dean thought with no small amount of bitterness.

"Why can't we just make something up?" The table turned, almost as one, to Bucky sitting at the head. He almost shrank back at the sudden attention, realizing as much as everyone else that he was suddenly participating like he was in on this conversation. Like he believed what they were talking about. On board the Crazy Train.

No one called him out on it, but he seemed to come to it all on his own. Bucky went back to his sullen silence after that, a little grumpy, a little surprised, and busy asking himself a bunch of questions he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to bother answering.

"It might work once," Sam offered, not unkindly given Bucky might just be coming around (though he clearly needed more time than the rest of them). "But we'll only get away with vague lies a couple of times before Hell starts poking around more seriously."

Bucky just nodded, though it was obvious from his grumpy expression that he wasn't really listening. The rest of the group turned back the conversation at hand, but Asa nudged the leg of his buddy's chair again, this time with a small smile. Bucky tried returning it, but it was weak. Asa had all the faith in the world that it would get stronger, given time.

"Way we figure it, we need to keep Hell in the dark as much as possible about this," Dean started up again, keeping his voice calm and even now that some of the tension in the room had shifted internally. "The longer we can keep 'em, the longer we have the advantage of knowing what comes next." Well, at least somewhat, but they didn't need the details of how fucking hard that actually was. "Cas says we stick to the timeline as much as possible. So that's what we're gonna do. Whatever we would do normally if we didn't know what was coming."

"No hunter would ever just let a hellgate open," Ellen offered up, *gently*, before anyone else could do it. Asa had probably well been on his way, but coming from Ellen it wasn't defensive or accusatory. It just was. The woman had power that way Dean would never understand (or ever be able to emulate).

"No," Dean agreed. "So we're gonna try to keep this one from opening

too."

And just hope Cas was right and they didn't somehow screw their only chance to get Lilith before it was too late. Of course, Dean supposed it was far more likely Hell would get their way and they, the lowly humans, would always be scrambling to catch up, not the other way around. Figured that the one time he'd wish for the former, he had to hope they got stuck with the latter.

"So we have till May?" Ellen leaned back in her chair at the natural pause, the shift and slowing, of a ridiculously tense conversation.

Dean shrugged, even as Bobby reached across Ellen to the paper tray he kept beneath his array of landline phones. He slipped his hand under the stack of papers on the top tray, pulling a legal pad out from beneath it all. Dean recognized it immediately, its yellow pages, dog eared and worn, covered in Bobby's scrawl. Page after page of it, not that they could tell as Bobby set it down in front of him. Those were the notes he'd taken when Dean laid it all out for him, back when their Dad had narrowly escaped a Baku and Meg had taken a bullet from the Colt.

The man from the future swallowed roughly. There was a lot in there – including the death of the Harvelles at the hand of that same demon bitch and her squad of hellhounds – that he didn't want everyone in this room knowing so freely.

"Uh, we, um," Dean shook his head, looking away from that legal pad. Unfortunately, on his way to meeting Ellen's gaze, he caught Bobby's, which was both apologetic, unapologetic (they needed to know, at least *some* of it) and, probably the worst, sympathetic. Dean swallowed past the frog suddenly lodged in his throat and focused on Ellen's question. "We *should* have till May, but don't count on it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jo jumped on the question. "Why would the date change if we don't change anything?"

"Because we have been changing things." Sam offered a half smile – weak but trying – when everyone turned towards him. He shrugged self-consciously at the attention, but his brother shouldn't be the only one handling with this, after all.

"What things?"

Dean rubbed at his chest automatically, and Jo eyed the movement like a hawk. A frowning hawk. The man from the future sighed,

dropping his hand.

"Well, for one thing," he began, trepidation thick like mud in his voice. God, he didn't want to be talking about this. "We brought Cas in early. So…Hell knows there's an angel involved now."

"Fortunately, they think it's only Cas," Sam jumped in. "From what the demons have done to try and catch her, they seem to think she's working alone. That she's rogue from Heaven."

"She is rogue," Dean muttered, voice bitter with an undercurrent of worry and regret. Beside him, Jo's eyes narrowed, but Dean didn't notice it.

"What would happen if they thought she wasn't?" Ellen asked, catching on to the thread of concern in the room buried beneath the tension and dread. It was shared between the four men who knew the whole story, which was ringing all sorts of alarm bells in Ellen's head.

"Bad shit," Bobby answered with a sardonic eyebrow. "If Hell thinks Heaven's on to them, they'll only try harder. And work faster. They've already sped up their plans, far as we can tell."

"How?" When Bobby's gaze shifted to Asa, he gestured to the notes in front of him. "How can you tell they've moved up their plans?"

"Uh…" Sam exchanged a weak look with his brother when their surrogate father turned that question directly their way. Sam cleared his throat. "Our dad died two months early in, uh, in this timeline."

Silence settled thick and heavy, both out of mourning and respect. Ellen was the first to break it. She always was.

"John's death had to do with the apocalypse?" she asked softly, eyes wide and hand on top of Bobby's forearm. The older hunter didn't pull away or reciprocate, which was as good as hand-holding in Singer terms.

Sam dropped his gaze, unsure how to proceed without breaking the eggshells that topic was less than skirting.

'*Ah, hell,*' Dean thought.

"He sold his soul and the Colt to Azazel. To save me." Dean tried to get it out neutrally, like ripping off a Band-Aid, but all that accomplished was it coming out sharp. Harsh. Ellen's eyes widened. Beside him, Jo

physically jolted.

"Jesus," Ellen whispered, taking that hand off Bobby's arm to hover over her mouth.

"There was a car crash," Sam whispered, hands in his lap, eyes locked on the table but really eight hundred miles and seven months ago in a hospital in Flint, Michigan. "Dean was, um…it wasn't good."

"Azazel set the whole thing up. Crash included." Dean's words were spat through clenched teeth, hands fisted against his torso, tight to his chest. He could still feel that gutting agony deep inside, that flare of white and explosion of pain as Cas's grace had reacted to a demon soul-searching them both. Dean should have been a goner. Sometimes he still thought his dad should have let him go. "He knew dad would sell his soul."

"Why?" All the eyes turned once more to Bucky, who looked again like he wanted to duck away from the attention. But he didn't. He squared his shoulders, gesturing with one hand. "I'm not trying to start anything. But…one soul in hell? This Azazel sounds like big fish. John was a hell of a hunter, but what's one more guy in Hell to something as big as the apocalypse?"

Bucky took the way Dean squared his jaw, the way he worked that muscle till he might hurt himself, as a sign that he'd overstepped. Which, given that he certainly hadn't made the best first impression with these guys (and he was still questioning whether they were all insane), the Winchester probably had grounds. Bucky raised his hands, not wanting a fight. Especially not one with odds seven to one.

"I didn't mean anything by it. I'll uh, shut up."

"You're not wrong." The words were out of Dean Winchesters mouth before Bucky even finished apologizing, leaving the older man to stare at him, eyes wide and eyebrows up in surprise. Dean was still clenching his jaw, but there hadn't been any heat in his words, just bitter frustration Bucky got a feeling wasn't because of him.

"Dean…?" Sam's voice was soft. Quiet. Questioning just enough to bring his brother back from whatever edge he was teetering on. "We don't have to."

The man from the future shrugged one shoulder so jerkily it nearly dislodged him from the counter. He was agitated, that much was clear. "They're gonna find out eventually, Sammy."

"Find out what, boys?" Ellen kept her tone even as the rest of them. She could sense the precipice they weren't far from. And while she wanted to know what was on the other side, she also wasn't inclined to go jumping off cliffs without some form of parachute to keep her up. When no one answered right away, Sam staring at Dean, Dean glaring at the floor, and Bobby looking between 'em both, she cleared her throat using the 'mom' setting. Even Dean glanced up, though she could tell it was a weighted, reluctant look. "At best all you got – all any of us got – is us. Together. Bad shit's coming and it's coming fast. Better to tell us now than after it's too late to help, boys. So no secrets or half-truths, here."

"Ellen," Bobby warned, worried what her pushing too hard on the boys might do. Dean was all the more likely to shut down for it. Even if she meant well, patience had never been Ellen's strong suit.

"It's easy for you to say, Ellen," Dean said in the beat just after Bobby. "You're not the one holding all the secrets."

"We're not gonna judge you, Dean." The older Winchester turned to the woman at his side, Jo's eyes were big and honest while somehow still looking pissed off. Just like her mother, Dean thought. She tipped her head cockily, a smirk at the corner of her lips, but those eyes remained sincere. "I think the End Times coming kind of suspends the petty stuff, don't you think?"

Dean huffed, shaking his head. He didn't dare look at anyone else as he said it, just keeping his eyes on Jo as he answered her, "How about if Sam and I are the whole reason it goes down in the first place?"

Sam dropped his eyes to the table, shoulders taught.

Jo scoffed, straight up laughing in his face with the kind of innocence of someone who thought they were playing along. "Dean, come on. You're not gonna end the world. Even your ego's not *that* big."

When he didn't laugh with her, she glanced around the room, face slackening. But everyone was watching them, so she turned back to Dean, a little paler and a lot more shaken as she regarded him warily. It hurt to see, but he also knew Jo was anything but scared of him. Wouldn't happen in a million years, so he knew now what this look was. Disbelief, pure and simple, in the Harvelle style of suspicion and skepticism over shock and raw emotion.

"You're not serious…are you?"

Dean stared at her, into her beautiful face, full of life and laughter (even as it was slowly disappearing and in his mind's eye he watched the color drain from her face as well, leaving it ashen grey, her eyes nearly lifeless-) for as long as he could. Then he turned to the rest of the room. "The first seal on the devil's cage breaks when a Righteous Man spills blood in Hell."

Ellen sucked in a small breath, the only audible reaction in a room that could have heard a pin drop. "John was…?"

"No. Dad never broke." Dean shook his head. It wasn't just that, honestly. Dean doubted that deal his dad made had ever been entirely selfless. He loved his father, but if him sacrificing his life for his son's had been entirely selfless, John Winchester never would have asked Dean to do what he'd asked him to do next. Something even ten years later, Dean hadn't forgiven. Couldn't forgive.

The real truth of it was everyone broke. He'd learned that down in the Pit. They just broke differently. Some took the deal. Took up the knife and tore into others to save being torn into themselves. Those were the souls that turned. That twisted and knotted and burned until there was nothing left of what they'd been, not even their name. That kind of breaking left only black and pain and a need to cause it in others. Those were the souls that became demons.

But there were others. Others who never picked up the knife. Who retreated into themselves so they never could. Those people, those souls lost themselves just as surely as their counterparts. No one survived Hell. But those that didn't take up the knife eventually withered into nothingness down in its depths. They'd had a name for where those souls went, but Dean didn't remember it. Hadn't cared. He'd been more interested in the ones that turned, the ones that he could make bleed so that he didn't have to, take up the knife so he could put his down, however temporarily, until the next soul was escorted in.

Everyone breaks. Just some break differently. The only ones who make it out – and not intact, never intact – were the lucky ones who managed to escape Hell. And they were few and far between.

"Dad never took up the knife, never used it on another down there." The man from the future closed his eyes, arms crossed over the remnants of the angel who'd gotten him out after he'd broken, but before he'd lost himself completely. "But I did."

Forget a pin drop. That night in Bobby Singer's kitchen, you could hear the blood pulsing in everyone's veins. Or, more appropriately, the skip that everyone's heart took.

"Dean…" Ellen's voice was a whisper. Suddenly she understood where that feeling had come from, the one that told her this man was more than just ten years older than he should be. Now she knew why, and she wished she didn't. Wished it wasn't true.

Across the kitchen, her daughter put a hand on Dean's arm, but withdrew it again when the hunter flinched beneath her touch. He opened his eyes to give Jo a half smile, stretched across his face with force, but she understood. She nodded, backing off and tucking her hands back in her pockets.

"You've…been to Hell?" Asa asked over her shoulder, the shock and horror clear on his face. It wasn't the disgust Dean had quite been expecting. He supposed most hunters had at least thought about it – thought about selling their soul for that loved one that had gotten them into the life – but most weren't dumb or desperate enough to actually do it. That was the difference. They knew that the ones that sold their souls sealed their own fate. Dean had known that and done it anyway. Learned the hard way.

"They kill Sammy." Dean hated the way his voice caught. He knew what was coming and still he couldn't even begin to prepare for it. "May first, 2007. At least, that was the date where I came from. There's a battle between all the psychics. Azazel set it up so only one gets to walk away. And that…that wasn't Sam."

"Dean-" Sam started to climb out of his seat, but Dean shook his head adamantly. So the giant of a man settled back in the kitchen chair while his brother's green gaze flickered over to Andy, sitting in the corner, a silent compliment to this party. The kid wasn't looking up, staring at his lap. Dean wouldn't have been able to hold his gaze, either. He'd barely known the kid last time, his death just another blip on the radar, but that didn't count for nothing. And this time…

This time Dean would make sure Andy stayed out of it. He'd already faced down his psychic battle and crawled out of it, barely alive and permanently maimed. He'd done enough. Been through enough. Dean wasn't letting anything more happen to him.

"Or anyone else," he added softly, causing Andy to look over at him. And he could tell by that sad, pathetically understanding, sympathetic

face – a face that didn't seem capable of hating *anyone*, and that just wasn't fair – that Andy understood. He'd known for a while now that he was supposed to have died at Cold Oak. That the fact he hadn't was a chronological abomination. Borrowed time, nothing more.

Well, not if Dean got any say in that.

The hunter straightened up, shoulders squaring off with a new burst of determination. It was the same determination he'd always had, reignited by the surrogate little brother who didn't deserve the fate coming to him any more than Dean's actual brother.

"I got a year," he continued abruptly, not bothering with the details. Every hunter there would immediately understand what he was talking about. "Hellhounds dragged me down in 2008." His throat worked double time, swallowing past lumps that felt more like shards of glass. But he didn't dare stop talking, or he'd hear his friends – his family – reacting to events he still pretended most days hadn't happened to him. "I broke the first seal four months later. Climbed off the rack and took up the knife in exchange for- for-"

This time when Jo settled her arm on his forearm, Dean flinched but she didn't remove her hand. He spared her a glance he couldn't hold longer than half a second, water very clearly filling his eyes. He fought it back valiantly, refusing to cry in front of a bunch of hunters. In front of his family.

"Cas dragged me out," he managed through a throat that felt like death itself. Swollen shut and hot. He could practically feel that scar on his arm – the one that wasn't there – burning in response. He probably would have reached up to grab it if Jo didn't have a hand on his lower arm. Dean shared a bitter, broken smile with the room. "Imagine that. An angel pulling my ass out of hell after I started the apocalypse."

"Okay," Ellen started with the very distinct mom tone that called for a change in direction. It was obvious Dean wanted no part in the possible pity party headed his way. She couldn't blame him, even if her heart hurt for the man who so clearly expected harsh judgement from those around him more than their sympathy. "So…don't sell your soul this time."

Dean snorted, the movement shaking his shoulders enough that Jo pulled away, giving her mom a *look*.

"Gee, why didn't we think of that?" Bobby interrupted from beside the

older Harvelle woman, backing his boys. Ellen turned a narrowed glare on him, but there wasn't much heat. The two had always exchanged glares with the same ferocity of an old married couple bickering.

"You haven't…done it already, have you?" Jo asked hesitantly, getting very much the big brother glare right away in return. She'd take it over the scary blankness that had been all over Dean's face for the last three minutes. Like a wall had closed between him and the rest of the room. A shield, no doubt, but she didn't like it any more for its purpose.

"Okay, first off, *no*." Dean's adamancy – clearly affronted by her assumption – was almost adorable. Jo smiled at him, pleased when his already narrowed eyes got even narrower. "Second, not doing it this time around *is* the plan."

Dean speared those last words in Ellen's direction. The woman raised her hands in surrender.

There was a beat of silence, a very obvious one, which Asa eventually pointed out. "But?"

"But…" Dean sighed, and this time he did reach up and rub at his bicep. Like a phantom itch he couldn't completely scratch. "Cas doesn't think it'll be that easy."

"Hell's shifty," Bobby shrugged casually when the group's attention turned his way. "We all know that. They'll find another way around it. Another way to make it happen."

"If it's not Sam, it'll be someone else. A dozen someone else's till they get what they want," Dean muttered, dropping his hand from his arm to rub at his chest instead. Jo followed the movement, once more like a hawk. Once more, Dean didn't notice, a little lost in the conversation. "I, uh…there's only so much I'll be able to take before..."

"We get it," Jo suddenly said. It was a completely supportive, not questions asked kind of tone and she stared at him with those earnest eyes. Eyes he was much more used to seeing narrowed and teasing. "Everyone has a breaking point."

The words, a mirror of his own thoughts, were almost like a slap to the face, but Dean managed not to flinch. He was pretty sure he paled but… Well, she wasn't wrong. In fact, it was the most damn supportive thing anyone could have said to him. Not expecting him to face the

world alone after everything had been taken from him. After he'd somehow found it in him to still say no. He knew that wasn't a possibility, wasn't even an option. And there was Jo, holding him up and saying she knew it too and, what's more, didn't blame him for it.

But the words still hurt. Because it was a reminder that he would break, and then he'd break again, thirty years and levels of fire and pain and guilt later. If he even made it thirty, this time.

Something flickered in his chest, like a fluttering tap against the back of his sternum, and Dean sucked in a breath. He pressed a hand to his chest, blinking rapidly and not breathing in hopes of feeling it again. He didn't, his chest had gone silent, but Dean wanted to cry (because of this stupid, emotional and difficult conversation he was being forced to have, and no other reason, *obviously*).

That…that had been Cas. His Cas. His trenchcoat wearing, nerd angel, *'I gripped you tight and raised you from Perdition'* Cas. Dean dropped his arm from his chest, crossing his arms as casually as he could manage (which was not that casually at all) and closed his eyes. Cas was in there, reminding him of that. That he'd be there for him, every version of him. Dean's hand, fisted where it was tucked into his other arm, was shaking.

Cas would come for him. He hadn't- he'd never- well, Dean hadn't gotten that far. But since they were starting to talk about him selling his soul like it would happen (*'It's not an inevitably Dean*', Cas's voice was in his head, even if he had trouble taking solace in it), maybe he should. Because if he sold his soul (and that was still a big *if* in his book), Cas was coming for him. In all her Miss Hawaii and Warrior of God glory. This Cas – the Cas of whatever year it actually was – would go after him. That…he had no doubt about that.

Maybe he could make forty years knowing she was coming for him, knowing it would end. Maybe. Dean swallowed roughly.

"Plan A is still not to sell my soul," he clarified, just to say it out loud. To make that promise to himself, once more, if to no one else. "But Plan B or – er, the overarching plan – is to kill Lilith so it won't matter whether I break the first seal or not. No final seal, no apocalypse."

"Alright then." Ellen nodded, and that was, somehow, miraculously, unexplainable, *that*. No one dared tell her otherwise. "We work with that. How are we gonna know if this whole thing goes down early?"

She directed her question at Bobby and his legal pad of notes, and

something vaguely like relief and a lot like needing to throw up flooded Dean out of nowhere. The man from the future swallowed the feeling down, but it never made it back down past his ribs. The rest of the room turned to the conversation of stopping this Hellgate without breaking time, and Dean was bracing against the kitchen counter like he couldn't breathe. Probably because he couldn't breathe.

"I'm uh, gonna go, and uh…do…something…bathroom." Dean shook his head, blaming the utter lack of oxygen getting to his brain for that rambling, muttering mess. Luckily, most of the crew didn't pay him much attention. Dean wanted to think it was because he was a smooth operator just going to do something…in the bathroom (uh-huh, right). … The rest of him knew that he probably looked like crap warmed over and they were giving him some space to pull it together.

Sam nodded at him as he slipped out of the room, those puppy dog eyes knowing full well what was going on. He didn't look at anyone else, but no one tried to stop him so Dean slipped out of the kitchen under the guise of, uh, bathroom things, and bolted for the stairs the moment he was out of view.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A/Ns: Oh nose, sounds like Dean's in for another panic attack. I do love tormenting that poor boy….

I had to cut it off here because, no kidding, this chapter grew to be the length of three (now it's just the length of two! Yipee!) Also, cutting it here leaves much lighter stuff for next chapter, rather than all this heavy doom and gloom (I always get self-conscious and second-guess-y with the chatter chapters, man)

The Colt: I read an interesting fanfic once upon a time that suggested the Colt didn't kill Lucifer because he was an angel and the gun had been designed to kill creatures of darkness or evil origin. It was a cool theory, since we've never been given a canon reason for why the gun can't kill five things, or what those fives things are.

More Trivia Knowledge: For your Jeopardy collection, the word 'meme' was coined in the 1970s, but the internet meme didn't really come into play until the 1990s. It wasn't until Youtube released in 2005 that memes became more widely known. The earliest news article I could find that didn't have to explain what a meme was, was from 2008, so I think I'm safe to say some hunters back in (late) 2006 probably hadn't caught on to an early internet craze yet :) Isn't

research fun?!

Bucky Sims: Okay, this boy gave me some trouble all chapter long. I liked him well enough in the episode we got, at least until the end. I sort of felt a little bad for him, actually; he got judged pretty harshly by the others. Now, I get it – dude pulled a dick move and should be held accountable. But I didn't feel like he was evil or like he deserved having every hunter turned against him and shunned. I don't know, it's possible I'm in the minority on this (I mean…yeah, going through with stringing your friend up with a noose gives you a *lot* of time to second guess your life choices and Bucky didn't….), but I felt the reactions against him were a little extreme for the crime. Asa's death was accidental, the crime was that he hid it and lied. Anyway. Long story short (too late), this chapter was hard to write in that regard. I kept switching back and forth between BUCKY = EVIL TERRIBLE DIPSHIT because the show (kinda) went that way with him (debatable), but my gut instinct was to make him a halfway decent guy (because the show also kind of went that way with him?). You know, maybe a bit of a coward and a follower, not too relatable, but not a bad dude, maybe even redeemable. Anyway, I'm a *tad* all over the place with him at the moment, but I think I've got character growth set for Bucky Sims and we'll see if we can't redeem him over the next however many years till the apocalypse (which, of course, isn't coming, cuz we're *totally* gonna stop that. *cough*)

Lemme know what you all think of my take on him. We're still in the early stages, so fixes can still be made!

On the Topic of Race in Writing: Time to get real for a second, because this topic is important even if it is incredibly uncomfortable and I have my own work to do as a white woman who claims to be an ally. I currently feel pretty comfortable in my ability to write characters of color and I like to have a diverse crew whenever it's my choice to make it that way. But if I am ever off, or could improve how I write characters that are not white-cis-woman (aka: what's default relatable to me), please do not be afraid to speak up. To be perfectly honest, I struggle every damn time I write a description of a character as black or dark-skinned. I can never figure out what to say without worrying it's not cool to say it that way (and then I try and think how I'd describe a white person in reverse and get completely flail-worthy-flustered when I realize *WE DON'T FUCKING DESCRIBE WHITE PEOPLE WE JUST ASSUME THEY'RE WHITE AND HOW MESSED UP IS THAT?!*) *ahem* Anyway, if there are ways I can be improving how I write characters outside of my admittedly small, single-white-woman perspective, please let me know. I am genuinely interested in

improving myself in and outside of writing (even if it's hard and sucks and I wanna whine about it a lot).

Up Next: Dean's little panic attack is gonna take him right to Cas's room (cuz…honestly, who here thought any differently once he went for the stairs?) but he's not alone. Jo's got a couple of questions, and she's way too smart for her own good. Andy's finally joining the conversation (much to several people's headache-induced surprise, this little Confab gets wrapped up with some motherly threats of being kept in the loop, and the boys get back out on the road, looking for their next hunt or any sign of Ava Wilson.

Reviews: I would really love to hear from you guys. Thoughts, opinions, predictions, or the standard-but-always-more-than-acceptable, "Like Button Pushed!" would be really appreciated in these times of isolation and discord (even if both are, unfortunately, quite necessary).

Chapter 106: Season 2: Chapter 73

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Well, my brain is kinda fried today. It's been a whirlwind of two weeks for me. Big things happening when big things were not supposed to be happening. I'm supposed to be *relaxing* C'est la vie. Anyway, you'll get to read all about it in the end notes when I ramble and babble. Hope everyone is doing good and staying safe!

New Readers: WELCOME!!! We have had what feels like a swell of new readers the last two months, but particularly this week. It's awesome. Thanks for checking out mah little beast of a story and sticking with it for, uh, like seven hundred thousand words or something (good god. And we're in what season? *head thud*)

Reviews: I have become quite terrible at replying to reviews/ comments, which I am most ashamed of but I also know the priority is getting new chapters up for you all :D Anyway, if you haven't heard from me, know that you guys are still keeping me going, new and old readers alike. Seriously, you guys are amazing. Thank you SO MUCH for your time and your words and your encouragement.

Chapter Warnings: Dean's having a panic attack, Cas is calming him down while also, uh, doing absolutely nothing as a comatose-slash-healing-tranced angel in a hospital bed. Jo's sneaking and teasing. Sam's eating salad. Just another night in the Singer household.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 73

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean didn't really know how he ended up in Cas's room, staring at the comatose body of Angela Garrett. He'd had taken the stairs two at a time, heart pounding in his ears like he was being chased by the hounds of hell themselves. The rest of him felt pretty much par for the

course, as well. Blood rushing, veins pumping, skin tingling, adrenaline spiking. He couldn't breathe, his chest was tight and his stomach was a black hole, and yet still he wanted to throw up.

He backed himself into the first wall at the top of Bobby's stairs, then doubled over with a hand on his knee and the other on his chest, heaving shallow, rasping breaths towards the floor. What the hell was happening? Was he having a *panic attack*? In Bobby's house? Literally the safest place in North America, second *only* to the bunker (which was so damn safe they couldn't even currently get inside)? What was *wrong* with him?

Body busy panicking, brain busy trying to figure out *why,* Dean didn't actually realize he'd slowed his breathing 'til he realized wasn't breathing loud enough to drown out a freight train. That was when he noticed he could hear the steady intake and *whoosh* of a ventilator. A rhythm he was breathing in time to.

Dean straightened in the hallway, rubbing a chest that felt like it had taken a battering ram straight to it, and headed for the partially open door to Cas's room with the kind of speed that suggested desperation but the caution that said straight up paranoia. The ventilator wasn't loud, but it was a steady rhythm, impossible to ignore now that he'd noticed it. Without letting himself think too hard about it (thinking was a big no-no that immediately ratcheted up all the pounding and pulsing and buzzing and breathing and he was *done* with that now), he walked into the angel's room, stopping at the foot of the bed and watching her breathe.

In and out, in and out.

Dean didn't even know how long he stood there, just watching the rise and fall of the woman's chest. He told himself he did it to match his own breathing, to make sure he didn't start freaking out again. He told himself it was like before, back in the first days they'd hooked Angela up and Dean was terrified she'd stop breathing and they'd have killed some innocent woman. He was just making sure she kept breathing. That they both just kept breathing.

And if he found himself wishing – wondering – that he could somehow get back into that dream with the two of them and the bunker, where he'd felt safe and the furthest from lonely he'd ever been, well…no one was around to give him shit for that wish. Or see him rub knuckles over his sternum in a steady circle, trying to create some of that missing warmth.

"So, that her?"

Dean jumped hard enough to knock his knee and his flailing arm both into the metal railing of the hospital bed with a ridiculously loud clatter *and* a good dose of pain. He spun around to find Jo standing a foot inside the doorway, looking at him with wide eyes and what were *definitely* judgmental eyebrows.

"*Jesus*, Jo."

"Sorry," she said, sounding far from apologetic as she bunched her shoulders up. Her hands were tucked in her jeans again, revealing a long stretch of skin along her torso with the shrug. Dean's eyes darted down to the expanse of soft, pale skin, an inch strip exposed by the way her shirt rode up with her shoulders. "Figured if you heard me coming, you'd run for the hills."

Her expression turned at least a modicum – really, the *tiniest* of bits – sheepish (and a lot expectant, still judgmental as *shit* and damn this woman he never could seem to fault). Dean cleared his throat, dragging his eyes away from her and her stupidly exposed skin that he somehow *still* found himself completely attracted to despite repeatedly reminding his little head that he thought of Jo more as a sister.

(Okay, that wasn't *quite* right. There wasn't a word for what he and Jo were. Had been. Would be? No, wouldn't be. Because if there was a word, it was more like star-crossed. Something simple and pure, that came together but bounced apart like repelling magnets. Not meant to be, even though all that possibility was right there, waiting patiently (*tauntingly*, Dean thought) just out reach.)

The hunter sighed, turning back to stare at the passed out angel so he didn't have to look at Jo. Whether she followed his lead out of graciousness or curiosity was anyone's guess. As she came up beside him, he conceded grumpily, "I wouldn't have run for the hills. I'm not a coward."

Her sidelong glance, endlessly amused with that same eyebrow still raised, made him grumble all the more. Alright, fine, he wouldn't have run but he might have…snuck away. Awesome. So he'd be a sneak over a coward. Fan-freaking-tastic.

"That Cas?" Jo asked, thankfully changing the topic (and damnit, he would not be grateful for her changing a topic she'd picked in the first place! After *following* him. He wasn't the sneak, she was the sneak!)

(And *why* was he having this argument in his head like a five year old? One who'd pulled his crush's pigtails and got punched in return and was now *pouting* about it. Friggin' ridiculous.)

Dean eyed her warily from his periphery. When he turned more fully to her, it was with a mask of confidence and pure diversionary tactic. "You seriously think an *angel* would be strapped to a hospital bed?"

Because he didn't *want* her to know the angel was currently strapped to a hospital bed. He trusted Jo, he really did, but for some reason that he really wasn't up for exploring, he didn't know if he trusted her with Cas.

(And how silly was that? Like he continuously insisted to *everyone* around him, Cas wasn't *his*. There was no sharing him – er, *her* – with others because she wasn't friggin' his to pass around.)

Dean sighed internally, brain cloudy with frustration and irritation and impatience, all because there were *feelings* going on up there and, damnit, he didn't have time for them, let alone to sort through or make sense of any of it.

Cas was like a secret this time around. His secret that he *had* to keep, or he risked losing it. Losing her. Not to Jo or other hunters, but to Azazel. Damnit, Azazel had almost taken the angel out – taken her from Dean – once already. Twice if you counted that chest explosion in Michigan. And it was only going to get harder from here on out. Experience had taught Dean that and taught it well. That yellow-eyed bastard had taken his father from him, would take Sam from him no matter what he did to try and stop it (and fuck it all, but he *would* stop it. Somehow). That son of a bitch wasn't getting Dean's angel too. Fuck that, and fuck anyone who gave him shit keeping Cas close to his chest (literally, some days).

Dean wasn't losing anyone else he cared about to Azazel or to Hell. And Cas felt like one of the few he actually had some control over.

Jo, oblivious to all that going on in Dean's head, shrugged one shoulder nonchalantly. "My mom likes to say I'm an idiot but I'm not stupid." She quirked a grin his way which was returned out of force of habit but not backed by much. Jo looked back at the angel, starting to get a hint of the headspace Dean was floating around in. She cleared her throat, tone a little more serious. "You said the uh, vessel?-" and here Dean gave a small nod at her expectant look- "she took was in a coma."

Damnit, he had said that. He'd been trying to defend Cas, not give away she had a weakness. Double damnit, of course Jo knew this was Cas. Andy had sent her a friggin' picture, the two of them all cuddled up together, and Dean had all but labeled her as the woman comatose'd upstairs. The hunter managed to tilt his head back, throat rumbling with an angry growl even while his cheeks reddened.

(It was an interesting combo, Jo thought personally.)

It was a damn good thing it *had* just been friends down there in that kitchen while Dean tried to defend Cas's need to take a vessel and inadvertently alerted half the room to her vulnerability. He and Sam and Bobby had all silently agreed (Andy too, extra emphasis on the silent part for him) that they wouldn't mention Cas was upstairs. It was bad enough they were telling hunters almost abstractly that angels existed and one was on their side, but if they'd mentioned she was upstairs, within view or reach, they'd find themselves contending with curiosity at the best and a whole lot uglier at the worst.

Dean wanted to bang his head against something hard. He resisted by reminding himself there were friends downstairs. Just friends. Down there and in this room with him.

"Yeah, that's Cas," he mumbled, trying not to feel like he was somehow betraying the angel by admitting it. Was he just being way too protective? Damnit, was this that chauvinistic thing rearing its ugly head again? Would he feel this same way if it was Jimmy Novak's body lying there instead? (Not that that even made any sense. If it was Jimmy, he wouldn't *be* lying in that hospital bed, therefore Dean and Jo wouldn't even be up here talking in the first place.)

God, he hoped it wasn't that and hoped harder Jo wouldn't pick up on it. One lecture about vessel equality from Cas and about half a dozen more about women's rights and *suffrage* (like it was nineteen friggin ten) from Sam had been more than enough to last a lifetime. Dean did not need more (and definitely not from *Jo* of all people. She wouldn't stop at the verbal ass-kicking, he was sure). The subtle twinge in his chest sure wasn't doing much to help, either, and he poked at it irritably (conveniently ignoring the fact that he was happy to be feeling anything at all from Chest Cas).

"She gonna be okay?" Jo received another sidelong look which she couldn't quite read (protectiveness? Defensiveness? Who knew Dean Winchester was so…*touchy*). She buried the urge to poke him for it and instead shrugged. "Not stupid, remember? She's hooked up to

more machines than a hospital even has. And from the way you went full Mama Bear back there on *Bucky* of all people…I kind of got the impression she might be, you know, hurting."

"I did not go Mama- I *do* not go Mama Bear on people," Dean all but growled. He friggin' watched the way Jo's shoulders tensed up with restrained amusement and growled again, for all the good it did him. As his eyes landed back on his injured friend, the fight in him deflated and he sighed, scrubbing a hand through his hair with a half-hearted sigh of defeat. "Azazel tried to catch her in a trap."

"Like a devil's trap, but for angels?"

"I don't know, I didn't get a good look at it." He lowered his hand back to his chest before dropping it completely, realizing what he was doing and that Jo was eying him for it. "Think it was more painful than that. She took a beating from it. I got her free and we bolted before I got a good look."

Not that there'd been much to look at after Cas exploded half that damn gym, taking Azazel with it. After that, they'd had bigger things to worry about. Like the angel squad that no doubt showed up to sniff around.

"Jeez," Jo shook her head, closing the last foot between her and the bed, resting a hand on the metal railing, eyes still on Cas. "I can't imagine the kind of power it takes to bring down an angel."

Coming from anyone else, it might have made the man from the future tense. But this was Jo, and Dean saw past that that tough exterior – to the woman beneath trying to be a hunter more than herself – to the actual concern beneath. Jo cared. That's who she was, no matter how she tried to bury it beneath guns and knives and pure female badassery. And yeah, those all might be the things that turned Dean the hell on around her (always, without fault), but they weren't the reason he loved her.

But her question took him away from those thoughts. Back to a terrifying dark night, to the stupid florescents of a high school gym and lightning forking through the air, shattering every window and bulb. He could still see the bright flashes of wings as they – as Cas – was speared by those streaks of light. Could still hear Cas's screams. Dean tried not to think about how that would have ended if he hadn't stayed conscious through the beating. If Cas hadn't managed to heal him first.

He sucked in a breath and shook his head. "Nothing good, that's for sure."

Jo was giving him the side eye again. Dean tried not to twitch under that gaze. What was it with Harvelle women and their piercing friggin' looks? Like expectancy and judgement and understanding all wrapped up in one unblinking stare. Made no damn sense and wasn't friggin' fair, to boot.

"She'll be alright though?"

Dean huffed out a laugh, thinking of Cas and her – well, *his* at the time – annoyed glare in that parking lot, hovering over Dean's bloodied corpse as the soul of the man dared suggest she – he – didn't have it in him – her? – to bring Dean back.

'I will be weakened.'

He thought of the half dozen other times he'd heard that. Those stupid words that meant anything from 'gonna need to take a nap' to 'I'll be coughing up blood for the next three days'. In this case, at least they were somewhere in the middle.

"Yeah," he breathed out with a headshake that was more amusement than worry by sheer will. "She's healing right now."

A peaceful silence settled between them.

Too peaceful. Too settled. Dean's eyes narrowed.

"You know," Jo finally broke it and he could already hear the smile in her words without seeing it growing on her face (despite her mediocre efforts to hold it back).

"Jo," Dean countered immediately, warningly. He didn't know what she was going to say, but he knew that type of silence. It was gonna be nothing good for him.

"I thought she looked a little old for you in the picture," she kept going, heedless of his warning. Her words were thick – *clogged* – with that smug little grin. "But *now*…"

Dean pulled his head back, entirely unsure which to be more offended by. The fact that she was bringing up The Photo, the fact that she'd *seen* The Photo, the fact she was calling him a cradle robber (and what exactly did that make *her?*), or the fact she was calling him *old*.

There was just so much to choose from.

(And how, *how*, for even the last five seconds, had he forgotten about that *damn photo*?! Oh, right, because he'd been distracted by friggin' apocalypse Story Time! Well, that and panic attacks, but he wasn't acknowledging that last one had happened.)

"No, really," Jo interrupted before Dean could even get his mouth fully functional. "It'll be good for you. You know, someone your own age instead of a day over jailbait."

"Hey!" Dean barked, though any heat that it actually carried bounced off her shaking shoulders and shit-eating grin like a goddamn, impenetrable force field. "I'll have you know I like women of all ages. I'm an equal opportunity lay!"

The words had sounded good in his head, they really had. A strong defense, a stance of equality. A decent womanizer! And that's *sort of* how they came out…right in tandem with the utter lack of denial that he and Cas were a thing. Which they *weren't*. Damnit, he'd been *dreaming*, alright? That was *it*. And it took climbing into bed with the angel because the chair Dean had *wanted* to stay sitting right in hadn't worked out so well for him!

Damnit. Dean sighed and weighed the pros and cons of going out back to go dig an ever bigger hole and curl up to die in it. He was too busy thinking which junker in Bobby's yard probably had the softest dirt for digging under to notice the silence. The second silence. A long silence. The expectant kind that sat, just waiting on the edge of a joke he'd walked himself right into.

"…Just women?"

Dean's head whipped around and his eyes laser-focused on the woman standing next to him, currently giving Angela Garrett a run for the title of Devil Lady. "What the hell, *Jo!*"

She had the audacity to look *innocent* of all things. Oh, Jo and Angela had better never meet, because if they did, Dean would just save everyone the trouble and shoot himself in the head.

"It's just, I couldn't help but notice…" Oh, oh, he was very sure she could have helped a lot of things, "…the Castiel in your world was a guy. And since you two are all cozy in *this* time, and you've only been here for like…a *year*…"

Dean turned on his heal and left the room.

"I'm just saying it would explain some things!" Jo called after him, voice so full of laughter she actually struggled to get the words out.

Dean was not having this conversation (with Jo, or anybody else. And, for that matter, *what* the hell was going on? Was everyone drinking the gay Kool-Aid or something?!) At least she didn't seem serious about it, unlike the Devil Lady they left behind in the hospital bed, who was probably cackling even in unconsciousness (Dean just knew it). Which is why Angela was retaining her title and Jo would just have to try for it another day.

"Come on, Dean!" Jo followed after him, still laughing with the payback of years of bad jokes she didn't even know existed between them. "I thought you were an equal opportunity lay!"

-o-o-o-

The two hadn't been gone for long, maybe twenty minutes by the time they came back downstairs, Dean stomping and Jo following with less-than silent chuckles, punching him when they got to the landing with a look that said *'get over it, you know I'm just kidding and the longer you pull the sourpuss face, the longer I have rights to make fun of you for it.'* Yeah, Dean knew that face well too. He glared at her for it though. For *reasons* (and only one of them was her being mostly, sort of, partially right).

The others were still in the kitchen. Ellen and Bobby were in a quiet but heated discussion about something over in their corner of the kitchen table. Dean could guess what (what else, but apocalypse plans?) but really wasn't up for getting involved. At first, panic flared – that legal pad was still out on the table, available for just anyone to grab, to see, read, *know* – but Bobby caught what must have been quite the stricken look on his face and shook his head ever so slightly, eyebrow cocked. He laid a hand on that stack of notes, inching it just ever so much closer to him. Dean got the message. Bobby wasn't an idiot. He wasn't spreading information like a wildfire or letting anyone feed off anything they shouldn't.

Ellen remained in the dark about her daughter's fate where Dean came from (and hers, too, but Dean knew which one the Harvelle woman would actually give a damn about). Good. The man from the future planned to keep it that way. Wasn't gonna happen this time, so no one needed to know.

Someone had broken the ribs back out, as well as the next round of beers. There were a couple bags of chips open on the kitchen counter, reached for occasionally here and there or passed around when called for. Sam was munching on a *salad* that he hadn't done much more than pick at earlier. Andy was eating a bowl of ice cream (because of course he was) as he chatted with Asa and Bucky in half Sign, half haphazard gestures. Given the shaking heads, failed attempts not to laugh, and, in Bucky's case, shouting of random answers like they were playing a game of charades, it wasn't so much of a conversation as it was code breaking.

So, yeah, life was almost normal despite everything this group had learned tonight.

Some wonders never cease, huh? Dean thought, not entirely sure if his brain was being sarcastic or not. Either way, the fact that all these people – his future family – were still *here*, discussing the apocalypse like they believed him, believed *in* him, and were possibly on board to help…. Dean knew better than to knock it, sarcastic or not. He was damn lucky, was what he was.

He had to pass between Andy and Asa, interrupting their, uh, 'conversation', while Jo still followed right behind. He figured he could begrudgingly get her a beer as well. Very begrudgingly. Andy smiled lazily as Dean stopped right in front of him – *purposefully* in front of him – and glared until that smile grew into nothing short of a little brother's shit-eating grin. Dean was getting a lot of those lately.

"You're dead," Dean said incredibly evenly, holding Andy's half-lidded eyes. The kid had definitely taken a sabbatical of his own while they'd been upstairs, seeking out some comfort of his own in the form of good old Mary Jane. For once, Dean couldn't even fault him.

Not that he'd let the kid know, of course. Nope. He held that reddened gaze for a second longer, his own eyes narrowed in a promise of big brother bodily harm, then he turned for the fridge to get those beers.

Andy responded with, *'Who, me?'* and, '*Whatever do you mean, Dean?'* as well as, *'I didn't do anything!'* and *'Oh, so Jo brought up the picture finally, huh?*' All at once, in a series of images that were (mostly) in order and actually (somewhat) discernible. Apparently, the kid had been practicing. The images also, given the way the entire room around them both simultaneously silenced and seemingly flinched as one, didn't go just to Dean.

Guess he hadn't gotten much farther on the whole sending images to one specific target front.

The room stayed in that stunned silence for another beat before it erupted in chaos.

"Gah!" Bucky spilled his beer half across the table and into his lap.

Asa was holding his head and shaking it at the same time. "What the hell was that?"

Jo stuck her head out from behind Dean, blinking at Andy in surprise. "Was that you, Andy?"

"Oh, uh, yeah…" Sam sent an apologetic look around the room on behalf of their resident Jedi, who looked more sympathetic than apologetic, but that could just be the stoned expression on his face. "Andy does that now."

"*Now*?" Ellen practically barked, massaging at her forehead. The headaches Andy caused never lasted long (well, unless you were Sam, who seemed to have a natural defense against his powers, which included a headache all its own, but the younger Winchester hid it well) but they were annoying anytime they flared up. Like a phantom pain you knew you felt a minute ago, even if you weren't feeling it now. Especially if you didn't know one was coming. "What the hell did he do *before*?"

Ellen knew the kid was a psychic, but she'd never gotten much out of Jo regarding him, and the boys hadn't bothered with specifics when they were busy telling her about Cold Oak and their missing girl.

"Oh, he was a total Jedi," Jo answered with a wide grin. Andy leaned over from his spot on the counter and held out his fist. She gleefully bumped it with her own, offering a wink that had that lazy smile getting even lazier. She just laughed and turned to her mom. "He could make people do what he wanted with just his voice."

"Until someone wised up and took that away, I see," Ellen said somewhat caustically. She got multiple, immediate frowns for her effort and realized only belatedly (though hell if she would take it back) that these boys (and even Bobby) seemed to care about the kid more than just some random stray would suggest.

"What the hell, *mom!*" And apparently her daughter as well. Jo was frowning at her possibly the hardest of all of them. She crossed her

arms over her chest and Ellen wondered just how much time she'd spent with the Winchesters. Because it sure seemed more than Ellen had been aware of. Or, perhaps, comfortable with. "Not cool."

Over her shoulder, Andy waved it off, catching Jo's attention too. She looked ready to argue, but the kid shrugged, the bandages around his neck more obvious than ever with the movement. A second image accosted them all. A bumper sticker with the words *'Shit Happens'* slapped across them. Still at the table but in the closest seat, Bucky choked on his beer.

"He's family, Ellen," Dean stepped in while Jo rolled her eyes and gave Andy a look (possibly a look that said *'stand up for yourself, you idiot*.' She just got that same lazy smile and an exaggeratedly slow wink in return. Jo looked caught between hitting him and throwing her arms up in surrender).

Ellen Harvelle drew up with a blink of surprise. She knew what that word mean to a Winchester. Forced to reevaluate, the woman glanced at Andy, who was grinning at her daughter like a harmless puppy. Truth was, she was less than comfortable with a person able to control anyone with his voice alone (particularly a person building a very obvious friendship with her daughter). The hesitancy must have shown on her face.

"Back off, El. Boy's a good kid," he'd muttered low enough that the words were just for her. Ellen cast him a side glance, but Bobby was close, eyes buried beneath a furled brow. Ellen took in a breath. Okay. She trusted Bobby, and hell…she might not want to, but she trusted those boys to. And even her daughter, though her worry as a mother almost always trampled right on over that.

Ellen nodded and backed off, as requested.

"So you don't really need Sign, do you?" Asa asked in the lull that fell over the group, not quite calm but not too uncomfortable either. Bucky was still cleaning up the spilled beer, Jo was still glaring at her mom, but Andy gave Asa his full attention. The giant of a man was looking at the kid with obvious interest, backed with a touch of wariness he hid well behind a cheerful smile.

Andy returned the cheerful part a hundred fold, set his bowl on the counter beside him with a clatter of spoon against ceramic, and raised his gauze and band-aide accosted hands. *'Not really*,' he said in sign. *'Bobby makes me do it.*'

"You'll thank me one day, ya idjit," the older hunter grumbled loud enough for the rest of the room to hear.

"So…you get death premonitions and he got Jedi powers?" Bucky was glancing between the two, hand absently running an already-pretty-soaked paper towel over what was left of the puddle on the table. Andy and Sam shrugged identical shrugs. Off to the side, Ellen shook her head; apparently 'family' hadn't been that far from the truth. Bucky laughed, the first honest, unrestrained noise he'd made since the apocalypse had first come up. At least outside of his and Asa's half-conversation with Andy, who had that effect on people. Bucky looked at Sam, eyes wide but also somehow okay. "Man, you got the shit end of that stick."

Andy cracked up hard enough to knock himself off the counter, silent even as it was. He reached over to Bucky, hand raised high. The hunter looked hesitant for a second, but Andy just flapped his hand and sent a picture of a kitten hanging onto a rope, the inspirational words '*Hang in There'* big and bold above the picture.

'Don't leave me hanging, man.'

Bucky chuckled after he was done wincing, still a little wary, but high fived the psychic. Andy beamed like he'd just won an Olympic gold and hopped back up, recovering his ice cream with a gleeful expression, utterly heedless of Bobby barking to get off the damn counter.

Through it all, Jo looked over at Dean and smiled. Smiled, like it was just another night, just another gathering of friends and family. Dean caught the look and couldn't have stopped the warmth that blossomed in his chest if he tried.

-o-o-o-

"I expect check-in's, boys," Ellen said as she stood in the front door the next morning. Asa and Bucky had split late last night to find a hotel. Jo decided to stick around, spend the night with her mom and the boys. The Harvelles had camped out in the den, though by the time everyone actually called it a night, it was pretty much morning. They'd agreed to meet back up before noon, with Asa, Bucky and Jo headed for a possible hunt in Indiana. Ellen hadn't looked happy about, but she'd kept her mouth shut. She had a business that wouldn't run itself to get back to.

"Will do, Ellen," Sam agreed as he bent over for her to wrap him in a

brief farewell hug. She patted his back harder than any man Sam had ever known.

"We're all we got," she repeated her words from the previous night as she pulled away, hard but also loving eyes locked on him. They slid over to Dean next and the older Winchester straightened under that gaze. "Shit-storm that's headed our way? Best way to prepare against it is to know it's coming. So you *call* when you have new information. I don't care how insignificant it is. Got it?"

"Got it." Dean gave her a nod, going in for his own hug (knowing from experience he'd get hit if he tried to get out of it).

"And for God's sake, if your brother goes missing, you *call* me." The words were only for him, her arm tight around his back, keeping him from retreating. Dean closed his eyes, tightening his own grip before he could think too hard about it or the words that caused it.

"Yes, Ma'am," he whispered, chin tucked over her shoulder. She patted his pack like a mother (and damnit, that thought did not make his insides squirm with the stupid fuzzies) before finally loosening her hold.

"Nothing's gonna happen to him," she promised the one thing she couldn't possibly promise, pulling away. She held Dean by the biceps, eyes as fierce and full of that promise as he had ever seen them. "Or you."

Dean couldn't look away, for all that he wanted to. He eventually had to, if only to hide the way her words were worming under his skin and straight to his heart (and soul). He wanted to believe her, for all that he did and didn't. So he just nodded and she stepped back, dropping her arms from him.

"And you."

Jo gave her mother a raised eyebrow and expectant look when that gaze turned to her next. She stood just to the left of Sam, arms crossed but features somehow still soft. Like she knew this wouldn't devolve into a fight (even if she was ready for one).

"You take care of yourself, you hear?" If anyone noticed the way Ellen's words came out thick, despite the brave face and refusal to voice anything more than that about her daughter's life choices, well, no one in that room was dumb enough to bring it up.

Jo smirked in response but there was a grateful smile buried beneath it. She stepped up to her mother, wrapping her in a hug completely of her own volition. "I will, mom. You don't need to worry about me."

"I'm your mother, Joanna Beth. That's the job." Ellen tucked her head over her daughter's shoulder and held her for an extra long moment. She didn't let up when Jo started to squirm, or pat her back in an attempted signal.

"Okay, mom."

"Right." Ellen pulled back, the look in her eye saying she knew exactly what she'd just done and didn't regret it for a second. She regarded her daughter for another long beat before turning and leaving the house with no further fanfare. She and Bobby had already exchanged their customary farewell over a cup of coffee that morning (*'Headed back?' 'Bar won't run itself' 'Be safe. Poor one out for me.' 'Always do, Bobby.'*)

Jo turned to the brothers as soon as the rumble of her mother's truck faded into the dust and distance. Asa and Bucky would be pulling up any minute now. "You sure you don't want help on this one? I could tag along."

Sam smiled but it stretched across his face wrong. "We don't even know where we're going, Jo. We don't have a lead on Ava."

"Last time we searched for weeks. Never found her." There was bitterness in Dean's tone that Jo was starting to associate with repeated events, even if she didn't know what those events were. "Not much reason to think that'll change."

Not until Azazel came after Sam. Then, and Dean could only hope to a god he didn't believe in, Sam would somehow find a way to tell him where he and the others had been taken. Like he had last time.

(Dean wasn't thinking about the fact that it had been Andy who'd gotten that message to him last time and that, if Sam were to have any hope of repeating the past, the kid would have to be at the new Cold Oak with him. Something he hadn't walked away from and which Dean had no intention of letting repeat this time. And yeah, he was aware there was a problem with that equation. He just didn't friggin' know how to fix it.)

"So…what will do you now?" Jo tucked her hands in her jean pockets even as the rumble of Asa's Jeep became audible on the main road.

"Don't know," Dean admitted with a frustrated sigh. "Cas is out of commission for a while. I guess…we'll start looking for Ava anyway. Pick up hunts on the way."

That's what they'd done last time, at least. And while Dean was getting increasingly frustrated by their default of 'just do what you'd normally do,' it *was* the advice everyone with any basic understanding of Time kept telling him.

Jo nodded as the engine rumble grew louder. Asa and Bucky were pulling up outside. She stepped forward, leaning up onto her tiptoes to wrap her arms around the two of them together. Both Winchesters had to bend over for her to do it, but they surrendered to the hug before she had to start yanking them down.

"I'm glad you told us," she said from between them, squeezing once before letting go and stepping back. The boys straightened, Sam with a light blush and a much more genuine smile, Dean trying to look like he wasn't touched in the slightest. She was getting to know him so much better than that, though.

"Your mom's right," Sam admitted with a self-conscious shrug of one shoulder. "We need all the help we can get."

Jo eyed him for a moment, head cocked to the side, before she shook it. "It's more than that." She put her hands on her hips, glancing at Dean before looking back to Sam. There was a little quirk to her lips, playful and yet somehow earnest as always. "It's family."

Sam's grin only grew, as did that light dusting of pink on his cheeks. Dean shook his head, blatantly ignoring his own warm and fuzzies doing flip-flops in his chest (and thinking maybe that was Cas in there. He'd forgotten how much the angel had grown to like the Harvelle women after their one night together). He reached out, wrapping one arm around Jo's shoulders to pull her into a hug.

"Be safe," he said, planting a brief kiss to the top of her head. She wrapped her arms around him shortly, and he could feel her grinning into his chest.

"You too." She pulled back as Dean released her, turning a rather demanding eye on Sam, whose eyebrows went up in questioning innocence at the look. "That goes for you as well."

The younger Winchester chuckled even as the front door opened, Asa and Bucky stepping through. He gave Jo a nod, mirroring his brother's

words to her mother, "Yes, Ma'am."

Her looked definitely took on the echo of a glare, which made Sam laugh more, but it was interrupted by the morning greetings from Asa and Bucky. Jo's bag was already packed and ready to go, hanging out next to the front door, so there wasn't much left to do but head out.

(Andy had already said his goodbyes that morning, giving her a big hug and a high five. He'd suggested joining them sometime, but had been swatted down (literally, swatted on the back of the head) by Bobby. He, in no uncertain terms, was not going anywhere until he could communicate without giving people a headache. The images that had followed had gotten him another head-slap. *'I meant your hands, ya idjit!'*)

Jo gave each of the boys a look on her way out, duffle slung over her shoulder. Dean shook his head with a wry grin and a stupidly warm swirl in his torso. Sam sent him a knowing look, which he glared at immediately.

Asa held his hand out to Dean as Bucky followed Jo out to the Jeep. "Well, it was a wild night," he said with a wry grin. Not the usual wild night for any of them – in either of the two usual contexts hunters ran into – but wild all the same. Dean shook his hand with an understanding nod. "You guys need anything, you call. Bucky and I'll be there."

Neither Winchester knew how sure Asa was about Bucky's commitment to their so-called cause, but the guy had seemed to turn a corner by the end of the night. Was almost one of 'em, though the barrier of not-quite-on-board-for-an-apocalypse had remained.

Regardless, Sam shook his hand next with a grateful nod, too. "Take care of Jo for us."

"Always." Asa gave his tall counterpart a playful wink, then both brothers a two-fingered salute as he headed out to the car, screen door banging closed behind him. He climbed into the driver's seat, the glare off the windshield too bright to see the people inside the car, and then they were backing away from Bobby's house and pulling out for the main road.

The Winchesters exchanged a glance as the Jeep disappeared into the distance. Dean let out a haggard sigh, running a hand down his face and leaning his hip against the nearest surface, which happened to be the stairs.

"It could have gone worse," Sam offered in condolence, a rallying but cheap smile on his face. He was feeling as weary as his brother. Neither had slept all that well last night, or gotten much of it between the extended Apocalypse planning with Ellen and Bobby, maneuvering around certain facts that no one needed to know (like upcoming deaths outside of Sam at whatever replacement Hell found for Cold Oak), and the racing thoughts it had left them both with for hours afterward.

Dean dropped his hand from his face, giving his brother a light glare. His gaze drifted back to the open front door, the dusty yard beyond the screen. "You think they actually believed any it?"

Sam shrugged. The answer to that, he thought, probably varied from person to person. "I don't know, I thought they took it pretty well. Don't know if that means they believe it, though," he said instead, crossing the couple of feet to lean against the wall next to his brother, tucking his large hands into his jeans pockets. He tipped his head back against the solid surface behind him. "Does it matter?"

No, Dean thought with another pent-up sigh. It didn't. The Apocalypse was coming, whether or not anyone believed it was.

"Hey!" The call for attention immediately grabbed theirs and both boys turned to find Bobby standing in the entryway to the kitchen, cell phone in hand. "You boys up for a case? Got what sounds like a salt-n-burn in Omaha."

An ampersand, a stack of pancakes, and half a dozen exclamation marks immediately followed Bobby's words, searing across the inside of their eyelids. The Winchesters both winced. Bobby didn't even flinch.

"And pancakes, apparently," the man said with a roll of his eyes. He disappeared back into the kitchen, hollering something at Andy about setting the stove on fire. Dean and Sam exchanged yet another look.

"A hunt sounds good," Sam offered with a small, tight smile. It wasn't like they had anywhere else to be than sticking to a timeline that was ultimately going to screw them over and searching for a woman they both knew they'd never find.

Dean huffed but pushed himself off the wall. "So do pancakes." He raised his voice as they both headed for the kitchen. "You better be putting chocolate chips in those!"

-o-o-o-

They hit the road the next day. Both boys still needed the sleep catch up (and, though they'd never admit it, the downtime) so they stuck around Bobby's for a full day, researching the hunt one of his buddies had called in so as not to completely be 'wasting time' (as any hunter generally called 'resting'). It looked pretty run-of-the-mill ghost, but they'd know more once they got there. It was only a couple hours from Sioux Falls, so they agreed to set out early the next morning.

(It was run-of-the-mill once they got there. Exceedingly so.)

After that, it was back to the grind of everyday routine for a hunter. Catching a case, getting to town, talking with the witnesses, researching at the local library. Nights spent in dingy hotels and days driving place to place, stopping for gas and greasy diner food. Asking after Ava Wilson with a picture Sam had scrounged up from the internet somehow (Dean hadn't asked). No one ever knew anything about her, same as last time.

Dean didn't want to say he disliked the monotony (this was his life, after all, and when the world wasn't actively ending, he usually liked his life), but he was getting twitchy. There was an itch just under his skin he couldn't reach, a curling dread just over the horizon, getting every closer with each day they drove toward it, and its name was the Apocalypse. More specifically, Sam's death date.

December turned to January, the boys ringing in the New Year with a solemn clink of beer bottles, false cheer, and their best efforts to pretend that 2007 wasn't going to be the beginning of the end.

They spent three weeks on the road in total, that stupid itch growing every day. Sam was feeling it too, Dean could tell. And it wasn't just spillover from him. His kid brother was aware of the looming future well enough on his own. It was getting to the point where all they had to do was exchange a look to know how little impact they were making killing some werewolf in Utah or doing a salt and burn in Nebraska.

But they didn't have anywhere else to be or anything else to be doing yet, despite how *wrong* that felt, day in and day out.

"Yeah, alright, thanks, Bobby," Dean said into his cell before snapping it shut, tossing it on the table with the same growing frustration that he did everything these days.

Across from him, Sam glanced up from the newspaper he was scouring over for their next case, phone in the other hand as he cross-referenced information on the internet. "No change in Cas?"

"Still breathing. Still comatose." Dean shrugged, but Sam could read the concern in the tightness of his shoulders. At least, for once, his brother wasn't rubbing at his chest. He didn't know how Dean didn't have a flat spot in the center of his sternum by now, worn down by sheer repetition.

Sam set the paper down, trying to offer his brother a supportive expression. He guessed he overshot given the grimace the older Winchester immediately adopted in return. "She'll be fine, Dean. She said it could be a couple of weeks."

"One week," Dean corrected. "She said it would be one week, *maybe* more. It's been four. A whole friggin' month, Sammy."

"It's been three," Sam corrected. "Three weeks and two days, Dean. Give her some time. She was pretty beat up."

'And, you know, raised *you from the dead*,' the younger Winchester thought, still with a tinge of bitter nausea in his stomach that *always* came with a reminder of his brother's death. Of that bloody, messy photo on Gordon's phone.

Dean huffed and growled and mumbled, but eventually nodded, shoulders dropping. "I know, damnit. Tell me you have something for us to do. Sick of this town."

Which was a ridiculous exaggeration, considering they'd only been in Dayton, Ohio for the night and a breakfast stop. A stopover from the case they'd wrapped in Zanesville, heading back towards Sioux Falls for lack of a better direction to take. Lately, though, Dean was sick of everything that wasn't progress, and nothing felt like progress.

"Uh, maybe. Check this out." Sam spun the newspaper around. He pointed to an article at the top of the page, complete with a photo taken of the inside of a jewelry store, police tape still stretched across several open, empty cases. "This is the second robbery in Milwaukee in a month. Both of them – the first one was a bank – were done by someone on the inside. A teller at the first one, and uh, the head buyer at the jewelry store. But get this."

Dean looked up from the article, something uncomfortable in his stomach that was usually a precursor to the déjà vu of knowing things

he couldn't remember. Sam locked eyes with him, the morbid excitement of a mystery lighting those brown babies right up.

"Both employees committed suicide right after the robbery. Like, the night of." At Dean's sharp frown, opening his mouth to no doubt tell Sam that didn't make any sense, the younger Winchester continued, "But the money was never found. And everyone who knew them – friends, family, coworkers – insist they weren't the type to do it."

"So what do you think it is?" Dean asked, but the question rang hollow. He already knew what it was…he just couldn't seem to remember it.

"I don't know," Sam answered, that tinge of excitement still an undercurrent in his posture and voice. He may attest to not liking hunting much, but kid sure did like the deduction and problem-solving side of it. He typed something on his phone before sliding it across the table to his brother, too. There was another article about a different robbery, this one the bank. "It could be nothing – maybe they're being held hostage, forced to rob their businesses, and then the suicides are faked. But the reports don't mention any kind of nervous behavior. There's a security guard from the first robbery who witnessed the whole thing. Talked to the guy who robbed the place. Uh, Ronald Reznick, from…" Sam took the phone back to skim part of the article, eyes jumping back and forth rapidly, "Milwaukee National Trust."

He slid the phone back around for Dean, who stared at the name with much harder intensity than two typed words should ever require.

"The teller that heisted the place, Juan Morales, was a friend, and the security guard let him in after hours. Said he was acting completely normal. 'Too normal,' is actually what he said. At least until he beat Ronald within an inch of his life." The younger Winchester shook his head, sitting back in his chair. "The guy survived, but he's insisting that wasn't Morales. So…I'm thinking, maybe-"

"Shapeshifter."

Sam straightened, realizing only in that second that Dean's face was slack with that same blankness he always got when preoccupied with future memories. Sam glanced down at the paper, then back to his brother, anticipation and tension growing like a knotted ball in his stomach. It was always a good sign, Sam thought, when they stumbled on hunts they'd done in Dean's time.

"We did this one before?"

"Yeah," Dean mumbled, slowly leaning back in his chair but his eyes were still on the paper and also a decade away. "Yeah…Ronald…With the, uh, the laser eyes."

"Laser- *Laser* eyes?" Sam was staring at Dean with a frown now, wondering if maybe this wasn't a future thing after all and Dean was just…uh…tired. He'd only had half a cup of coffee at that point. It *had* been a rough couple of weeks of idleness and frustration.

Suddenly, the older Winchester was up and out of his seat, grabbing his breakfast sandwich right off the plate with one hand and his jacket off the back of the chair with the other. He shoved one in his mouth and the other through an arm. Then he tried to tell his brother they had to go, only through a mouthful of bagel, egg, and bacon, it came out more like, "Whey ghattah ghoh!"

"What?"

But Dean was already headed for the door. Wide eyed and taken by surprise, Sam scrambled to follow, hastily throwing down some money and scooping up his half-eaten muffin. He chased after Dean, lamenting the loss of his glass of orange juice and a calm breakfast, all the while resisting the urge to shout questions after his brother as they left the semi-crowded cafe in a real hurry.

Chapter End Notes

Dean's Panic Attack: I love writing Dean panicking because his brain literally only supplies physical reasons for discomfort and completely misses all other reasons one might be having a panic attack. Like just telling all of your closest friends and family that you sold your soul, got dragged to Hell where you tortured others willingly, started the end of the world, and, oh, you might go and do it all again in a couple of months. Then to just have them accept that and accept you. But no, honey, it's definitely something physical freaking you the freak out. You go with that ;)

Farewells: I find writing the end of a conversation/parting of ways to be super awkward, almost always. Like, I don't get why, but the minute I have to wrap up a conversation, my brain goes "uh…how does this happen naturally, again?" Ugh!

Up Next: It's time to save Ronald! All Dean's gotta do is convince him to let this whole Mandroids thing go, find and catch a

shapeshifter, and *not* accidentally rob a bank this time or hold anyone hostage. How hard can that possibly be!

Up Next TIMING: Okay, I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is Real Life oriented and, sadly, is not actually good news for you. In fact, it's the reason for the bad news . So, I have been offered what is pretty much my dream job (with the downside of it being offered in the middle of Covid so I will be working at home, which I am *terrible* at) and am moving down to Los Angeles! Like…tomorrow. Oi vey. It's been kind of a mad scramble to get things ready. I had to buy a car. Guys. I own a car. And a car payment. And an insurance payment. I'm…like… even more of an adult than I was before. (*whispers* I'm not sure I like it…)

Anyway, two weeks ago when I posted the last chapter, I already had 90% of this one written, and I was so excited thinking I'd actually get a stockpile going again. Yeeeeah. The company reached out literally the next day and I haven't written a word since -_- So, there's probably going to be quite the delay. I'm really hoping that in the in betweens of the hectic whirlwind that is about to be my life ("about to be"?! -_-) , writing will come easy and naturally as an escape from the chaos. If that's the case, it may only be two or three weeks until the next chapter. If that's not the case, it, uh, it's gonna be a while as I get my life settled in a new city, in the middle of Covid , find a place to rent, set up a home office, start at a new company and learn an entirely new software all while stuck in my house 24/7. Hehe…heh…did I mention it's a dream job except for that little tidbit? Oh boy. It's fine, it's gonna be fine. Totally fine. Is it hot in here? It seems hot in here.

I will keep my progress posted on my profile on both sites, and I'll try do to that every Sunday so you guys know how it's going on my end. I've got fingers crossed for both this job and this story, so we'll just see how it goes.

Thanks everyone for bearing with me and for missing this story when it's delayed. Honestly, knowing my writing is wanted is the biggest motivator to keep going.

Chapter 107: Season 2: Chapter 74

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Oh my god. I made it. I finally made it, guys! It's only been about three weeks' worth of effort, but the muse and I finally did it! WE GOT A CHAPTER UP!

Now we just have to follow it with one more every week (maybe every two weeks?) from now until, uh….the end of season two. Sure. No problem. No pressure. Totally, totally got this o _ O

Anyway, I will try to keep this short to get you guys your story ASAP. I just want to say **THANK YOU** so much to each and every one of you for your patience, your understanding, your comments and reviews, and your support. It means the world to me, and it is absolutely what helped me return, what kept me motivated every week, after so long off.

Alright, let's get this party back on track!

Chapter Reference – Croatoan: Quick reminder that during the Croatoan fiasco, Sam spun a lie for the Sergeant that they were from a nameless agency that dealt such biological attacks. See Chapter 75, Season 2: Chapter 42 for a refresher.

Chapter Warnings: Ronald Reznick's about to get the accidental job offer of a lifetime, Dean needs to learn when to stop talking, Sam's throwing in the towel, and Time's right back at it making absolutely nothing easy (actually, pretty sure this one's on Dean this time, and Time's just sitting on the sidelines with a bowl of popcorn)

Actual Chapter Warnings: Uh, well, this chapter took weeks to actually get written, so I think it's a little up and down and all over the place. I definitely wrote a whole chunk of it after taking an edible, so it got a little loopy there for a min. There is a balance of silliness and realism I'm not entirely sure I kept on the right side of, but hopefully you all will enjoy the comedy after such a long absence.

AO3 Folk: Apologies that these notes weren't in the standard AO3 pre-chapter note format. They were too long :P So they got put in front of the chapter instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 74

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Number five. This is it," Sam announced as they pulled up outside Ronald Reznick's address, Dean putting the Impala in park and shutting of her purring engine. The younger Winchester closed the folder he was holding – a compilation of what he'd been able to find and Dean had been able to tell him to look for – and spared his brother a long glance. "So this security guard, Reznick-"

"Ronald," Dean corrected, almost as an afterthought as he pulled the key from the ignition and opened his door.

"-he thinks there's, a, uh...a what, robbing people? You said he thinks it's some sort of robot?"

Dean's smile was the kind Sam had grown up learning to be wary of. "Yeah," he bobbed his head, grin only growing. "A mandroid. Half man, half android. *Mandroid*."

Sam resisted rolling his eyes, but it was a close thing as he sighed, closing the folder and storing it in the glove compartment. Dean was already climbing out of the car and the younger Winchester followed suit.

"Alright, so the plan, then…" he started as he closed the passenger door, straightening his tie and jacket. Across the roof of the car, he watched Dean round the hood and head right up the walkway to Ronald Resknik's house. Sam was forced to follow after him again. "… is to tell this guy the truth?"

Dean didn't say anything as they marched up to the nondescript house with its glass storm door and – Sam did a double take – dual security cameras and flood light aimed right at the front entrance. The younger Winchester gave his brother a raised eyebrow even as Dean reached out and rang the doorbell.

"Seriously? That's our actual plan? Dude, that's a terrible plan."

Dean shrugged, pulling at the collar of his dress shirt and the tie he

always hated wearing, no matter how many times he put the monkey suit on. He'd never understood how Cas could wear it all those years. His collar had itched the whole first year any time he so much as looked at the overdressed angel. It had been a physical relief for Dean once Cas finally lost it. "He's already got most of it figured out. And telling him to forget about it and fuck off sure didn't go well last time."

Sam huffed out most of a chuckle, having heard Dean's rendition of the last go around – including the two *robbing a bank* by *mistake* – and was in no hurry to repeat whatever events had led to that truly spectacular fallout. But the crook of his smile wasn't so much mirthful as it was sarcastic. "And you think telling him the truth and then telling him to fuck off is going to work better?"

He got a glare for that. "Look, we'll just…play it like the Croatoan job."

Sam's heart practically stopped, all mirth instantly evaporated like a flash fire had just swept through. The physical equivalent of which sent him lurching half a step forward in terror. He managed a choked out, "What?" that sounded a bit too much like a prepubescent boy than the fully grown hunter he actually was and Sam immediately swallowed down the second sound that tried to escape.

Dean immediately looked at guilty, sharing an apologetic grimace with his brother. "I meant the whole nameless, faceless government agency thing," he hurriedly said, reaching out to ring the doorbell again. "Not, uh, not any of the rest of it."

The 'rest of it' being Sam very nearly drinking demon blood voluntarily to save his family (*again*), Dean beaten within an inch of his life, and Andy both almost dying and going missing, culminating in the worst night of the Winchesters' lives to date, let alone Andy's. Yeah, no, Dean had just meant the lie they'd told the Sarge that night to cover why they knew what was going on and how Andy and Sam had been supposedly 'immune' to the virus.

Seeing how Sam had to take another stabilizing breath and physically shake himself out of the lingering alarm, Dean realized he definitely could have been more specific.

"Come on, Ronald. We know you're in there." The older Winchester, for lack of any better way to break up the barrel of awkward-snakes he'd just stirred, switched to pounding on the door with the side of his

fist.

The security light flashed on a second later, flooding them in way-too-bright light. It was all the more ridiculous given it was full daylight out, being 2pm on a somewhat cloudy day. Sam squinted beneath it, unamused, and Dean rang the doorbell again, several times just to be as obnoxious as the spotlight they were standing under.

The older Winchester raised his hand to pound on the glass door again, rattle it in its frame real good this time, when Ronald's head poked out from the end of the hall they could see through the glass door. The larger man approached cautiously, brow furled in confusion with a hesitant tension in the rest his frame. Not that either Winchester could blame him. If they'd been normal citizens beaten within an inch of their life a month ago, they'd be a little wary too.

"FBI, Mr. Reznick," Sam announced, already pulling out his badge to press it against the glass pane. He was getting so much more confident with committing felonies, Dean thought with a smirk. His little brother was growing up. If they weren't on a case, Dean might have wiped away a fake tear.

"Yours too," Ronald demanded snappishly and Dean blinked at the man. "Badge. Let me see it."

Oh, right. Dean shook his head a little, trying to get it back in the game as he dug into his monkey suit pocket and pulled out his faked credentials to slap against the glass. Ronald approached a little closer, glancing between the two sets with squinty eyes. Finally, he pulled back, still staring a little skeptically between the two men but less out of mistrust and more confusion.

"I already gave my statement to the police."

"Uh, yeah, Ronald, we just, uh…"

Sometimes the déjà vu of words once spoken and events repeated was so spot on it was dizzying. But it also came with the benefit of having some clarity for what came next. Dean remembered a Ronald who was excited to see them, practically chomping at the bit to tell them his theories. And it wasn't hard to remember what had changed his suspicion into excitement, now that they were well into the script and repeating it word for word. The man from the future tried for a reassuring smile as he tucked his badge back inside his jacket, but he was pretty sure by the return of the squinty eyes that he didn't quite nail it.

"We have some follow up questions. About your statement. We read it, you see," he added quickly, recalling that the man in front of them wanted to tell them. Wanted to be believed. "And, we, uh, just have some more questions about your, er…theory."

"You read it?" Ronald repeated, tone suspicious at first but edging into hopeful. He reached for the door, already unlocking it.

"Sure did," Sam added as well, smile tight but still more genuine than Dean had managed. Although definitely less amused. "That's why we're here, sir. To hear what you, uh…what you have to say."

Dean managed not to roll his eyes over to his brother (*'Could you* try *to sound any less convincing, there, Sammy?'*) and instead smiled widely at their 'witness'. Ronald seemed more receptive of it this time, at least.

"Well, come on in." The larger man opened the door outwards with enough enthusiasm he almost clipped Dean's nose right off his face. Sam was significantly more amused after that, following his brother into the house while Dean rubbed at the tip of his nose like he had an itch.

"None of the cops ever called me back," Ronald said over his shoulder as he led them down the hall. "Not after I told them what was really going on."

"And what's that, Mr. Reznick?" Sam asked almost absently – routine questions in their line of work, after all – as they followed him to a room at the end of the hall.

Dean didn't even blink as they turned into what was clearly a conspiracy theorists wet dream, but Sam stumbled at the door, eyes widening but hidden behind a cough and a quickly ducked head. There were newspaper articles for alien landings, UFO sightings, robots with – and Sam did a double take because yup, those were laser eyes – and dozens of other conspiracy theories plastered over every inch of available space. Sam kept his head ducked, eyes still the size of saucers, as he definitely started second guessing (translation: regretting) his brother's decision to include this nutcase in their case.

Why, oh why, couldn't they have skipped over him and just gone after the shifter themselves? If this was Dean's idea of a joke…

"They all, uh, they all thought I was crazy," Ronald continued, looking around the plastered walls with pride before turning back to the two 'agents' with an expectant expression.

Sam coughed to cover a muttered something that would not have been well received (yet was entirely too true). Dean elbowed his brother in the side, offering Ronald a way-too-wide-to-be-genuine smile that the man from the future had no idea was way too wide to be genuine.

The frenetic man didn't seem to notice. "First off, Juan Morales never robbed the Milwaukee National Trust, okay? That, I guarantee." He waved a finger at them, both energetic and almost a challenge. Dean glanced at Sam. Sam glanced right back at Dean. "See, me and Juan were friends. He used to come back to the bank on my night shifts, and we'd play cards."

The younger Winchester straightened at that, gears turning. The shifter would have known that, once he'd taken Mr. Morale's skin. Shifter's absorbed memories, too, so long as their victims were alive to absorb from. So he would have known the best way to get into the bank with the least amount of witnesses. "So you let him in that night? After hours?"

"What I let into the bank *wasn't* Juan!" Ronald immediately fired back, almost defensively if it weren't for his eyes. They were alight with something terrifyingly close to excitement. Sam resisted sending Dean another 'glance' and kept his eyes focused on their witness. "I mean, it had his face, but it wasn't *his* face. Every detail perfect, but too perfect. You know? Like if a dollmaker made it. Like I was talking to a big Juan-doll."

Sam had to choke back the fact that he practically choked on his own saliva there for a second. "A, uh…a Juan-doll?"

This time he did not spare his brother that glance, but Dean was just grinning like an absolute idiot. When he caught Sam's more-than-just-a-little judgmental glare, he just mouthed, *'Mandroid*' with a little nod and eyes about as alight as Ronald Reznick's.

Sam instantly had the urge to knock his head into the nearest flat surface. Or possibly his brother's head. Instead, he just sighed and turned back to the security guard, smile tight. But Ronald was distracted, already launching into the next part of his rant, grabbing a folder off a nearby surface – was that a mini fridge? Dude, they were less than a dozen feet from the kitchen – and handing it to Sam, who accepted it with a look that was less than willing.

"Look, this wasn't the only time this happened, okay?" He nodded encouragingly at Sam, who cracked open the file. The hunter was

surprised to see newspaper clippings from the first and second robberies, sewer system maps, and a page full of notes. Not unlike a case profile from any hunter worth their salt. "There was this jewelry store, too. But the cops, a-and you guys, you just won't see it!"

Sam closed the file, giving Dean another side glance, but his brother had been expecting it, waggling his eyebrows like he'd just proven a point. Sam glared. This was still a terrible plan.

"Both crimes were pulled by the same thing," Ronald insisted, eyes still alight as he grabbed a magazine off the nearby desk, covered in clutter several layers thick. He turned back around, tapping the front cover several times. Sam found himself staring at a robot man shooting lasers out of his eyes under a title that read, *'BIRTH OF THE CYBERMEN'*.

Dean was nodding along in a way that *wasn't* helping.

"Chinese've been working on 'em for years," Ronald said, nodding his head in time with Dean's. Sam wasn't sure which one of them he wanted to smack upside the head harder. No, that was a lie. It was his brother. Definitely his brother. "And the Russians before that. Part men, part machine."

"Like the Terminator," Dean cut in with a wide grin, and Ronald matched it.

"Yes! Exactly like the Terminator! But, but the kind that can change itself. Make itself look like other people."

"Like the one from T2." The man from the future was still bobbing his head up and down, smirk growing, and Sam definitely wanted to hit him. Dean was playing this like it was a game, and not someone's life – multiple someone's' – on the line.

If Sam had voiced any of that out loud, Dean would have told him to back off; how often did he get to actually have some fun with his future knowledge instead of battling a never ending clock that was always several steps ahead of them?

"Exactly! See, so not just a robot." Ronald didn't seem to be picking up on the tension between the two agents. "More of a- a- a…"

Dean's smile could not be beat as he finished Ronald's thought for him. "A mandroid."

"Yes!" Their witness blinked after a moment of excited agreement. Then Ronald hesitated, drawing up a little as things started adding up that his brain might have been cataloguing all along, even if the man hadn't noticed. "Wait…how- how did you know that?"

Sam cleared his throat, deciding the time for this little cat and mouse game to end was well past. The mouse didn't even know he was being played with. "We're FBI, Mr. Reznick. We know everything."

"Including," Dean picked up his brother's lead, even if a little of that grin lingered despite his attempt to pull on more of the Fed persona, "mandroids."

It was, after all, not the easiest thing, keeping a straight face while saying the word, *'mandroid'* in all seriousness.

Ronald's eyes near doubled in size. "You…you believe me?"

"Sure do," the older Winchester answered smoothly. "Only it's not a mandroid."

The ex-security guard blinked, confusion clouding his face for a minute before it cleared with something a step shy of awe and muddled up with hope. "Then what- what is it?"

"That's classified, Mr. Reznick," Sam stepped in efficiently, the two hunters pulling on the full force of the FBI disguise like a well-worn role. Dean avoided looking at his brother, but he couldn't quite hide the smile that played at his lips. Little Sammy, growing up to impersonate federal agents and commit felonies. He was so proud.

"But- but- I-"

"Now," Sam continued, drawing on every inch of his ridiculous six and a half feet to tower over the poor guy, "you've done some great work, and you're onto something. But we'll take it from here."

"What? No!" Ronald protested immediately, eyes wide but in such a way that Dean just knew they were going to have a hell of time getting this guy to back down. Not that he needed Ronald's eyes to tell him that. He remembered the guy *chaining* the front door of the bank closed and then *not-robbing* it just to prove a point. Getting him to back down was always going to be a challenge. "I can help! I can help catch the mandroid-"

"It's not a mandroid," Sam practically snapped and, beside him, Dean

flinched. He remembered a much angrier version of his brother practically shattering this man's soul by telling him such things didn't exist. This Sam was, thankfully, a lot less bitter, but no less harsh when it came to protecting innocent civilians from getting involved in the kind of life the Winchesters' led.

"But-!"

"No buts, Mr. Reznick," he interrupted again, but this time Sam managed to keep his tone a little more professional. He waved the folder Ronald had given him as if it was his closing argument. "We will take it from here."

"Why?" Ronald was glaring now, meaty fists balled up at his sides. He glanced between the two agents, both hurt and anger in his eyes. Dean was getting a bad feeling about this. The kind of bad feeling that was time planning to repeat itself all over again. "You say I did all the work finding this thing, why can't you tell me what it is? Why can't I help catch it!"

He didn't say it out loud, but the unheard *'This thing beat me unconscious, I* earned *hunting it down'* was very much heard by the two hunters. Dean cleared his throat, remembering that same face staring at him, bloodied and grey and a ghost in Bobby's house, accusing him of getting him killed.

"Because your plan ends with you dead, Ronald."

The conspiracy theorist blinked, then frowned, definite guilt causing him to shift his weight and look anywhere but at the two FBI agents standing in his house. "P-Plan? What plan, I'm not planning anything."

Dean gave him a single look, then started scanning the room around him, almost nonchalantly. "So, you're not planning to rob the bank – Milwaukee National Trust, right? It's the only other bank on that sewer line – with…" The hunter pointed to a duffel bag shoved hastily under a couch strewn with dirty clothes, an empty Doritos bag, and several more files like the one Sam was holding. "…chain, padlock, and, I'm going to guess, assault rifle that's in that bag?"

Ronald's mouth flapped open and closed like a fish stuck on dry land. Then his eyes got real squinty. "How- How do you know that? Have you been *spying* on me?"

"We're the FBI, Mr. Reznick," Sam cut in, tone almost bored but expression damn near ready to leap right off his face and walk out the

door even if the rest of him couldn't. "We spy on everyone."

"What my partner means to say," Dean said in a loaded tone, sending Sam a *'cool it'* look followed by a tight smile Ronald's way, "is that we're always keeping tabs on all, uh, potential…er...agents."

The slow turn of Sam's head – and *just* his head – in Dean's direction was not the first clue of how badly he'd just stepped in it. No, his tongue gave the first clue, his brain the second, and Sam the third.

"Uh, recruits, I mean. Not- not recruits! No, uh, definitely not…those. Uh, I meant, um, people who, erm…can help us. Do the leg work. Like, um, like you've done. Great work, Ronald."

Dean gave the guy a thumbs up while Sam's eyebrows disappeared well into his luxurious hairline and he rubbed at his forehead, eyes sliding closed. The older Winchester's rough smile definitely turned into a grimace as Ronald straightened up in surprise, shock overtaking his features for a second before the blank expression was wiped away by a slow, dawning smile.

"Are you- is this- A-are you *recruiting* me?"

The single eyebrow Sam somehow managed to raise in Dean's direction, despite both eyebrows already being clear and gone from his forehead, very much said, *'What the hell, Dean?*' Dean tried to return it with an equally expressive, *'I don't know, man, I'm winging it here!'* look. Despite his best efforts, it was chump change compared to Sam's face, and Dean turned back to Ronald, the clear loser here.

Time for some damage control.

"Yes," Dean said, even as Sam, very sternly, said, "No."

The glaring and silent-but-most-definitely-yelling-yes-lots-of-yelling exchange resumed between the two of them.

"Maybe," the older Winchester practically growled out in some very skewed concept of a compromise. He stared daggers at his kid brother, demanding with eyeballs alone that Sam get on the same page.

Sammy's return look told him with equal vexation to pick a damn page, then, and stick with it. And maybe, while he was at it, he could pick a page that *wasn't insane*!

(It was possibly a new bitchface worthy of categorization and a

number all its own. Dean would have to see if it repeated itself enough times to make Official Bitchface Status.)

"Gr-Great!" Ronald exclaimed, clutching that Cybermen magazine to his chest like a well-earned carnival prize and he was a twelve year old girl. "I'll go with you then!"

Dean's head whipped around faster than a whore hearing the expensive rumble of a loaded John's vehicle approaching her corner. "Uh, no, now, uh, wait a minute…"

But Ronald wasn't listening. He was busy grabbing papers and blueprints like a crazed chicken with its head cut off, if that chicken had also made plans to rob a bank. "I know the layout of Milwaukee Trust! All- all the exits. And I-I've got everything we need!"

At this point, Sam had given up all pretense and actually buried his forehead into his hand, his last look at Dean a very clear indication that the older Winchester had gotten them into this and it would be his job – and only his – to get them out of it.

"Um…" Dean racked his brain for a solution that would keep Ronald from running straight to Milwaukee National Trust with that duffle bag and a death wish. But as he was trying to run through every possible idea his preoccupied brain could come up with, his eyes just stayed locked on the frenzied man, ready to rob a bank – to throw away his career, his life – to find a monster and stop it from killing again.

Dean remembered the look in Ronald's eye – the crushed devastation, the determination, the surefire will to carry through if only to find out if he was actually crazy – and suddenly knew that nothing he said here was going to stop the man. Ronald was going to show up at that bank. It wouldn't matter if Sam and Dean beat him there. Hell it wouldn't matter if they beat him there, found and killed the shifter, and got back out before Ronald ever showed up. He'd still go, thinking there was something in the bank that needed to be taken down, and he'd still get himself killed.

If they took him with them, they wouldn't waste time having to re-earn his trust when he showed up on his own. They could do this job like they'd planned the first time, find the shifter on the cameras then follow him home and take care of him where it was quiet and deserted. No bank robbery, no cops, no *feds,* and no snipers. Just an extra tag-along who would walk away alive at the end of it.

The solution, then, was obvious. Dean caved, totally and completely.

"Yeah, sure. Why not."

The hunter yelped as Sam punched him not-so gently and less-than-subtly right in the bicep.

"Ow, dude! What the hell!"

His little brother towered over him, brow furled, dark, and stormy. "Can I have a word with you, *agent* Simmons? *Alone*?"

Dean grimaced at his brother's gritted teeth, words squeezed past in obvious anger. He gave Ronald a nod and a smile, the still-somewhat-nervous man now eyeing between the two of them with a roller coaster of hope, then doubt, then hope again.

"What the hell, Dean?" Sam hissed the moment they were far enough away to do so without Ronald hearing them. The two brothers could still see him from their spot in the hallway, listless in the little conspiracy room they'd left behind, poking at his own files and glancing their way not-so discretely.

"I don't know, okay!" Dean shrugged both irritably and self-consciously. "Why not, Sam? He's gonna go to that bank, no matter what we say to him. You can see it in his eyes, man!"

His brother glanced away, a sure sign that Dean wasn't missing the very obvious mark in the next room, even if he hadn't already lived through this all one time already.

"Tell me I'm wrong," he challenged, Sam looking back at him sullenly and Dean knew he wouldn't. Couldn't, because Dean wasn't wrong. "At least this way we'll be there to keep him from getting shot. And maybe he'll actually listen to us this time, because we didn't lie to him!"

At Sam's blatant stare, Dean shrugged, looking away guiltily.

"Okay, we lied…*less* this time."

The man from the future knew the look that crossed his brother's face. Sam wanted to roll his eyes and was doing everything in his power not to. (Dean just thought he looked constipated whenever he did that.)

"He's still going to get himself killed, Dean," his brother argued back,

practically hissing it. They both glanced Ronald's way. The man who was not-so-subtly trying to listen in very abruptly turned and studied the article-covered wall. Sam closed his eyes, and Dean knew he was doing everything in his power to remain the adult in this conversation. Sucked to be him. "Only this time, *we're* going to be responsible for it."

Dean immediately looked away, the grimace of knowing his brother was right spread tight across his mouth. "We'll watch out for him. Come on, man. If we do this with him, maybe we can give him some pointers. Put him in contact with some hunters who can teach him how *not* to get himself killed."

Sam's scoff could have shaken the damn house. Dean glared to cover the flinch. He hated that stupid sound Sam made when he thought Dean was being an idiot and was about to prove it with law-speech and college-boy verbs.

"You *want* to turn him into a hunter?" The younger Winchester's stare was both incredulous and pissed the hell off. Dean shrugged.

"What's so bad about that?"

"*Everything,* Dean. Our lives suck!" Sam threw his arms out and this time Dean did flinch, but pulled his head back and double-downed on the glare. "Being a hunter is a shitty career path! You can't have any friends-"

"Hey, we have friends-"

"-almost everyone we know is going to *die* a horrible, bloody death at some point-"

"That's not-"

"-including *us*. Hunters end up miserable and alone, Dean, or they end up dead." Sam dropped his arms, something haunted crossing his face for only a second before it smoothed out, buried down deep. "Why would you want to push anyone into this?"

Angry and defensive – this was his life after all – Dean shrugged, throwing his own arms out if for no other reason than to be on the same level of angry and defensive as his brother. "What else do you want to do with him, then, Sam. Huh? Because if we lie to him and tell him nothing's happening, he'll go to the bank to prove us wrong. If we tell him he's totally onto something, he'll go to the bank to prove

he's right. Either way, he's going to that damn bank, and if we don't help him, it's going to look like he's robbing the place, and he will get himself *killed*!"

Sam turned away, jaw clenched and vein popping just below his temple.

"Either we lie to him and take him with us, gank the son-of-a-bitch shifter, and convince Ronald that was the only one. *Maybe* he drops it and lives out the rest of his life chasing, I don't know, aliens or something else safe." Dean shrugged self-consciously, lowering his arms and resisting the urge to rub at his chest for no other reason than to feel a little less alone in this argument. Cas would have his back. Cas always had his back. "Or we tell him the truth – the *real* truth – and we point him towards the Roadhouse. He spends the rest of his life as a hunter, but maybe he doesn't get dead."

Sam, for all his grinding teeth and popping veins, also knew a lost argument when he saw one. Especially with his brother. Especially with his brother and the crazy they had waiting for them in the other room, now just blatantly watching them with no attempt at subtly.

"For the record," the younger Winchester ground out, "this is a terrible idea."

"Totally noted," Dean agreed, not even fighting Sam on that one. Then the younger Winchester grumbled something not entirely discernible but definitely unpleasant, and turned back into the Conspiracy Theory Wet Dream Room with a grimace stretched so tightly across his face it was no wonder Ronald didn't accuse him of being a mandroid right then and there.

"So…I'm in?" Ronald asked, the hope clear in his voice, as his eyes darted between the two agents.

Sam looked like he'd rather swallow razor blades, but begrudgingly conceded with, "You're in, Mr. Reznick. But there are some ground rules-"

However, their new favorite conspiracy theorist wasn't listening. He dove for the couch, Dean having to scramble to the side not to be taken down with him as the man grabbed his duffle bag. Sam threw his arms out to the side and Dean offered his best, apologetic, work-with-me-I'll-handle-this smile. Then Ronald straightened up, assault rifle in hand and the kind of excitement in his eye that made even Dean think twice about this plan.

"No," the hunter said immediately, like a master barking at his dog for obedience. Ronald blinked, glancing down at the weapon in his hands then the man denying him it. Dean pointed his finger at the floor, chin jutted out, and gave that finger a firm jerk downwards. "Just no. Leave the gun."

"B-but…" Ronald glanced down at the rifle again, then turned those big eyes right on Dean. "I don't go anywhere without Betsy."

Sam dropped his arms, pinched the bridge of his nose, mouthed the name *Betsy* to himself, and then promptly announced he would be in the car. He left the room without looking back.

Dean turned to Ronald, eyebrows up and expression clear: *Now look what you've done.*

Ronald looked down at Betsy with nothing short of mourning, fingers curling around her sweet, dark metal. It was Dean's turn to bury his head in his hand and question everything that had brought them to this moment.

-o-o-o-

"So…you want to look at our camera setup?"

The woman in front of them, the first employee of Milwaukee National Trust that they'd run into once inside the doors, was staring at them with bored, skeptical eyes while she chewed gum that definitely wasn't professional but certainly served the sarcastic-and-also-couldn't-care-less attitude she was definitely rocking. Sam's smile was so tight Dean was worried it might actually split his face in two in the not-good way.

"Yes, ma'am," Dean said in lieu of making Sam deal with it. Sam had been dealing with enough today, including the crazy who had driven over here with them in the back of the Impala and not stopped talking *once*. "We just need to do a routine system update. Make sure this branch's monitors are good to go."

The woman popped her gum loudly. "We haven't had any problems. Security would have flagged it to us."

Dean felt his own smile getting tighter. "Yes, we understand that. This is a glitch in the overall grid. Just want to make sure everything's kosher."

Her bored eyes slid over Dean's shoulder, between the two brothers, to a twitching Ronald, who was pulling at his Securiserve Guard service technician uniform in the most obvious way possible. Dean wanted to groan. Instead, he kept his eyes forward on the not-so-helpful woman helping them.

"And that takes three of you?" she asked, that tone growing more skeptical but no less sarcastic and definitely no more interested than before.

Sam's smile really was going to split his face in two in the not-good way. "He's in training," the younger Winchester offered, something off in his voice.

The woman raised an eyebrow, looking like she was about to start asking more questions, but instead just shook her head. "Whatever. I don't care. Come with me, I'll get Roger. He's head of security. He'll show you the monitors."

With that, Ms. Bubble Gum Pop turned and escorted them past the row of tellers and towards the back, where a security guard was standing beside a hallway marked for employees only, hands on his belt.

"Roger, these men are here to check the monitors. Something about a glitch in the system." The woman was already turning and walking away practically before she'd finished speaking. Apparently, they were Roger's problem now.

Dean turned his ever-weakening smile on the poor security guard, who offered them each a handshake and a far friendly, actually invested smile.

"Howdy, there. I'm Roger, head of security. What's this all about?"

Sam repeated the spiel they'd come up with about the tech company that maintained the bank's video monitoring equipment having a temporary glitch over the weekend that might have effected the branch's monitors and recording abilities. Dean assured him it would get them in the door, since it already had once before.

"Huh. Well, we haven't had any flags go up on our system yet," Roger said, even as he escorted them down the hallway without further question. He did give Ronald a second glance, the man still pulling at his uniform as discreetly as possible (which was to say, not discretely at all)

"Yeah, this is an overall glitch," Dean reiterated, following after and glaring over his shoulder at Ronald, who looked guilty but didn't stop, either. "Might not effect this branch at all, sir. Just want to be sure."

"Well, better to be safe than sorry, I guess," Roger agreed as he opened the door to a small room – little more than a closet – full of monitors actively filming the bank lobby, vault door, and teller stations. Dean and Sam went ahead into the room, Ronald following a little too enthusiastically, still pulling at his jumpsuit. Roger gave him another look and Dean wanted to smack away Ronald's hand until it stayed by his god damn side. "All righty, you guys need anything else?"

"Oh, no, no we'll be, uh, we'll be in and out before you know it," Sam said as Dean dragged Ronald further into the room and all but shoved him into one of the seats in front of all the monitors. Sam had to forcefully pull his gaze off the live train wreck and smile encouragingly at the poor security guard, who was still glancing back at Ronald with less than assuredness. "Just a routine check."

"Well…" The guard sent one more questioning look their way before smiling and nodding at Sam. "Okie-dokie."

He turned to leave, closing the door behind him and Sam and Dean both let out a breath of relief as soon as the latch clicked into place. The slight déjà vu that came from Mr. Okie-Dokie (Dean remembered liking the guard for no other reason than he said things like Okie Dokie) wasn't enough to derail him from his current source of frustration.

"Will you stop pulling at that thing?" Dean hissed at Ronald now that the three of them were alone.

Ronald, still tugging at the back thigh of his jumper like he had a wedgie, despite currently being seated, made a face that was both sheepish and annoyed. "Sorry! It's just, this thing's kinda tight. You guys couldn't have gotten a bigger size?"

"Sorry, last minute disguises aren't exactly sold at Big and Tall!" Dean snapped back. Ronald frowned, the look nothing short of a pout on his round face, knowing an insult when he heard it.

Sam sat down in one of the two chairs stationed in front of the monitors, deciding to ignore his two 'coworkers' and get to work, since he was pretty sure it would be a while before either of them actually did.

"Why did we have to wear disguises at all?" Ronald asked, tone at least dropping some of the whining as he glanced at Sam to see what the other man was doing – searching the feeds for the laser eyes – before copying him. His attention lasted for about three seconds before he was back to looking over his shoulder at Dean. "I mean, why couldn't we tell them we're FBI and- and we're looking for a, a you know-" Ronald glanced between the two 'agents'- "mandroid?"

Dean did not manage to stop his eyes from rolling despite giving it his best effort (which was to say, really no effort at all). "Gee, I don't know, Ronald. Maybe because, one, *you* aren't FBI, and B, that's going to call a hell of a lot of attention to us? Not to mention the shift- the, the thing would run and we'd lose him. And it's *not* a mandroid, so stop calling it that."

Beside him, a little more calmly despite being annoyed for his own reasons, Sam added, "It would raise a lot of questions we don't have answers to, Mr. Reznick. Trust us, people do a lot better if they get to keep living their lives, oblivious to the things we hunt."

The larger man frowned, still pouting, as he looked between the two men again and then turned back to the monitors. "But you're the *FBI*," he mumbled.

"Yeah," Dean agreed easily enough, even though they were lying through their teeth about that. "And the reason we're able to do what we do is because people *don't know about it*. Now, let's just find our, uh, perp, and get the hell out of here before we get caught."

"If it's not a mandroid-" Ronald leaned forward in his seat, eyes narrow slits as he squinted at the different monitors, bank employees and customers going about their everyday lives, just as Sam had said. Utterly oblivious to the danger they were in. "-then what is it?"

"Classified," both Sam and Dean answered at the same time. Ronald frown-pouted with a huff.

"Thought I was a potential agent," he muttered grumpily.

Dean, leaning over his shoulder to watch the monitors as well, glanced at the guy with a hell of a look he, thankfully, didn't see. It was nothing compared to the look he just knew Sam was giving him.

Ronald, meanwhile, was still whining. "I can help, but you guys gotta read me in!"

Dean tried not to roll his eyes again at the dramatic wording. He'd been the one to go the whole FBI-slash-secret-agency route. Couldn't exactly get mad that the excited nerd he'd gone and fed that to was running with it. The older Winchester turned back to the monitors, looking for the tell-tale sign of a shifter. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Ronny. You're doing great, but we're the professionals. Let us handle the big stuff, yeah?"

Ronald was still pouting, but eventually he gave a one shouldered and mumbled, "Yeah, okay."

"There," Sam announced only seconds later, pointing to the upper most left monitor. It was on one of the teller stations, where two employees were talking, one a young woman smartly dressed, the other a man in a suit. His eyes were glowing.

"Laser eyes," Ronald breathed in, voice both awed and excited.

"Shit," Dean muttered, staring at the image. "It's the Bank Manager."

Which he only now remembered was spot on with the last time this went down. Sam glanced over and up at him, and Dean gave a subtle nod to indicate it was the same.

"Okay," Sam breathed out, leaning back in his seat. "So we watch him, make sure he doesn't change skins again, then follow him home. Take him out there."

Beside him, Ronald mouthed, *'change skins?'* while gaping a bit like a fish, before he glanced over at Dean. "It can do that?"

"Told you, you weren't far off with the T2, mandroid theory," Dean answered with half a shrug, still watching the monitor.

"What if he tries to rob the bank today?" Ronald countered, glancing between the two of them, then to the monitor where the Bank Manager was still discussing something with the teller. "Shouldn't we stop him now?"

"No, Ronald," Dean practically growled, hanging onto his patience with a single thread labeled *'you got yourself into this*' and not much more. "Because that would call a lot of attention to us. Remember?"

The bigger guy didn't look happy about it, scrunching up his mouth, but he kept his eyes on the monitor, watching as their not-mandroid nodded at the teller and then walked out of the camera's range. They

tracked him across two more screens as he headed back to his office.

"Look, the bank closes in twenty minutes," Dean continued, glancing at the watch on his wrist. "We'll track him till then, then follow him home like Sam said."

"Mr. Okie Dokie may come back before then," Sam muttered quietly, not looking away from the monitors. Beside him, his brother shrugged.

"Then we'll deal with it. Say we're just wrapping up and will be done before closing time."

"We could wait for him outside," Sam suggested instead, though his little half-shoulder shrug said his heart wasn't really behind the suggestion. Dean shook his head.

"If this thing shifts while we're not watching, we'll never know about it until it's too late." Plus, his new victim would probably get killed in the meantime.

"So…" Ronald glanced between the two of them again, eyes a little wide but a little less enthusiastic than they had been a minute ago. "We just wait?"

Dean cocked a half smirk his direction. "Job's not all gunfights and glory."

Ronald sighed, looking ridiculously downtrodden considering what Dean had just told him usually ended bloody, but he went back to looking at the monitors with a studiousness that the real FBI probably would have appreciated.

-o-o-o-

They waited until just three minutes before closing time to start packing it up. The bank manager was still reading the glowing laser eyes in the monitors when Roger the Security Guard came to check on them. They wrapped up and headed back out with Mr. Okie Dokie leading the way, thanking them for their time and for double checking their system.

The group was almost back to the lobby when the absolute worst thing that could have happened did. The Bank Manager walked out of his office, practically colliding with the group of hunters and their tag-along recruit.

Ronald froze, eyes so wide there was no way he wasn't giving them away immediately. The shifter froze, half-formed apology on his lips when he met Ronald's eyes and paused. He glanced between the other members of the group, immediately dismissing Roger, who had switched from his discussion with the service technicians to say hello to his coworker (whose name was apparently Thomas), and focused on the two hunters. The way the Bank Manager's eyes widened and then turned hooded – dangerous – told both Winchesters immediately that they'd been made.

Dean tensed, itching to draw the silver blade he'd stashed in his ankle (no way he was coming in here unarmed, no matter what Sam had suggested about leaving their guns in the car), but he was too late. The bank manager suddenly surged forward, shoving both hands into Sam's ribcage *hard*. The beanstalk toppled backwards, taking the security guard with him to the floor.

"Hey!" Ronald yelled suddenly even as their shifter took off running for the front of the bank. Dean started after him, leaving Sam to disentangle himself and Ronald to do whatever it was he was doing. Which, turned out, was a drastic mistake.

Dean was a dozen feet behind the shifter, nowhere near catching the much faster creature, when he heard Sam's cry.

"Ronald, no!"

It was quickly followed by the loud, sub-bass pops of an automatic rifle. Instinctually, Dean hit the floor, covering his head. At the same time, he watched the shifter stumble, blood splattering from a fresh whole in the back of his suit. The creature hit the ground on one knee, but managed to stumble up and disappear behind the row of teller stands, blocking him from view.

Dean spun onto his back, staring with wide, horrified eyes at Ronald, holding Betsy, which he'd somehow, *somehow* managed to stash in his 'too-tight' jumpsuit this entire time.

Ronald's eyes were wide, maybe not quite believing he'd shot someone, or that that someone had gotten right back up and kept running. But the shifter wasn't even their main concern right now, as the bank had erupted in screams and chaos. Customers ran for the front doors, others hit the floor. Employees ducked behind their stands, and Dean knew, without a doubt, that one of them had already hit the silent alarm.

He stared at the unfolding scene in complete shock, still lying on the floor, almost unable to contemplate how, once more, they'd landed themselves in the same god damn situation as last time.

Time really did fucking hate them.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: First, sorry for any typos. This was kind of speed edited. I thought I did pretty good, but I'm sure I missed something (I always, always do!) Second, hopefully you can suspend some disbelief for some of the funnier bits. There's no way Ronald could have snuck Betsy in, but I just couldn't resist. It was too funny, especially with him pulling at his jumper the whole time. Anyway, as I said, probably not my finest work, but I decided to surrender to the comedy. I hope you all enjoyed the ride!

Up Next: Dean's got a tough choice to make. The shifter's still in the bank, but so are a dozen innocent civilians, and the cops are already on their way. They could run and probably make a clean break, but they'd leave behind a shifter who'd no-doubt be in the wind before the night was over. Or, they could stay. But if they stay, they can't just let those innocent civilians go; without hostages, the cops won't hesitate to storm the bank and they would need time to find the shifter again. Damnit, Dean was really hoping to stay off the FBI's most wanted list this time around.

Stay safe until the next update, and thank you all again for your support!

Cheers,
Silence

Next Chapter: The next chapter is NOT A CHAPTER. It is a trailer for the rest of season 2, written and posted with the hope that it would kickstart the muse during the great Covid-creative-recession of 2020/21. It didn't really work in that regard [insert grimace here] but for anyone interested in a written trailer, please enjoy! Anyone who's not interested in teases of what's coming, please skip! :D

Chapter 108: Season 2: Teaser Trailer

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Oooooh boy am I nervous about this one guys.

First thing first, **THIS IS NOT A CHAPTER**. I know that may disappoint some of you, but hopefully not for long. This is a teaser trailer for the rest of Season two! I wrote it up for a couple of reasons. First, as a warm up to try and get myself back in the writing spirit, something I've been struggling with during the lockdown. See, I don't usually write well at home. Too many distractions, too many things to do. But pop me off to a cafe, throw some headphones in, indulge in a nice Chai Latte, and I'm usually pretty productive. Cue Covid, and I am now stuck writing at home. Which...as you may have noticed from a severe lack of updates for months now...is not going so well XP So! This was a writing warm up, if you will. The second reason is to hype you all up for the rest of the season, and to that end, the third reason is that hopefully your hyped up responses to everything I have planned will remind the Muse WHY WE LIKE WRITING IN THE FIRST PLACE. *huff* I'm not annoyed with her at all. NOT AT ALL.

Trailer: The following clips are not in any necessary order (though for the most part they are chronological. Mostly). There is a mix of good times, not so good times, and really not so good times. They are also a liiiittle no-good-dirty-rotten in places (*cough* cliffhanger-y *cough*) because...well...this is me, here. Those cliffhangers can be a little spoilery as to what's to come, but only so much as a normal trailer for an episode or a season of a show would be. The main goal of it is to get you excited for what's to come, and some of that requires a little twist, a little turn, and some minor spoilers.

If you don't want to read because you don't like the idea of that, no worries! Like I said, I've not done something like this before and I have no idea what I'm doing! XP

Reviews: Okay, not gonna lie, the primary incentive behind this is to hear from you guys! Hearing from readers every week or two was like a friggin' drug for me and I have been in withdrawal for MONTHS. I'm not going to be surprised if that is partially responsible for Covid-Creativity-Drain. MAMA NEEDS HER FIX.

(It's late and I'm a little loopy, y'all. #SorryNotSorry)

Lastly, Thanksgiving! In the spirit of Thanksgiving Weekend, I want to take a moment to say how thankful I am for all of you. Several of you check in with me on a bi-weekly basis to make sure I haven't died or been maimed in a horrible accident. So many of you have mentioned in your comments that you will wait this story out, no matter how long it takes, and I remind myself of all of you every time I struggle with another week gone by without writing productivity. More still remind me to take care of myself first, and to you I say a deep-hearted and sincere thank you. I am super thankful for the incredible spur of new readers and reviewers this story has gotten in the last three weeks (the ending of the show being the cause, no doubt). You all have made smile so much as you comment throughout your reading journey or unload all at once when you finally catch up! I am also incredibly thankful to be part of this fandom, which is so full of supportive, wonderful, beautiful souls. And I am very thankful that creativity and coffee shops are the only real thing Covid has taken from me. I know I am lucky in that regard.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Season 2: Extra Chapter

Teaser Trailer

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Giving Ronald another fierce, *'stay put!'* glare, Sam pulled Dean off to the side of the vault where they'd just finished locking their brand-spanking new hostages inside. The older Winchester looked like he knew exactly what was coming and would rather be hunting down a shifter.

"Dean, this is crazy," Sam hissed, which was almost verbatim what Dean had, indeed, guessed was coming. Sam's grip on his arm remained, a sure-fire example of how just not-joking Sam was right now. "We should get out now."

"Little late, don't ya think, Sammy?" Dean muttered, gesturing with his free arm to the closed vault door. In for a penny and all that.

Sam released his arm to run that same hand through his hair, the other still holding Betsy. "What aren't you telling me?"

Dean frowned, pulling his head back and attempting to look affronted by the accusation. "I told you everything about this."

"Then what aren't you telling me about after this?"

The man from the future stiffened, immediately cursing his brother's ridiculous intelligence and instinct. Okay, so, maybe he hadn't told Sam everything, he hedged in his own mind. But he'd told him everything that seemed important at the time.

"Dean." His thoughts must have shown clear across his face, because Sam was regarding him with a warning look. "Seriously. Because this is *insane*. We should ditch Ronald and get the hell out of here. We can find the shifter again later."

"The Rising of the Witnesses." Dean blurted it out before his brain could fully process what his tongue was already committed to. Sam blinked, brow furling in confusion. Before he could ask, Dean continued, "It's one of the seals. When it breaks, ghosts of the people we got killed or couldn't save…they come back, and they come back angry. A lot of hunters died. You, me, and Bobby were almost among 'em."

Sam paused, taking a moment to process that new gem of information. He swept his bangs out of his face and glanced over his shoulder at Ronald Resnik, standing restlessly, like he couldn't figure out what to do with his arms, by the vault door, 'guarding' their 'hostages.' Sam pursed his lips and turned back to his brother.

"Ronald?"

Dean nodded, not quite able to look at the larger man he remembered more as an angry, hurt, volatile ghost than the buffoon they'd taken with them into the bank today. "Him and Meg."

It was Sam's turn to pull back, that heavy brow furled over his brown eyes. "Meg? The demon?"

"The human she was riding. Meg Masters." Dean shook his head, trying to block that poor girl's voice from his memory, the look in her face as she'd beaten the crap out of him. Retribution. "She died last time. After we exorcised Meg."

Because first they'd thrown her from a third story window. And then when they'd managed to exorcise her, they'd left behind a broken, crumpled human to die a slow and miserable death in Bobby Singer's living room. Dean shuddered and turned partially away from his brother.

"Dean…that's not your fault. And neither is Ronald."

The man from the future immediately rounded back on Sam, eyes fierce and filled with that terrible, angry guilt he was so damn good at. "Not my fault? Yeah, it was Sam! And it will be this time! Ronald might have been planning out an attack on the bank to trap the shifter, but we have no idea if he'd have gone through with it without us showing up and pushing him over the edge. Telling him he was crazy. We drove him to the bank."

This time, *literally*.

"If he dies, it's on us."

Sam sook his head. "You don't know that, Dean."

"Yeah, I do!" The hunter threw his arms up, startling Ronald who was far enough away to be out of ear shot for all but the loudest of the argument. "That's literally what the Rising of the Witnesses means, Sam. It means we got them killed!"

Sam had his doubts about that – sounded like some twisted logic and twisted memories – but ultimately he couldn't argue otherwise. He hadn't lived through it. And when Dean lowered his arms, a crestfallen and haunted look crossing his face, Sam found he couldn't argue for other reasons too.

"I can't go through that again, Sam," his brother muttered, finally glancing over at Ronald and looking away just as quickly. "I won't. I'm not letting them die on our watch. Not again."

Sam scrubbed his free hand down his face with a rough sigh, but finally nodded. "Okay. We save him this time. But after this, Dean-" he shoved Betsy into his brother's arms, not wanting much more to do with the damn semi-automatic rifle that had gotten them into this- "no more crazy."

His brother nodded, firm and resolute, fingers tight around the gun. "No more crazy."

-o-o-o-

"Run!" Dean yelled, charging at Sam, who straightened in alarm. His brother was gesturing wildly while sprinting at full speed right towards the younger Winchester. Sam registered the look on his face, the comically wide eyes and red, flushed skin, before movement over his brother's shoulder caught his attention.

Sam stared, frozen to the spot, at the giant snake slithering, head sliding smoothly back and forth, not a hundred feet behind Dean. The logical part of his brain broke; how was a snake that big – and this thing was as tall as his brother, at the very least, with a head that could very likely swallow a human whole – even moving in a tunnel this tight? The less logical part of his brain could only stare, thinking, *'what?'* and *'how?'* and maybe also, *'why us?'*

"Run!"

Dean grabbed Sam's bicep *hard* as he flew past, hauling Sam into an awkward hop-wobble before he turned fully and put those long legs to use.

"What the hell, Dean!"

"I don't know!" the older Winchester screamed back, partially over his shoulder as he checked on their gaining adversary.
Their *quickly* gaining adversary.

"I thought we said no more crazy!" Sam yelled from slightly ahead of him. Damn those long cricket legs of his. Dean whipped his head back around to glare at his younger – and therefore, should-be *shorter* and *slower* – brother.

"This is *not* my fault!"

The giant snake chasing them let out a truly hair-raising hiss and Dean redoubled his efforts to not become snake chow. He would never again think Indiana Jones a wimp for his fear of snakes. Never. Again.

-o-o-o-

The object in the kid's hand wasn't what Bobby was expecting when he looked up from the desk in his den, neck-deep in sea witch lore. Olivia Lowry had managed to stumble into a nasty one off the coast of Maine. The cavalry was already on the way – she'd managed to filter just about every curse word in the book between explanations of how

the bitch had nearly gotten her and this was definitely not a solo gig – but they'd need all the backup they could get when it came to killing the thing. Witches. They really were the worst.

The flash of a question mark searing itself across the inside of his eyelids for a second time in as many minutes brought Bobby back to Andy Gallagher, standing in the doorway to the den, holding a thick, leather dog collar and an old, empty, dusty tin bowl.

Considering his hands were full, Bobby would forgive the lack of Signing for the easier, headache-inducing telepathy. (To be honest, the kid was getting good enough – or Bobby was getting too used to – his new powers to even cause much of a headache anymore.)

"Rumsfeld," Bobby huffed, going back to the books. "My old dog."

As silence settled like a weighted blanket in the wake of that statement, a third question mark (well, actually three question marks all together now) flashed through his brain once again. Bobby sighed, realizing he wasn't gonna get this research done for Olivia while Andy had *questions* apparently. Like, given the raised eyebrows and exaggerated nod to the disused items, the whole story.

"Demon got 'em," the gruff hunter admitted, managing to hold back the emotion that welled inside at the thought of Rumsfeld. He'd gone quick, at least, but Bobby had sure wished Dean had left something of that demon bitch for him to kill himself after what she'd done to his dog. He'd been a damn good boy and hadn't deserved an end like that. Dogs were meant to grow old, damnit.

He turned back to his research.

Andy audibly huffed, entering the den and setting the items on Bobby's cluttered desk. *Loudly*. Bobby knew he could chase the kid off with some not-unjustified anger at digging through his personal belongings, at bringing up some painful memories and then continuing to poke at that bear. But he'd been the one to tell the kid digging around was fine as long as it kept him busy.

Turned out, a twenty-something year old psychic with nothing to do and nowhere to go got bored about as quick as a toddler. Just so long as he didn't touch anything that looked like "occult stuff" as Bobby had said it (or "adult stuff" as he'd meant it) than Andy wandering through the basement and closets at least kept him out of the old hunter's hair.

This twenty-something psychic was gesturing to the collar, and

forming the word for 'another' in Sign, eyebrows up to make it a question. Bobby did not want to be having this conversation, but considering the kid was using his hands and not his mind, he begrudgingly answered.

"Getting too old for training a new pup," he muttered, almost under his breath. Too old to lose another one, too, not that he'd ever admit that part out loud. Unfortunately, Andy was a perceptive twenty-something toddler. Bobby turned back to his books, gruff rising like hackles. "Got enough strays as it is, kid."

It was Andy's turn to look sad at that, but Bobby chose not to notice, going back to his research. It was a terrible mistake, in hindsight. If he'd been paying more attention, he might have seen that sadness turn into the furled brow of thought, which evolved into the wide eyed delight of an idea, followed ultimately by a dangerous amount of determination.

All of which would might have clued Bobby in to the inevitability that he was getting a new dog well before he walked into his house three weeks later to find that very thing had happened while he was out for groceries.

-o-o-o-

It took him a minute, but as soon as that déjà vu settled into full focus, Dean turned them right the hell around.

"Dude, what the hell?" Sam muttered as his brother practically pulled him back off campus towards the Impala. He glanced over his shoulder at the retreating school buildings, one of which had been the scene of a tragic death. A professor, flung from his top story office, to die on the steps below with no witnesses and a hefty number of shady connections: right up their alley.

"Not this one, Sammy," Dean muttered, keeping his voice low as he looked around like someone might be watching them. Sam frowned, looking around as well, but it was largely a deserted college campus, give it was the middle of the night and had only stopped raining about twenty minutes earlier.

The younger Winchester pulled his arm free of his brother, dragging them both to a stop. Dean looked irritated, but Sam didn't let that deter him. "You said no more running."

"No," the man from the future countered immediately, "I said we'd

pick our battles. Well, I'm not picking this one."

"There are people dying here, Dean." Sam tried for the honor-and-duty angle that usually was enough to win his brother over, or at least make him pause. Not this time, apparently.

"Yeah, douchebags who deserve it," the older Winchester harped back almost immediately. "That's what the trickster does, alright? And trust me, we don't want to get involved."

"A trickster?" Sam's voice rose in surprise. They'd never run into a trickster before. They were old and powerful, usually pagan gods or half-gods. Through no fault of his own, the younger Winchester was intrigued. Dean could tell, given his deadpan return glare. Sam cleared his throat, trying to look a little less curious. He failed. "What, uh, what happened last time?"

His brother grabbed his arm again, once more hauling ass for the Impala. "Let's just say Taco Tuesday was permanently ruined for you, for like…ever. And I never got to listen to Asia again. So, yeah, we're leaving."

Sam was still trying to argue his case in and among attempts to get more out of Dean than that jumble which had made absolutely no sense, when the Winchester boys rounded the corner of the building closest to the school parking lot and went out of sight. From a darkened alcove of that building, a short-statured man stepped into the light of the courtyard lamps, eyes narrowed and lollipop clacking against his teeth.

Gabriel pulled the sweet from his mouth with a pop, eyes still locked on where the Winchesters had disappeared. Well. That was…weird.

Good thing a trickster such as him liked weird.

Popping the lollipop back in his mouth, the archangel-turned-Loki tucked his hands in his pockets and followed after the pair of hunters.

-o-o-o-

They landed hard, or maybe it was an illusion of a hard landing that came with the adrenaline of Angel Air and the knowledge that Dean was bleeding to death. That, and the apparent chaos they'd landed in the middle of. Their third party member was screaming in that kind of what-the-hell-just-happened manner and for some reason there was a dog barking fiercely – the scary kind that meant you were about to get

chomped on – in the not-so-distant background.

Sam managed to shove all of that to the side and scrambled back to his brother, hands curling over the bullet wound more out of instinct and fear than anything logical. Especially considering that Cas was right there, already pressing two fingers to the older Winchester's forehead. Dean had time to grunt in pain from his brother trying to keep him alive before he was miraculously and immediately healed.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, head thunking back to the floor of Bobby's living room as his body went limp, all that pain and tension suddenly gone. Sam could relate, sagging back onto his heels, struggling just to breathe normally in the wake of an adrenaline crash.

Their tagalong, on the other hand, seemed to be ratcheting up in anxiety.

"How are we…where are…but we were in the….what is happening?" The larger man spun around, eyes wide as he tried to take in Bobby Singer's den but likely saw none of it. "Did…did we just *teleport*?"

As his voice climbed in volume, Cas finally spun on her crouched knee, gracefully standing in one swift move, and pressed those two fingers to the man's head. He went down with a hefty thud that shook Bobby's bookcases. Then the angel spun once more, fierce blue eyes locked on the German Shephard still barking ferociously at them from the hall, but not entering the room. It fell silent with a reproachful whimper.

"What the hell is going on in there?" Bobby came charging in, still in his pajamas but shotgun in hand. He straightened, pulling the butt of the gun away from its braced position against his shoulder when he spotted the newest round of houseguests. He glared at the angel who seemed to be having a staring contest with Sarge, then shifted his eyes to the Winchesters and the puddle of blood slowly soaking into his rug. "Balls."

Sam, on the other hand, was looking between him and the German Shepherd with wide eyes and a confused brow, brown hair flopping over his forehead. "When did you get a dog?"

Bobby huffed and lowered the shotgun. Dean was clearly no longer dying if those were the first words out of Sam Winchester's mouth. Damnit. What did a man have to do to get one good night's sleep in his own friggin' house these days?

-o-o-o-

Jody Mills looked up from her phone, which was still pinging with text messages from her latest 'pen pal' (if it could be called that in this day and age – and she just knew said pen pal would make fun of her for such an old fashioned term. Squirrely little kid) as the door to the small Sheriff's office opened and a stranger strolled in.

"Howdy," she greeted with a share of Midwestern friendliness at the unfamiliar face. The suit, sans a jacket, rolled up sleeves of a pristine dress shirt, and solid colored tie all said important. The multiple files tucked under his arm, a photograph paper-clipped to the outside of one of them, said Fed. Not something they saw a lot of in Souix Falls, South Dakota.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" the man asked congenially enough, though there was something dark in his eyes that immediately set Jody on edge. Nothing aimed at her, per say, but it was obvious this man was here on a mission.

"Nah, 'course not," she answered in an equally light tone, setting her cell down on her desk. "Just helping a wayward kid handle his first dog. What can I do for you, Mr. ...?"

"Henriksen." The man offered his hand, which the Sheriff shook. "Agent Victor Henriksen, FBI. I'm looking for a couple of boys, and word is there's a man in your town who knows 'em."

The agent set his files – three of them, it turned out – onto the counter, and the smile slid right off Jody's face at the picture attached to the top one. The spitting image of Bobby Singer's 'nephew,' new to town as of two months ago. The young man who'd bumped into her outside the grocery store last month with a favor to ask. The goofy, tragically mute kid who was, in fact, the very same 'pen pal' she'd been texting thirty seconds previously regarding taking proper care of that damn favor.

"Don't suppose you know a resident by the name of Robert Singer, Sheriff?"

Jody raised her eyes back up to the federal agent. She let out a huff of air and forced the corner of her mouth into a smile. She doubted it was convincing. "You mean the town drunk?"

-o-o-o-

Bobby shut his front door on the retreating figure of one, FBI special agent Victor Henriksen, to share a wide-eyed look and a relieved breath of air with Andy – a wanted felon, mind you – who'd been hiding behind the door for the entire length of conversation. Every awkward, hair-raising minute of it.

"Balls," the hunter muttered. He was gonna have to call the boys and tell 'em a Fed had been sniffing around, looking for 'em. The thought was not five seconds through his brain when a pounding on the door caused both hunters to jump. Andy scrambled back into the protective corner created by the door once it was open, and Bobby gave him one hell of a warning look before he turned the knob once more. Like he needed the reminder to stay quiet. Him. The wanted felon.

"Alright Bobby," Sheriff Mills said loudly from the front porch, hand on hip, with a tone that sounded about ten seconds away from murdering them both. "Where's the kid and what the hell is going on?"

-o-o-o-

He was still humming the catchy tune under his breath as he left the diner, pie in hand, only to draw up feet short of the Impala.

The empty Impala.

The empty Impala that should not be empty, because it should have his stupidly tall, stupidly long-haired little brother in the front seat.

"Sam?" Dean glanced around the parking lot, hoping Sam had just hopped out to help a stranger with directions or take a piss in the woods (and…not the fully working, indoor bathroom complete with plumbing located just feet away inside the damn diner. Sure.) "Sammy!"

The hunter spun in a full circle, only to halt abruptly ninety degrees to his left. There was a woman, standing at the far end of the parking lot, right on the edge of the only street light along the deserted country road. She was short, legs spread in a solid stance that suggested she was waiting on a fight, and her eyes were *glowing* green.

Son of a bitch.

Azazel's girl. Which meant that Sam...

Dean dropped the pie and drew his gun, but the woman was already turning, bolting into the night.

"Hey!" The man from the future – now very damn certain it was about to repeat itself – took off running after the supernatural bitch who'd just kidnapped his brother this time around, leaving the toppled pie abandoned in front of the empty Impala.

-o-o-o-

Sarge's whining finally caught Andy's attention and he pulled the ear buds out of his head to notice the German Shepherd standing at the entrance to the panic room, tail tucked, head ducked, and eyes looking about as uncertain as Andy had ever seen them. Sarge was nothing if not stalwart most of the time.

'What's up, buddy?' he asked in his own head, signing along with the question, knowing the dog could neither hear or read him, but it hadn't stopped him from chatting to himself in either form yet. He uncrossed his legs from the cot they'd dragged into the iron-walled room once it was obvious Andy would be spending more than just an evening hiding out down there. He stood, stretched, and crossed the small room to crouch in front of the dog. *'You gotta go pee?'*

He made the hand signal for bathroom that Jody had taught him and Bobby – the one Sarge's previous handler had picked – and the dog whined again, turning and heading for the stairs up and out of the basement. Andy stood, following after with only a moment's hesitation and a quick glance back at the panic room. Five minutes out of it wouldn't hurt, and it was only to go upstairs and grab Bobby so he could take Sarge for a walk.

The two climbed the stairs, Andy trailing behind the much faster four legged beast. When he got to the top of the stairs, Sarge was already waiting at the front door. Andy held up a finger – not that they'd actually taught Sarge what '*one minute*' meant, and ducked his head into the study.

Bobby was on the phone, back turned to the psychic, and from the sound of it, he was buried up to his elbows in a case for another hunter. Andy didn't have a convenient way to interrupt the man without using his powers. He glanced back into the hall. Sarge was staring at him with desperate eyes, and whined once he had eye contact again.

How long had he been asking to go out? The hunt must be a bad one, Andy figured, if Bobby hadn't noticed.

Well, he could take Sarge out. Yeah, the Winchesters and Bobby had

both told him not to leave the panic room, and definitely not to leave the house, but what was five minutes going to hurt? Besides, Bobby's property was warded seven ways to Sunday. No demon – Prince of Hell or otherwise – was setting foot in the salvage yard.

Andy grabbed Sarge's leash and opened the front door, following after the dog as he ran out into the night in nothing short of desperation.

It wasn't until a good ten minutes later that Bobby finally hung up the phone after shouting Carl Bates through a Banshee banishing spell after the thing had almost taken the head off his hunting buddy. Which meant a follow up shouting bout of how to keep a man alive when his neck was kind of hanging on by a thread. Bobby heaved a tired sigh. He really was getting too old for this.

It took another second for him to realize that Sarge was barking in the distance. Not inside the house, but from…the yard. Bobby straightened and spun around, dread pooling in his gut. Sarge was in the yard. The front door was open. And so was the basement door.

"Andy!" Bobby surged to his feet, but the stairs to the basement were deserted and no psychic came answering back with his telepathic powers. The old hunter bolted for the front door, heart pounding. Sam's death date was just around the corner, and the kid *knew* better than to leave the panic room!

When he found Sarge, the dog was barking furiously at the far fence of his property, nothing but empty night beyond it. His leash was attached to his collar, dragging on the ground around him, but there was no sign of Andy.

-o-o-o-

Chuck stared at the freshly printed page. So fresh the ink would still smudge if he rubbed at it hard enough. For a moment, he entertained doing just that. Just rubbing away the last hour of work – the last year's, the last millennia, the last…forever, really – and do it all over again.

The writer shook his head, freeing himself of such morbid and… existential thoughts. The story was what it was; it always seemed to write itself more than Chuck ever being an active participant. There was something weird about that, but the prophetic author didn't dwell on it. He had bills to pay and he supposed this was at least one way to do that.

"Here you go. Final chapter." There was something flat to his voice Chuck didn't like, but he didn't know how to fix it. He stared at his editorial assistant as she sat up in her chair, legs curled up beneath her short body, and took the papers from him. His hand brushed hers, and he stared at the contact. His fingers were overheated and kinda tingly.

He wondered if Steph noticed, because she rubbed at the back of her hand where they'd touched, the motion absentminded. Chuck wondered at that, at that contact and the fact that she was always somehow nicer after moments like this. The poor writer tried not to read too much into that. He turned to head back to his lonely computer.

"Hey, Chuck?" Steph had dropped her hand, but she had a distant look in her eye she always got around him. Chuck didn't know what to make of it, but something deep within Chuck, something he didn't even realize existed most days, always took notice and great care to nurture that slowly growing ember. "Do you know what's going to happen next?"

It was a weird question to ask of an author, Chuck thought. Then again, he seemed to be the kind of author that didn't know what was in store for his characters. Last minute writer, his publisher had teased, but Chuck always wondered if it was more than that. If it was weird not to feel in control of your own story.

"No," Chuck answered honestly, because he liked to think he was at that point of friendship with Stephanie. "I don't. Sometimes I think the story will go one way, but usually when I write it…it's completely different. Not the way I'd have taken it at all."

He frowned at that, scrunching up one side of his face. He wondered what it would be like to write the story he wanted to write, and not the one that came to him in flashes of bright lights and a lot of head pain.

"What do you want to happen next?"

Chuck – and something altogether not Chuck – blinked in surprise. He glanced over at his editorial assistant, not sure why the question affected him so. He supposed…no one had ever asked him that before. Probably because it had never occurred to anyone to need to.

"Oh. Um. Well…" Chuck had to pause, had to actually think about that answer. Funny, that. No one had ever bothered to ask, including

himself. The prophet smiled almost idly. "I think something big is coming," he admitted with a slight shrug. "And, well…it sounds silly, but….I want everyone to pull through."

He smiled shyly at Steph and she smiled in return. It was nice, even if he was pretty sure it was a smile born of pity.

"Guess it's not very good writing if everyone makes it out unscathed, though, huh?" Chuck sighed with another shrug, this one far more self-deprecating than the previously awkward one. "Tragedy maketh money, and all that. Not that I'm making much money, of course."

He chuckled awkwardly, completely missing the sad downturn to Stephanie's smile. But the thing that lived deep inside him, that saw all when it wanted to, didn't miss a thing. And when he picked up those papers thirty minutes later, he brushed Chuck's fingers across her's once more, blowing on that growing flame. One whisper at a time, he would remind Persephone of what she used to be. And maybe, Time permitting, they would save Sam Winchester this time around.

-o-o-o-

Sam's knees hit the wet, uneven pavement in a way that should have hurt. That did hurt, but distantly, because the hurt was nothing compared to his back. Sam couldn't breathe. Or maybe that was the fluid filling his lungs. Blood, his brain supplied unhelpfully.

"Sam!"

That was Dean's voice. But it was far away. Which…was really unfortunate. Sam didn't think his brother was going to make it in time.

"Sorry, kiddo," the demon said from above him, wiping the sharp, curved blade in his hand off on a rag. Wiping Sam's blood off with that rag. "Your brother's gotta pay his entry fee."

"Sammy!"

Sam bent forward, finding it harder to support his own weight. The rough cement bit into the palms of his hands. Breathing was hard and…metallic. Ah. The blood in his lungs. That made sense.

"No! Sam!"

He could hear Dean's pounding feet now, but his brother was still too far away. Sam knew he wouldn't make it. The younger Winchester hit the wet ground before Dean ever got close.

"Sammy!"

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: oooooookay, GO. YELL AT ME. :D

I hope you all enjoyed the teaser trailer, and that it hit it's goal of getting you guys psyched for what's to come. If it did, please let me know. Which clip are you the most excited to get to? Are you freaked out I'm (totally not) killing Sam? (Or Andy) (*ducks and hides real good for that one*) Or, in the spirit of this weekend, tell me what you're thankful for, because I am thankful for you and want to hear it! 3

Next Update: I can not give you guys a solid timeline, unfortunately. The muse and I are close to getting back to writing, I can feel it. If nothing else, every time I open up Word to write and it just doesn't come, I use that time to outline what is coming up so, so, so heavily that when the Muse is finally ready, all we have to do is turn bullet points into full sentences XD

Hope you are staying safe. Happy Thanksgiving, thank you for reading, and thank you for hanging with me through this uncertain and rough period. Until next time!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 109: Season 2: Chapter 75

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: HI GUYS! [waves incredibly enthusiastically] Boy, have I missed you all! I know some of you probably screeched when you saw the e-mail update, while others are reading this warily, wondering if they should believe their eyes. Well you can believe it! THIS IS A REAL CHAPTER!

[insert crazy Kermit dance here]

It has been a looooooong time coming. A year, actually. I really wanted to get this chapter up last weekend after checking the trailer for a detail I thought I'd missed and realizing that I put a thanksgiving note in there. Which means this story hasn't updated for a year (eek!). I really wanted to get you all a post on the year anniversary, but I wasn't able to as I was visiting family for the holidays and had very little free time.

So please accept this humbly delayed chapter, and what I absolutely hope is a return to routine posting.

Chapter Reference – Recap: I have super exciting news for everyone! Due to the growing length of this story and the horrendously long covid-related break we took, I decided to write up a summary of this story. It is short and sweet (well, at least for me ;) and only really covers important plot-related events. It's should be a great tool for anyone who doesn't have the time it takes to do a full re-read of this beast! You can find it linked to this story in the series section on A03, or in my profile on ff-dot-net.

Reviews: O. M. Chuck, guys. So, while the delay in posting this story has been awful, I read every single review that comes in, and I read every one with great joy and appreciation. And I gotta say. Just, holy shit. Not only were all of your reviews humbling and inspiring and touching, I didn't realize over the course of a year just how many there were. I went back to the trailer to check something I wrote and OMG. The trailer alone has over a hundred and fifty reviews. HOLY CRAP. You guys are just so amazing. I know I say it a lot, but seriously, this story exists because of you. Thank you so, so much for sticking with me through the last crazy year and a half, and for being here today. I can't wait to share the

rest of this story with you.

Quick Side Note on that Note: A belated but very happy birthday to Forestpelt, who has stuck with me through the entirety of Covid as a friend, confidant, and endless encourager of this story. Thanks so much for your friendship, enthusiasm, and feedback!! Happy late birthday, friend.

Chapter Warnings: Dean's robbing a bank, Sam's so done with this insanity, Ronald is doing his best (which, admittedly, isn't great), and an evil shifter's being shifty.

Quality Warning: I don't feel this is my best work, by far, but I am still getting back into the groove of writing. I happen to think this chapter is a little short and could use a little more oomph in activity, but I also had to end it somewhere and struggled to do so . Hopefully you guys will give me a little grace period to get my writing legs back under me and get us back into the truly interesting stuff!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 75

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Roger 'Okie Dokie' Miller sat bolt upright at the unmistakable sound of a semi-automatic gun firing. Roger had never heard a semi-automatic gun firing, not in real life, but instinctually he knew. Which really didn't make sense, because there was so very little reason to jump right to gunfire. But that's definitely what had just happened.

The group he'd escorted right to the bank monitors, those nice fellows he hadn't thought twice about, the ones he'd been escorting back out of the bank innocently enough, were now robbing it.

Roger scrambled up, only making it to one knee as he pulled his pistol from his hip holster, leveling it at the man who'd opened fire in the bank. The same man who'd just shot the bank manager. Thomas. Oh god, this man had just shot Thomas.

"Drop it!" Roger yelled, but neither he nor his target had any time to choose their next action.

Before the shooter could spin fully around – already shouting that it was okay, this wasn't a robbery! – the taller of the other two men was upright, clocking Roger right in the temple. The security guard and his gun both slumped to the ground, out for the count.

Sam grabbed for the gun, tossing it far away from the man's unconscious body. All of which gave Dean time to clamber to his feet as well, marching over to Ronald with the kind of fury that had the bigger man stumbling several feet back, eyes wide. Dean ripped Betsy straight out of his hands.

"Are you kidding me right now!?"

Dean spun away from the wide-eyed, only-slightly-guilty, much-more-stunned-and-lost-and-maybe-a-little-upset eyes of Ronald Reznick. The god damn idiot didn't get to look like a kicked puppy, damnit. *Ronald* had just started the exact same damn timeline that ended with a bullet in his heart that Dean was doing everything – *everything* – he could to prevent. So no, Ronald didn't get to look sad and wounded here, damnit.

The man from the future had about three and a half seconds to survey the chaos around him – people screaming or cowering, several of them sprawled on the floor, some eyeing the front door, wondering if they should make a run for it. Most of the tellers were crouched behind their stations, watching him with terrified eyes. There was blood splattered on the lobby floor where the bullet had clipped the shifter, a trail of it leading back behind the teller stands, which, damnit, led to the back of the bank. Just like last time.

Dean closed his eyes, dread settling in his stomach like a friggin' ball of cement. He could not believe what he was about to do.

With Betsy aimed at the ceiling, Dean fired two quick automatic rounds. More screams echoed around him. Bits of dust and plaster rained down. Sammy shouted his name from behind and oh, yeah, he'd get the honor of explaining his absolute insanity to his brother in just a second. Yay him. Until then…

"This is a robbery, everybody down, nobody move!"

He was spun around by Sam's hand, curled right around his bicep in a damn near death grip. "Dean! What the hell?!"

Dean ignored their newly acquired *hostages*. The simpering, sobbing, fear coming off civilians who had every reason to be afraid, despite the fact that they weren't in any real danger. Instead, he focused on his brother, who looked very torn between freaking out and punching something. Probably Dean. It was usually Dean. And Sam, unlike the others in the bank, actually did have every reason to be afraid. The Winchesters were now in very real danger, of being shot or, worse, arrested.

"The shifter's still in the bank," Dean growled quietly, hoping his brother would understand. The look Sam gave him definitely said he needed a hell of a better reason to fake-rob a bank than that one. "Look, the cops are already on their way, Sammy-" There was no way one of the tellers hadn't hit the silent alarm, and definitely no way the people who had made it out the front doors hadn't found someone to call 9-1-1 by now. "-so either we run right now, or we stay here and do the job."

Sam's look – the one that labeled his brother as completely off his rocker – did not change. "Dean, we *absolutely* run. We found the shifter once, we'll find him again. This isn't worth getting *arrested* over!"

They weren't talking breaking and entering, grave desecration, credit card fraud, or any of the other small-time, non-violent offenses the Winchesters committed on a near daily basis. This was *bank robbery*. *Armed* bank robbery. With *hostages*.

Dean just shrugged, keeping half an eye on the scared people littering the lobby floor. They'd need to lock and secure the front doors and quickly if they were staying. Then get their hostages in a more contained, controllable location while they hunted down the shifter. "Sure, we'll find him again," Dean answered, keeping his volume down, "after he drops two or three more bodies."

It was a low blow. Because Sam was right; landing in federal prison for armed robbery was probably not worth saving one or two people. Not with their destinies and all the shit they had to do to stop it. But they were hunters. A zero tolerance for loss of innocent life was written right into the contract when you signed up. Usually didn't matter what it'd cost you in exchange.

"Damnit," Sam muttered, looking devastated by that realization. "Dean…this is *insane*."

"Hey," Dean tried for his most encouraging smile. "We got out of it last time, we can do it again."

The arched brow Sam aimed his way stung because yeah, alright, the kid must be damn sick of hearing that promise shortly before everything – and Dean meant everything – usually went to Hell in a handbasket.

If Time really was a sentient being, Dean couldn't wait to find her and *strangle* her.

"Ronald." At Dean's barked command, the larger man – standing empty-handed several feet away, still looking like someone had stolen his puppy – jumped about a foot off the floor. "Get the front doors."

The ex-security-turned-bank-robber blinked, then looked up towards the set of double doors and the darkening street just barely visible beyond the reflective glass. He patted himself down, like their might be more than a semi-automatic assault rifle hiding in his too-tight jumpsuit. "I don't have anything…"

Dean's glare could have melted steel. Because of course the man had figured out how to sneak in a *semi-automatic rifle* in his *jumpsuit*, but hadn't made room for anything actually useful. "Figure it out, Ronald!"

The man scrambled away, posthaste. Dean turned back to his brother, only feeling a little guilty for being so hard on Ronald. The guy had blown their cover, sent their shifter running (and he no doubt had a new skin by now, which meant another civilian dead, this time on their watch), and set them up perfectly to be arrested for *robbing a god damn bank*.

Again.

Again.

How did this shit keep happening?!

"We need to get these people up and get them into the vault," he said to Sam, handing Betsy off to his younger brother, who took her quite reluctantly. Dean, meanwhile, was keeping an eye on Ronald as he scurried off to grab a stanchion from the nearest teller line – causing a woman to scream as he got too close too quickly. He tried to calm her down, completely unsuccessfully, by telling her in the least calm and convincing voice ever that it was okay, they were FBI. Dean wanted to go over there and hit him with his own gun, only he'd already handed

Betsy off to Sam. So instead he put his head in his hand and prayed to a god he did not believe in for some level patience. Any patience at all would be great.

Luckily, having no idea what else to say to further calm the terrified hostages he was busy terrifying, Ron hurried back to the door, sliding the pole between the handles of the doors. It wouldn't last for long but, then again, the doors were made of friggin' glass. So nothing would. All the cops had to do to get in was break them.

"Why can't we just let them go, Dean?" Sam asked quietly, eying Betsy with unease and pointedly not looking at the room full of terrified people that *they'd* created. "It'll be easier to hunt for a shifter in an empty building anyway."

Sam knew that wouldn't actually be the case; letting everyone go meant it would only be too easy for the shifter to slip out with them. But in that moment, forced to confront the dozen scared faces glancing their way, that knowledge didn't make this feel any more right.

"We can't, Sammy," the older Winchester muttered, actually sounding contrite about it. He reluctantly met his brother's eyes. "Cops are gonna call the FBI, the FBI will call for SWAT. That's our ticket out of here. Without hostages, none of that happens. The cops just shoot their way in right off the bat."

And they'd all end up dead or in jail. Dean didn't need a Hollywood-certified degree in bank robberies to know that. Hostages made good shields, whether or not you cared if they got hurt. And Dean cared, which meant every one of these people, while slightly traumatized, would walk out of this bank physically unharmed by the end of the night. The Winchesters just needed them to function as shields to buy time to find the shifter first.

"I know it sucks, man," Dean muttered again, this time quirking a small, utterly mirthless smile. "But we'll get through it. And they'll be one less murderous monster in the world after we're done."

That was the Winchester way, was it not?

Sam did not look mollified in the slightest (after all, there might be one less monster, but two more wanted posters in its place) but eventually he sighed, resigned to this insane plan. Gripping Betsy with at least half-faked intention, he walked past his brother towards the largest group of huddled hostages. As Sam began herding people to

their feet, then towards the hallway that led to the vault, Ronald made his way back over to Dean, footsteps both excited and hesitant.

"What now?" he asked nervously, eyeing the crowd Sam was gathering like any one of 'em could be the mandroid. They technically could, but Dean's money was on the shifter having made for the back of the bank, most likely to hide and change skins in private. That's what had happened last time, and, as the man from the future well knew, time liked to stay the goddamn same.

"Now we hunt that piece of shit down before he kills again," Dean growled, mostly under his breath but by the way Ronald's eyes widened, it had been clear enough. "You, on the other hand, are gonna shut up and guard the hostages *you* took, you giant idiot."

The look of hurt that crossed the man's face was only matched by the look of confusion. Dean was understanding of the first and wanted to slap off the second. "But- I- you said-"

"No buts, Ronald," Dean snapped, grabbing the man by the jumpsuit and pulling him over to the downed security guard. Mr. Okie Dokie was still out and would likely have one hell of a shiner when he eventually came 'round. Dean bent over, scooping up the guard's discarded gun from several feet away and tucking it in the back of his jeans. Then he got Ronald to help him haul the man off the floor and across the lobby to the gathered crowd of terrified civilians. Sam was more or less escorting them single file towards the vault, having one of the tellers lead the way. Dean, Ronald, and their unconscious security buddy brought up the rear.

Once the same teller had opened the vault, her nicely manicured hands shaking the entire time, Dean called for them to hold up. He had them line up against the hallway wall leading to the vault so he could make his way over to his brother. Ronald stayed at the back, propping Mr. Okie Dokie up against the wall next to the last hostage. She eyed the unconscious security guard nervously while Ronald patted him down for any other weapons. He removed a can of pepper spray and a pair of handcuffs. Then awkwardly took a few steps away from the guard and the woman who was clearly terrified of him.

"It's okay-" he started to say before Dean barked at him to shut. Ronald scurried further away, at first headed for the brothers but freezing at a second bark to stay where he was and watch them. Right. That made sense. If all three of them were at the front of the line, that left their 'hostages' free to run back to the lobby. It left the mandroid free to

bolt.

Ronald stationed himself at the front end of the hallway, clasping and unclasping his hands nervously as he eyed any one of their potential murderous robots.

"Jesus Christ," Dean muttered as he joined Sam, who raised a single eyebrow that succinctly and clearly reminded him just whose fault all this was. "I know, I know, shut up. Here."

Dean crouched down, pulling a silver knife from an ankle holster. As he stood back up, offering the knife to his brother, Sam's forehead had smoothed out in that way that screamed, 'danger!'

"Dude!" the younger WInchester hissed, pushing the knife back towards him with a look of disbelief and a quick glance to the hostages. Most of them were keeping their eyes on the floor, but a few watched on with wide-eyed fear. Sam dropped his voice. "I thought we said no weapons."

Dean had the decency not to outright laugh, but his eyes shifted sardonically to Betsy, still in his brother's hands. "Yeah. Cuz that worked out so well for us. Besides, like I was really walking in here naked." He rolled his eyes, half at the idea of him going anywhere unarmed, half at his brother for flipping his predictably girly shit about this. "Look, just use it to test them."

Sam looked like he'd thrown a disc or maybe burst something. "We can't just cut into them, Dean!" he hissed, keeping his voice so low it was almost hard for Dean to hear him, less than a foot away.

"Oh come on, it's a scratch," Dean argued back, balking at how much of a pain in the ass *Samantha* was being about this. He knew the situation sucked, but it was the one they were stuck with so they just had to deal.

"It's also incredibly unhygienic, for starters," Sam argued right back, throwing out the arm that wasn't holding Betsy. As the nearest civilian jumped from the sudden movement, scooting closer to the person next to him, Sam lowered his hand with a guilt grimace. Dean could see from the way he slouched that he was trying to make himself less intimidating in stature alone (bit late for that). "I'm not slicing into these people for the same damn reason junkies don't share needles, Dean!"

Huh?

Oh.

Ooooh. Shit. Dean hadn't thought of that.

"Uh…" the man from the future grimaced. "Alright, well, touching their skin should be enough. If they're the shifter, they should react to the silver."

Sam didn't look any more appeased, but at least he stopped arguing. He still hadn't taken the knife, though.

Dean tried again to get them back on track. They were on somewhat of a time limit here, after all. "Once we're sure the shifter isn't in the crowd, we lock them in the vault and go hunting."

"The vault is a sealed room, Dean." At the confused look Sam got in return for that statement, the brains of the operation sighed and tried not to hate everything about his life in that moment. "There's no air, in or out, in there. They'll suffocate."

Oh. Right.

Dean grimaced. Damnit, why was robbing a bank and taking hostages so *complicated*?He did remember them mostly leaving the vault door open last time, with one of them guarding it at all times. This was probably why. Not that he remembered that conversation. "Okay, uh…test them anyway, we need to make sure this group is clean, and get them inside. Then you and Ronald stand guard with the door cracked, and I'll find the shifter."

The way Sam opened his mouth *immediately* let Dean know just what he thought of that plan. But he held up his hand, face as serious as he could muster.

"I'll move faster alone," he argued, which wasn't a lie. They didn't have time to teach Ronald how to hunt right now. Which, *yes,* Dean knew was his own damn fault and he'd own that….Later. "And it's not like we can leave him here, *alone*, to guard the hostages while you and I hunt this thing down."

Sam's jaw clenched, the vein in the corner of his cheek jumping. Dean offered a weak smile, but the younger Winchester was having none of it.

"How about I hunt the damn thing down and *you* guard the hostages *you* took with the idiot *you* brought along!" Sam hissed,

emphasizing each accusing word with a push of Betsy towards Dean's chest.

Fair point. Not that Dean would admit it.

"Because I know how this goes down," he countered. Future knowledge almost always won him this type of argument. And when that wasn't enough, there was always his charming personality to consider. "Besides, people like you more. They trust you and that puppy-dog innocence. They'll feel safer with you. You know I'm right."

He might be right, and Sam might even know it, but it sure didn't make the younger Winchester any less murderous about it.

"Fine," Sam breathed out, the word hardly an acquiescence. "But I swear to God, Dean, if Ronald does anything-"

"He won't," Dean reassured immediately. "I'll talk to him. He's just going to sit here and be a good little hostage guard, alright?"

The man from the future jiggled the knife in his hand, encouraging his brother to take it.

Sam closed his eyes briefly, clearly not believing a word of that promise, but took the strap attached to Betsy, threw it over his shoulder and slid her around to his back. He swiped the knife out of Dean's hand and turned to the first hostage, who eyed the blade nervously.

Dean left his brother to start awkwardly explaining the deal to the civilians – into the vault, but first I'm going to press this blade to your skin, no, I won't hurt you, I promise – and headed towards the back of the line where Ronald was waiting eagerly. Dean didn't have any more silver on him, and he was damn reluctant to give Ronald another gun, but there wasn't much choice. He needed Ronald as backup in case the shifter was in the line and decided to bolt before the silver gave him away. A gun wouldn't kill him, but it might slow him down enough to give Sam time to catch up.

"Jesus," Dean muttered to himself again, taking a deep breath of his own even as he pulled the gun from his waistband to hand over to their way-too-happy-about-this tagalong. Jesus, this had all gone to hell already and the night was only getting started.

-o-o-o-

The bank manager's office was very much as Dean remembered it. Empty but for a disgusting pile of shed skin and goo in the middle of the room. The blood trail that lead from the lobby to this office was new and quite convenient, but it ended at the pile of nasty. The shifter had switched skins and healed, as shifters were wont to do.

"Damnit," Dean muttered from behind the desk, poking at the pile of gooey leftovers with a pen he'd stolen off the desk. He hadn't expected anything more than this exact scene, but it was frustrating all the same.

The man from the future stood with a huff and a groan, looking around the office. Last time, the shifter had stashed the new body….somewhere. Dean couldn't remember where, but it didn't really matter. Knowing what the new skin looked like hadn't helped them much last go around and Dean didn't want to waste precious time searching for wherever he – or it – had stashed the body.

What he needed was a weapon that would actually work against the creature. Leaving Sam with the only silver knife had been risky, but they needed to eliminate the pool of hostages so they could safely release them later without worrying about the shifter walking right out of the bank with them. Then he needed eyes in the sky.

Dean started ransacking the manager's desk, searching for anything silver and hoping the guy hadn't been a cheap bastard. The action along with that thought cause his vision to nearly spin from the déjà vu. That was usually a good sign, so he kept going. It took a couple drawers and a search of the desktop before he found it; a letter opener that came with such a dizzying amount of *'been there, done that'* that Dean knew it was silver-coated before he even inspected it.

He pocketed the knife, grabbed the light switch on his way out, and headed for the security room Mr. Okie Dokie had first lead them to before this hellish night began. He had a shifter to find, and the cameras were his best and quickest bet.

Dean was well on his way to the security booth, leaving behind the manager's office, when the phone inside started ringing.

-o-o-o-

Sam left Ronald to guard their certified-human hostages while he went in search of water and a first aid kit. One of the bank tellers had told him where to find the supplies; a break room for the first and the last of the teller's stations for the second. He'd easily found the

unopened case of water in the break room, stacked next to a mini fridge. The first aid kit to treat the security guard's minor injuries took a little more searching and Sam was just standing up from retrieving it when he heard the distant ringing of a phone. The hunter straightening from behind the teller's stand, eyes wide.

The phone rang three times before abruptly cutting off. Sam waited a beat in the silence of the lobby, wondering if whoever had been calling hung up, or if maybe Dean had decided to answer it.

Another beat passed before Sam realized with a jolt that it was probably the cops calling to negotiate. Immediately, the well-trained hunter dropped back down, crouching behind the teller stand. The upper windows of the lobby would give any sniper a pretty clear view of the lobby, and with it, Sam. There were no flashing lights, no obvious cop cars or uniformed officers beyond the glass of the front doors, but it was also hard to see from his obscured angle and the growing dark outside. What glass he could spot from his position mostly reflected the lights of the lobby, not giving much away of the outside world.

"Shit," Sam hissed, realizing if it was the cops, they hadn't hung up. Someone had answered the phone. Realization sunk like a led ball in his stomach – Dean wasn't his only 'partner' at the moment – and Sam scrambled back towards the hallway, staying as low as possible.

In his head, he was praying over and over again that Dean had been the one to pick up that phone. Because, if not, they were so damn screwed. If prison life didn't beat him to it, Sam was going to *murder* his brother.

-o-o-o-

"No, no, we're not bank robbers! You've got it all wrong. We're the FBI!"

Ronald's voice was easily audible halfway down the hallway and Sam rearranged his priorities. He was going to murder Ronald long, long before he murdered his brother. The dumbass was standing at the start of the hallway leading to the vault, where a phone was attached to the wall next to a time-punch clock – likely out of use for years now – and a plaque with a photo of the employee of the month. Ronald had the security guard's gun in one hand, phone pressed to his ear with the other, running his mouth *loudly* and paying about as much attention to the open vault door as he had to anything else remotely important

this entire day.

"Demands?" Ronald's eyes were wide as he shifted his weight, turning his back even more so to their hostages and catching sight of Sam booking it his way. "We don't have any demands-"

Sam grabbed the phone out of Ronald's hand and slammed it back onto the receiver, the case of water and first aid kit tightly gripped in one hand. Big, round, stupidly vulnerable brown eyes stared at him, and Sam clenched his free hand, resisting the urge to break the phone or, even better, Ronald's face.

"Are you insane?" he yelled instead, lowering his voice only when the hushed, panicked whispers of the hostages inside the vault reminded him they weren't alone. One of the male bank employees ducked away from the cracked door as soon as Sam glanced their way, having clearly been watching them. They needed to be so much more careful than they were being, darn it.

"Wh-what's the problem?" Ronald asked, oblivious as always. His shoulders were almost up around his ears, a tinge of red on his cheeks from both embarrassment and defensiveness.

"The problem, you idiot, is that we're not really FBI!" Sam hissed, but kept his tone as low as his broiling anger would allow. He did not understand how this moron could be so damn blind to what was really going on here.

"You're…you're not?"

By the way Ronald's eyes doubled in size, rounding out like giant, bulging saucers, he really didn't have a clue as to the mess he was in. Sam rubbed at his forehead hard enough to redden skin – anything to keep him from lashing out any more than he already had – then grabbed Ronald by the sleeve of his jumpsuit. Angrily, he led them around the corner, out of sight of the hostages. This was not the sort of thing innocent civilians needed to see or hear.

"Of course not," he hissed back, setting down the water and first aid kit. "Come on, Ronald! We dress up as service technicians and hunt *monsters*. Of course we're not with the fucking U.S. government!"

The way Ronald's free hand slowly curled into a fist, the other starting to shake and the handgun with it, was the least of recent events to inform Sam that things were quickly getting out of control. He owed his brother the biggest damn *'I told you so*' in the history of the phrase.

-o-o-o-

Dean's eyes were starting to hurt staring at the multiple feeds of low-quality CCTV footage. That could probably be fixed if he blinked more, but the hunter didn't want to risk it. They didn't have a lot of time before the cops would cut the power – a step Dean remembered clearly from their last go around – and the shifter wasn't going to be just up and wandering around, turning those pretty glowing eyes towards every camera in the joint. By now, he obviously knew there were hunters in the bank with him, which meant he'd by lying low, trying to figure a way out.

The front doors were currently locked, and Ronald had rigged up enough of a contraption to keep 'em that way even if the shifter had a set of keys. Removing that setup would make noise, enough to hear from the front half of the building. Plus, Dean was keeping an eye on the camera feed for the lobby and front door, just in case the shifter made a run for it. There was a back door, of course – all buildings had to have at least two viable exits to meet fire and safety codes – but the bank's was strictly a fire door; alarmed to go off if opened. They hadn't heard any alarms, so Dean knew the guy was still in the bank. And his first move, even before searching the manager's office, had been to barricade the shit out of that door with every piece of office furniture he could find in the nearby rooms. So the shifter wasn't getting out that way (and, added bonus, the cops weren't coming in. At least not easily).

"There!" Dean exclaimed aloud, despite being alone, as he finally spotted someone on the cameras. It could just be a straggler from the lobby who'd managed to stay hidden and avoid being led into the vault, but Dean doubted it.

Still, he had to be sure. Between the quality of the image – which was crappy – and the angle on the crouched, partially obscured man, Dean couldn't get a good read on the guy's face. He could discern race (dark-ish skin, probably Black but the camera sucked balls so Dean wouldn't go strictly by that alone), clothes (pressed dress-shirt and tie) and either short-cropped hair or buzzed. Maybe even shaved? The grainy quality of the video wasn't helping much there.

The guy who originally owned that skin was probably an employee of the bank, given the half monkey suit. He'd likely been in the back when this shitshow got started, bumping into the fake bank manager as he'd come running back to his office.

Dean had little doubt this was their guy, but stayed glued to the screen, hoping the figure – crouched behind a desk in the one and only conference room the bank had – would turn towards the camera and confirm it.

It took another thirty seconds, time Dean wasn't sure he had, before the man finally turned.

"Got you," Dean growled, jabbing a finger into the monitor, right over the creature's glowing eyes.

The hunter grabbed the silver letter opener off the counter and bolted for the door. The minute he hit the hallway, the building went pitch black.

"Son of a bitch!" he muttered, sparing the lights overhead a second's glance before he broke into a run for the conference room. The emergency spotlights flickered on with the whir of a far off generator, but it didn't matter. Dean had known the power would get cut eventually, but he'd hoped it would be *after* he got to the shifter. This guy would be jumpy as hell, knowing he was being hunted, and even the smallest change in environment was likely to trigger action.

It certainly would have triggered Dean, if he'd been the one hiding away with a couple guys out to kill him. Staying in one place was the best way to get dead. And now, with the power out and the cameras down, they'd lost their best and fastest way to find the guy if he'd fled to another part of the building. If he lost the shifter now, they'd have to clear the bank on foot, one room at a time. Dean doubled his pace to the conference room.

Sure enough, by the time he burst through the door, knife at the ready, the room was empty.

"Son of a bitch!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Ronald does not like Sam and has himself a right little hissy fit, Dean's calling in the FBI, and Sam wants to know when he bought a ticket for the bus to Crazy Town, and when that bus took a sharp left turn right off Insanity Cliff.

Updating Schedule: I did not get as many chapters written pre-posting as I had hoped, but I also realized that I needed to stop focusing so solely on that. I missed you all. I missed hearing from

you, hearing your ideas and hopes and excitement. That is going to get me writing routinely more isolation ever could.

So while I am going to aim for a two-week posting schedule for now, my goal is to get it back to weekly once I get into a rhythm. I can't promise I'll succeed or that there won't be any more delays or breaks. The world, my life, and my schedule are all still fairly unpredictable and also not back to normal. But I've got high hopes and I want to get you all what I can when I can!

Reviews: I would love love love love LOVE to hear from you! It doesn't even have to be about this story – how have you been? Is everyone fairing okay? I hope you're staying as healthy and sane as possible in trying times. Let me know how you've been. I can't wait to talk with you all again, and thank you so much for waiting so long and tuning back in!

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 110: Season 2: Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Gah, I can't think of much to say tonight. I am super tired and feeling the effects of my booster shot (good god, my neck muscles are tight and ACHEY. Grrrr) I'm actually going to go to bed right after posting this (at...like...an incredibly reasonable hour? Who AM I?) I hope you all are having a wonderful start to the holiday season and get some rest and relaxation in the coming week!

Chapter Warnings: Ronald's yelling, Dean's 'negotiating', Victor's getting late night phone calls, and Mr. Okie Dokie is having a panic attack. Just another Tuesday at Milwaukee International.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 76

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"I don't *like* you! You're a liar!"

Those were the first words – *yelled*, at full volume, with an almost childish level of resentment – Dean heard as he jogged back to the vault, as well his first clue that all was not good and right. Well, the fact they were in a powered-down bank, cops piling up outside to come in here, armed and ready to kill, was his first clue. This was the second, though.

Dean rounded the last dimly lit corner to find Sam and Ronald in each other's faces, both about seconds away from taking this confrontation to the next level. The older Winchester hurried towards them before they could get to exchanging blows.

"Whoa, whoa! Hey!" Dean pushed his brother and Ronald away from each other forcefully. Sam went a lot more easily, being about half the size of Ronald, despite towering over him height-wise. It helped that the younger Winchester let himself be pushed, backing off on his own accord as he turned away from the man that was damn near close to

making him homicidal. With Sam safely a few feet away, Dean turned to Ronald, who was red-faced and huffing angrily. "What the hell is going on?"

"You lied!" Ronald accused, glancing briefly at Dean before refocusing his attention on Sam. "You're not FBI!"

Oh for fuck's sake. Dean wanted to roll his eyes, but instead closed them and bit his tongue. As he started counting to ten (uselessly, he might add), the older Winchester grabbed the other two men by their forearms and forcefully dragged them further away from the vault. They were already halfway to the entrance of the hallway, but Dean didn't want to risk any of the civilians hearing them. Last thing they needed was panicked hostages.

He didn't quite make it to a ten count, but Dean figured five was about all they had time for anyway. When he brought them all to a stop them further away from the vault, he fixed Ronald with a look he usually saved for the things they hunted. It shut the other man right up.

"Yes, we lied. People don't usually let you into their houses, or banks, or *security systems*, when you tell them you hunt monsters, Ronald. Of course we lied." As Ronald's grumpy face came back, cheeks reddening again, Dean gave another shove against his chest with his open palm, still up and holding the man back from Sam. The *armed* man, Dean couldn't forget, eyes dropping briefly to the security guard's gun gripped way-too-tightly in Ronald's shaking fist.

"Look," he tried again, tapping Ronald's chest lighter this time to get the man's eyes back on him. "Yeah, we're not FBI and we probably could have told you that much-"

"Probably?!"

"*But*-" Dean emphasized sharply, keeping the man's protests to just that one word, "there is still a monster in this bank, Ronald. It's killed someone and taken their skin, and it's gonna do it again if we don't stop it."

Those big brown eyes, still angry, softened around the edges just enough that Dean could see he'd gotten through. He shifted from holding Ronald back to gesturing with an open palm to the man in front of him. Ronald's brow furled as he glanced down at that hand, then realized what Dean was asking for. With an even heavier frown, he handed over the pistol.

In return, Dean offered him the letter opener from his other hand. Ronald took it hesitantly, clearly confused but not objecting.

"We're going to hunt it down," Dean confirmed, hoping the man would accept the peace offering for what it was, and not see Dean's true motive: getting him far away from Sam. Sam, who wasn't even looking at them, jaw still clenched tight and knuckles white around Betsy.

Yeah, that was going to be an ugly conversation Dean knew he couldn't avoid. But one damn crisis at a time.

Almost on cue, the phone just around the corner started ringing and Dean realized immediately what had started all this. Jesus. Fucking. Christ. He pointed at Ronald with an accusing finger.

"No more answering phones," he ordered, then turned to Sam, who just shook his head, barely looking at his older brother. He was still too angry to speak. Dean knew that anger wasn't just aimed at Ronald this time (and god, who knew what the man probably said to the police. Dean could imagine it was something along of the lines of 'we're the good guys!' and could only pray it stopped there, before he got into mandroid territory. Dean resisted the frustrated sigh and counted to three this time). Sam had every right to be pissed; his kid brother hadn't been much of a fan of the way things went down in the original timeline, when Dean hadn't known this was going to happen and they'd ended up buried up to their eyeballs in shit before they could get out of it. This time Dean had walked them right into the shithole, holding the shovel with pride like he'd dug it himself, and on purpose to boot.

Yeah, Sam had every right to be pissed.

The phone was still ringing, so Dean rounded the corner, eyes briefly alighting on the still open vault door and the hostages inside, backlit by a single emergency light. There was one guy - expression dark and wary – watching them pretty boldly from the cracked door, even as the others were trying to call him back. They were speaking in hushed voices and, catching Dean's eye, the man finally relented, moving away from the door.

Dean kept his gaze on the vault for another second, eyes narrowed. He didn't remember the hostages giving them trouble last time, but he was also pretty sure they were a day or two off the original timeline. Which meant they were probably dealing with different hostages. Great, like they needed any additional problems. The hunter turned

his focus to the phone and picked it up, slamming it against his ear with punishing force.

"Get me Victor Henriksen from the FBI," he demanded harshly, cutting off the negotiator on the other end before he could get much more than a word out. "My name is Dean Winchester, I'm wanted by the FBI and I'm not talking to anyone but Henriksen. So you better get him here fast."

With that, Dean hung the phone back up.

Sam, having rounded the corner probably right around the bit where Dean just gave them his name, looked seconds away from exploding. His brown eyes were blown wide and all that anger he'd been harboring – the frustration of being walked hand-in-hand into a bank robbery with a brother who wasn't listening to how insane all of it was – was now hyper focused on said brother standing in front of him having just invited the FBI to the party.

"Have you lost your mind?" he yelled, no longer caring if the hostages heard them. Dean glanced briefly around the corner at the vault door, eyebrows raised, but the civilians had moved away from the partial opening. There was nothing to see but the wall of poorly lit safety deposit boxes. He turned back to his brother as Sam grabbed his arm, fingers digging in. He was clearly expecting an answer and wouldn't be walking away without one this time.

"We need the FBI to show up, Sam. They're our exit strategy. It was always going to happen, might as well speed it up."

"Might as well-" Sam let out a noise Dean had only heard a handful of times. It usually preceded him getting clocked in the jaw. While he'd love to avoid that this time around, his explanation had done nothing to calm the younger Winchester down. If anything, it seemed to irritate him more. "Yeah, you said that, but I'm not seeing an exit strategy here, Dean. Everywhere I look, the walls are just getting closer."

Which was…more than fair from Sam's point of view. Dean winced, remembering his brother sitting in the Impala some months back, telling him to back off because he wasn't like Dean. Sam didn't get to know what happened next and be reassured by it (not that Dean was finding his future knowledge all that reassuring these days). To him, this situation was flat out crazy-pants, completely avoidable, and now utterly screwed up with no happy ending in sight.

To be honest, Dean wasn't entirely sure he was seeing the situation any differently. He was just damn good at bluffing. Fake it till you make it, and all that.

"I get it," he said, dropping his voice to a low murmur. He tried to lower his own irritation and frustration levels – with the situation and with his brother – to at least aim for something sincere and reassuring. Well, maybe just the first. "I get it, Sam. I fucked up, alright? This isn't going the way we wanted-"

"Understatement!" Sam bit out, and Dean got a flash of déjà vu that he wanted to physically wave away like a fly in his face. He managed to resist the urge, gritting his teeth instead and reminding himself that Sam had every reason to be furious and he had to be the one to stay calm here.

"I *know,* okay? I tried avoiding this and walked right into it instead. But…we gotta deal with it now. You can be pissed at me later."

His brother's jaw rotated angrily, jutting out to the side before grinding down and causing a vein to pop along his temple. He didn't say anything – Dean sorta suspected he was still too angry to really argue - but he nodded sharply in the silence that followed. Dean let out an equally quiet sigh of relief. He needed Sam with him on this one, even if it was a shitshow and his brother had every right to hate it. To hate him. It didn't change the facts, though.

"Alright. When the FBI shows up, Henriksen's not gonna waste time. He'll send S.W.A.T in the moment he gets here." Dean rubbed at his jaw, happy it wasn't sporting a new fist-shaped bruise. He glanced back towards the vault door. The civilians seemed to be behaving, tucked away from view, and Ronald was leaning grumpily against the wall halfway between the Winchesters and their hostages. "Last time we knocked two of them out and stole their gear. Walked out of here in the mayhem and nobody stopped us. This time we'll just have to take down three."

The sigh that left Sam's mouth, followed by the way he raised a hand to rub at his forehead and pinch the bridge of his nose like he was warding off an incoming headache, rang a few warning bells.

"Dean," Sam started, and it was clear from his tightly controlled voice how hard he was reining in his frustration, "last time I checked, S.W.A.T. gear doesn't come in extra-large."

As one, the brothers turned to Ronald, who noticed their attention

after a beat and frowned deeply at the two of them. He looked away, his petulant child act still in full swing.

"Son of a bitch." Dean looked back at Sam, his own frustration mounting, mostly at himself (though he'd already admitted his fuck up once, he really wasn't ready to do it again). He wracked his brain for a back-up idea that still had all three of them getting out of this alive. "Okay…. Okay. Same plan, but we'll escort Ronald out as a hostage – or a prisoner. Get him into a cop car, and, uh…steal the car, I guess. You two can get the hell out of dodge and I'll double back for Baby."

His brother just stared at him, jaw still clenched, forehead scarily smooth. There was so much wrong with that plan – with all of this – that Sam didn't even know where to start. Not like Dean would listen if he did.

"It'll work," his brother affirmed. Dean was nodding his head, apparently convincing himself about as much as he was convincing Sam. "We'll make it work."

"Dean-"

Whatever the younger Winchester had to say about plan B (er…C?) Dean never got to hear it. The increased voices of their hostages – rising in pitch and concern – drew both Winchesters' attention to the vault door, where a woman was very hesitantly poking her head out.

"H-Hello? Don't shoot! We, um, we need help! Please!"

Ronald was already pushing off the wall, grumpiness forgotten now that there was something to do – someone to help – and Dean gave Sam one last look. He tucked the security guard's gun into the waistline of his pants and took off after Ronald, catching up to him just as he got to the door. He didn't think the hostages would try to stage some sort of revolt, but at this point he wasn't taking any possibility off the table. Time didn't like them enough to let take anything for granted.

He grabbed Ronald by the arm, holding him back before the man could enter the vault. "What's going on?"

"The security guard," the woman – a customer of the bank based on the way she was dressed in jeans and a loose, floral print blouse – was switching between looking at the two of them and then over her shoulder at the other hostages. "He woke up and he's- I don't know, he's having some kind of fit. I think he might be asthmatic and

panicking."

"Okay," Dean said, thinking this sounded a hell of a lot like a ruse, but also vaguely remembering escorting someone out of the bank last time for a similar reason. Could have been the security guard. All he remembered was the shock – and fear – of realizing how many cops and reporters were out on the street, waiting for them, and how screwed they'd really been.

Dean sighed internally. You know what would have been real handy in a not-robbery in a bank full of civilians? A fucking Jedi. Fate had chosen a shit time to mute one of their biggest assets.

(Not that they knew if Andy's previous power would have even worked on a Shifter. Hadn't worked on demons, after all).

Dean pushed that mostly useless thought to the side – he was allowed to be cranky and complain, damnit – and tapped Ronald on the shoulder, signaling him to move out of the way and stay outside the vault. Luckily, the man seemed to understand and didn't fight him on it, though his answering frown was still plenty childish. Dean followed the scared woman into the vault.

The security guard was actually in some pretty clear distress. He was taking giant, gulping breaths but they didn't seem to be helping, if his reddening face was any indication. His eyes were blown wide in panic and his grip on the surrounding crowd trying to help him suggested whatever was happening to him was getting worse.

"Alright, everybody move," Dean commanded, pulling his no-nonsense voice usually reserved for FBI roles. It worked almost too well; the group scattered, leaving the poor guard even more terrified. That sucked. He'd liked the security guard. He said things like, *'okie-dokie'*, and didn't deserve to be part of this hell for just doing his job.

"Help me get him up," Dean ordered the nearest civilian – an African-American guy he barely even looked at as he knelt down beside the guard. The man was clearly an employee with that light blue dress shirt and nice tie, but all Dean cared about was that he helped. The civilian grabbed the other side of the guard, helping him to his feet and then walking with Dean out of the vault.

"What's going on?" Sam asked, having come closer to the vault door. Ronald was waiting anxiously beside him, the two apparently in a tentative truce now that they had an all new problem.

"He's having a panic attack. We gotta get him out of here," Dean answered, handing the guard off to Sam. He turned back to the man who'd helped, only now realizing it was the same one who had been staring him down from the vault door. The same one that got Dean wondering if they were going to have to pursue a stricter containment of their 'hostages.'

At least he knew for sure the guy was human. Still, a human could be plenty dangerous. The man was regarding him warily, glancing between the gun at Dean's waist and the hunter himself. Dean squared his shoulders to the man, wary for all his own reasons. "Thanks for your help, man. Why don't you, uh, head back into the vault."

"I could help you carry him out," the guy said in response, those dark eyes never leaving Dean's and definitely keeping him on edge. The hunter moved his hand to the gun tucked securely at his waist, a reminder of who was in charge here.

"Nah, man, we're good. Now head back in."

There was a beat of silence where Dean wondered if they were about to have a fight on their hands. The dude was built: broad-chest, well-muscled physique, and a shaved head that all screamed ex-military. Dean was started to think they were about to have a problem.

"Michael."

One of the other hostages – a woman – was hovering just beyond the open vault door, eyeing the exchange warily. Given the pencil skirt and matching blazer, she was probably another employee. Likely a coworker, now staring in open concern at Michael, who was about to get himself killed.

(An exaggeration, at least somewhat. Dean wouldn't kill him, but he would incapacitate him in a heartbeat.)

Sam was watching the exchange warily as well, grip tight on the security guard's wrist and waist. He was prepared to drop the man if a fight broke out, but neither Winchester wanted that. After another tense beat, 'Michael' finally yielded to his coworker's concern. He gave a slow nod, raising his hands to indicate they weren't going to have a problem. Then he backed into the vault one step at a time and, at a nod from Dean, Ronald closed the door.

They'd have to open it soon enough to give their hostages a refresh on oxygen, but that could wait until they got the guard outside.

Speaking of which…. The gasping breaths of a person clearly in need of medical attention drew Dean's focus away from the vault. Right, Mr. Okie Dokie. He ducked under the man's free arm, wrapping it over his shoulder and balancing the ailing guard out between him and Sam. He told Ronald to watch the door but keep it closed; they'd be back in a minute.

"Wh-what if that's the mandroid?" Ronald whispered in anything but an actually quiet voice even as the brothers hefted the guard between them.

"It's not," Dean answered confidently, knowing by the way Sam was gritting his teeth that his brother wouldn't be answering any more questions from their tag-along. Not without some serious yelling involved. "They react to silver, and Sam tested all of 'em as they went into the vault. And stop calling it a mandroid."

Ronald's mouth formed an 'oh' like he understood far better than he possibly could, before it took on a frown. Not like they'd told him what else to call it, which he pointed out under his breath. His eyes dropped to the letter opener Dean had handed him, coated in silver. New understanding lit his eyes, but Dean didn't stick around to wait for more questions. The guard needed help and Dean wasn't letting murder, even third degree, get piled on top of armed robbery for his FBI rap sheet.

As they reached the end of the hallway and the phone on the wall, Dean halted them for a second to grab it off the receiver. He'd only ever robbed a bank once, but he was pretty sure he wouldn't have to dial – the cops should be listening. At least, that's totally how it worked in the movies.

"We've got a civilian who needs medical attention. I'm coming out with him. Don't shoot or my partner retaliates against the other hostages."

Sam shot him a sharp look over Mr. Okie Dokie's shoulder, but Dean ignored it. It wasn't like the younger Winchester would *actually* hurt anyone (or that Dean would ever ask him to for real), but Dean didn't want a sniper getting itchy trigger fingers while his head was in their scope, either. Maybe he didn't remember anyone taking pot shots the last time he'd escorted someone out of the bank…but he hadn't remembered Gordon Walker capping him either. Turns out that coming from the future didn't stop you from getting shot in the head.

"Relax, Sam," Dean bit out as they resumed their staggered walk for the front entrance. His brother was still leveling him with a glower that approached *Ultimate Bitchface*. "No one's going to get hurt."

"Yeah, Dean? Can you really promise that?" Sam asked as they reached the front doors and he took most of the wheezing guard's weight so Dean could undo the station barricade that Ronald had hastily setup. "To any of us that at this point?"

Dean growled as he dropped the gold pole and rope. He grabbed the security guard off his brother and pushed open the bank door with hostage in hand, stanchly ignoring his brother and his too-close-to-home point.

-o-o-o-

Victor Henriksen hadn't been asleep twenty minutes when his cell started ringing, and he immediately knew something had happened. Field agents might be on call 24/7, but most days Victor worked a desk. It was only in the past month that his case had gotten enough traction to warrant late night phone calls.

"What is it?" he growled into the receiver. He was a workaholic well enough on his own without getting called in in the middle of the night. This was the first night he'd actually taken off – purposefully leaving the Winchester files at the office – so he could get to bed at a decent hour for once.

"The Winchesters were identified robbing Milwaukee International Bank in Wisconsin twenty minutes ago." Deputy Director Steven Groves had an annoying voice any old day; it was light, exasperating, and pompous as all get out. The effect was multiplied several times over when it was after work hours.

Victor sat up in bed, surprise temporarily distracting him from how much he disliked the man he was obligated to report to. Arrogant prick. "They robbed a bank?"

That wasn't in the Winchester's standard repertoire at all. Far from it, actually. They usually stuck to crimes they could manufacture and then play the hero role in. Armed robbery didn't exactly fit that bill.

"Yup," his boss confirmed, dragging the word out in a way that rubbed Victor all the wrong ways, but he didn't let it affect his professionalism. He was too good an agent for that, and eventually he'd have Groves' job anyway. "Still at it, currently, holed up inside

with nine or so hostages. They asked for you by name."

That stopped Victor's train of thought so abruptly it almost broke his brain for a second. He switched his cell to the other hand and threw the covers off. "They *what*?"

"Dean Winchester requested you by name. Said he'd talk to you and only you."

Victor just blinked, taking a moment to process the thrown-for-a-loop sensation currently buzzing under his skin. He wasn't even aware the Winchesters knew he was after them – other than the chance encounter at Sturgis Hospital – let alone his name.

What the hell was going on?

"I'll be at the office in twenty," he reported instead, steadfast as he started throwing clothes on.

"Make it the airstrip. I've already got a jet waiting for you," Groves responded, and for once Victor appreciated his boss's micromanaging personality.

"Yes sir," was all he said – and honestly, his boss was lucky he got that much – before he tossed his phone onto the mattress and grabbed his go bag from below the bed. Apparently he was heading to Wisconsin.

-o-o-o-

Sam and Dean were just making it back to the vault, rounding the corner that led to it, when the phone rang once more. Dean wasn't all that surprised. They'd gotten Mr. Okie Dokie off to the medics – the hunter glaring at the two SWAT officer's who'd met him up the stairs and taken the guard off his hands (both *heavily* armed and a reminder of the full forced they'd be facing very shortly) – in about as big a media storm as the last time. Between the couple dozen cops, at least one helicopter, and a half dozen news outlets, the city street had been downright crowded. Just like last time.

Dean certainly hadn't forgotten (or missed) the overwhelming dread that sunk his stomach like a lead weight. He'd take déjà vu any day over déjà vu *and* a cement cannonball in his gut.

"That you, Victor?" Dean asked as he picked up the phone on the third ring, ignoring the tense look Sam shot him for the call out. His brother's looks had been growing increasingly more of the *do-I-even-*

know-you variety over the course of the night, and each one left Dean with a worst taste in his mouth.

There was the distant sound of propellers in the background for a second before the noise dimmed almost to the point of Dean not being able to hear it. He recognized the kind of static that came with sound-canceling headphones and the faint hum of an engine warming up. He might not be familiar (or comfortable) with planes, but it turned out he knew when someone was calling from one.

"That's Agent Henriksen to you, Dean."

Despite the situation, the older Winchester couldn't help his caustic grin. Victor Henriksen had been a pain in his ass – and definitely not good for his health – for more than a year last go around. But once the man had seen proof of the very real monsters that went bump in the night and taken that stick out of his ass…well, Dean could admit he'd found the guy not half bad. Almost tolerable, actually. In another lifetime, Henriksen would have made a damn fine hunter. Maybe even a halfway decent friend.

If they were lucky (and also didn't get dead in a bank in Milwaukee tonight), maybe this time he could bring the guy around sooner and avoid the whole Lilith fiasco entirely. Henriksen was a class A dick… but he wasn't a bad guy. And no one deserved a fate dished out by Lilith.

"Well, I'd say that's *Mr.* Winchester to you, but I think we both know that's not how I roll."

"Hardly," Victor snorted. And if they'd been friends, Dean would have heard the humor in it. But they weren't friends. ThisHenriksen still thought they were murderous sons of bitches, and any humor there wasn't meant for Dean. The older Winchester bit back a sigh. Sometimes being from the future sucked. It was kind of easier when he'd just hated the guy and had every right to do so. "I'm surprised you knew my name at all, if I'm being honest."

"What," Dean began with that same cocky grin, leaning against the wall with phone pressed to his ear. Like it was just another bank-robbing-chat-it-up-with-a-Fed Tuesday. Sam was giving him that look again (not like he'd ever stopped). "You didn't think I'd look you up after the hospital in Sturgis?"

There was a chuckle down the line that was anything but amused. "Oh, I know all about you too, Dean. I know about the Houdini act

you pulled in Baltimore. I know about the desecrations and the thefts. I know about your dad. Ex-marine, raised his kids on the road-"

"Yeah, yeah, you know my whole life style starting with a crappy childhood." Dean shifted against the wall, glancing over his shoulder at the vault door. Sam, who'd decided he'd be of more use standing guard by the vault (or, more likely, that putting as much distance between him and Dean as possible would save Dean a bruised jaw and Sam some busted knuckles), was playing almost civil with Ronald. Meaning they were mostly ignoring each other; the larger man's attention was on the vault and Sam's was locked on Dean. The older Winchester turned back to the phone. "Good for you. You here yet?"

He could almost picture the look on Victor's face. Probably pulling the phone away from his ear to give it a double check. Or, Dean supposed, if he had a headset on then that probably wasn't what Victor was actually doing. But the surprised beat of silence on the other end was telling all the same.

"No," the agent hedged, and Dean could tell he wasn't a hundred percent certain it was the correct answer to give. He could count on one hand (using just one finger) the number of times he'd seen or heard the agent unsettled, and he was pretty sure he'd just broken a past record. Dean might not know him all that well, but he gathered Victor Henriksen wasn't the type to be comfortable with uncertainty. "I'm on my way. It's pretty late in DC right now. Not a lot of courtesy pulling an after-hours bank robbery."

Dean shrugged – not liked he'd *planned* this to be convenient for anyone, himself included – before he remembered Victor couldn't see him, but by then the Agent was back to talking.

"And what's with that anyway, huh, Dean? Robbing banks isn't really your style."

The hunter wondered if that was standard FBI negotiating tactic: try to get the psychopath comfortable and talking. Well, it wasn't going to work on Dean. Two could play the game of pointlessly beating around the bush with nothing but a sarcasm stick.

"We're branching out," he responded as neutrally as possible, giving as little information as possible.

"We?"

Dean winced. Not little enough, apparently. Alright, maybe there was

some merit in that whole 'pleading the fifth' option.

"So Sam's with you then?" Henriksen sounded all too smug. Or maybe Dean was just imagining it. "The Bonnie to your Clyde?"

The older Winchester glanced over his shoulder at his brother. The silence hanging between him and the FBI agent on the other end was all levels of tense and unfortunate. Dean considered lying for a moment, but scrapped the idea pretty quickly. He'd already screwed the pooch there. With the way Sam was glaring at him from the end of the hall, holding Betsy and looking for the world like this, right here, was probably the end of it, he knew it too.

Well shit.

"Yeah, he's here," Dean responded, turning back to the phone if only to avoid seeing his brother's reaction. The kid was probably too far down the hall to properly hear his side of the phone call, but Sam was smart. He likely already knew what was being discussed. Or, at the very least, knew that it wasn't good (not that much in this situation could be).

"And Andy Gallagher?"

Dean physically recoiled from the phone in surprise, realizing far too late that it wasn't surprisingly at all for Henriksen to know the kid's name. Andy was a wanted murder suspect, and last anyone had seen of him he'd been with the Winchesters at the Sturgis Hospital. The feds had photos of him from that very hospital, and running facial recognition was kind of a thing for the FBI. Like, what they did.

Henriksen didn't know Andy was out. Violently so.

Dean swallowed.

"I know you've got a third man in there," Henriksen continued in lieu of the silence. "Eye witness reports don't exactly match Mr. Gallagher, but-"

"Andy's not here," Dean bit out, probably a bit too defensively. So what, sue him. He was under some stress here, damnit (whether he'd admit it to himself or not), and the kid was a sensitive topic. "There is no third person, it's just me and Sam."

There was a low tsk-tsking in the background as Victor clucked his tongue. "Dean, there's no point in lying to me. I told you, I did my

homework. It's my job to know all about you, and I know you've got a three man team in the bank."

Dean looked over his shoulder again, this time eyeing Ronald. The man caught sight of the sudden attention and straightened, eyebrows climbing towards his hairline. Dean held his gaze for a moment, thinking out his next move, before turning back to the phone.

"Don't know what to tell you, man. It's just me and Sam."

"Uh-huh, sure." Victor's voice couldn't possibly be more condescending, and Dean realized the conversation was well past the point of being beneficial or even entertaining.

"Just call me when you get here," he cut in abruptly before Henriksen could get going on any other topic that would get Dean's hackles further up. Like circling back to his dad, god forbid. "Then we'll talk."

He put the phone back in the receiver a touch harder than was strictly necessary, but Dean was comfortable putting that squarely in the '*hey, I'm under the stress of robbing a bank here'* category of excuses and move the hell on. He jogged back to the vault door and his two partners in crime. God, *literally*.

"We've got an hour, maybe two to find the shifter. Once Henriksen gets feet on the ground here, he'll send in SWAT." The hunter glanced between Ronald and his brother. "When that happens, we gotta be ready to go."

"Fantastic," Sam muttered, anger still clearly at full capacity. Not that Dean could blame him, but it wasn't exactly helpful in the moment. So Dean ignored him, turning to Ronald.

"You and me are on monster duty. Sam, you're the babysitter."

The tight-lipped grimace he got in affirmative wasn't exactly a good sign either, but Dean threw it on top of the ever-growing, probably-overflowing box of things to handle later. When they weren't, you know, in the middle of robbing a bank.

Ronald looked surprised to be chosen – like the kid used to being chosen last at just about every activity ever was finally getting picked first – and the enthusiasm showed. Dean resisted groaning and instead gestured for the man to follow him down the hall. It wasn't like he actually wanted the trigger-happy conspiracy theorist with him. He just knew he couldn't leave him with Sam again if he wanted either of

them – let alone both of them – to survive this.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I know a lot didn't happen this chapter - I read through it and was like...'how did that take up 10 pages?!' but I was hesitant to start combining chapters both for the natural stopping points getting messed up, and because my stockpile is still pretty low and the more spread out the material, the more likely I can continue to provide two-week updates reliably for now. Hope you all don't mind having a little less happen until I can get my writing feet back under me.

I'm on vacation for the next two weeks, yaaaaay, so hopefully that will present many an opportunity for some hefty writing.

Up Next: My brain is foggy enough I am straight up trying to remember what happens next (insert head desk here) Uh...let's see...Ronald's getting a crash course in Monsters, their shifter is a sneaky bastard, Victor's on scene, and a sniper gets itchy trigger fingers. See you in two weeks!

Happy Holidays!

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 111: Season 2: Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I'm dancing right now, hands in the air like a total doof because we're at three posts on schedule! I haven't had as much time to write as I'd really hoped lately, so that stockpile of chapters is starting to dwindle and the two week thing's going to be the new norm for a while - le sigh - but I'm really hoping to get some stuff out in the next couple days. We're getting real close to the good stuff, and that should keep the Muse moving her little tushy :D

Chapter Warnings: Ron's pouting, Dean's teaching, Victor's demanding, and Sam's just along for the ride at this point. Poor Sam. Oh, and a police sniper decides to take a lucky shot.

It's been a right proper minute since our latest cliffie, no? [insert no good, dirty rotten grin here]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 77

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

As they made their way out of the vault hallway, through the lobby and towards the manager's office, Dean could feel the grumpy tension pouring off Ronald in waves. Eventually, he bit the bullet he wanted absolutely nothing to do with, and started talking. "Look, I get you're pissed-"

"You *lied*." Oh yeah, the pout was in full swing. Like arguing with a child. Dean resisted sighing, but pretty much failed.

"Okay, first, even if we were FBI, Ronald, they lie too. You know that, right?" The grumpy tension turned to grumpy silence, but Dean would take it as a win all the same. He pushed open the door to the office, gesturing Ronald inside. "Besides, what were we supposed to tell you, huh? We're brothers who drive around the country hunting monsters? You'd have called us as crazy as everyone was calling you."

The larger man frowned back at him, half turned as he walked into the office. "You keep saying that - monsters What do you mean, monst-"

His question turned into a startled squawk mid-word as Ronald's foot connected with the pile of skin and goo that was the whole point of bringing him back here. The conspiracy theorist managed to keep his footing, but just barely, and only after an awkward half-split and a hand to the floor to balance himself.

A hand that landed smack dab in the middle of said skin-goo.

Ronald recoiled immediately, almost falling over once again, this time to the side. Once he had his balanace again, he lifted his hand up to his face with saucer-sized eyes, fingers spread wide. He stared in horror at the slime looping from digit to digit and stretching back down to the similar pile below.

Then he screamed. Dean popped a finger in his ear almost nonchallantly, having expected at least half of that reactiong and turning his head away from the noise. Ronald scrambled back onto his butt, shaking his hand furiously to free it of the skin-goo. Dean took a step back to avoid the spray as Ronald leveled his letter opener right at the pile of harmless shifter leftovers (like *that* was gonna do a thing).

"Wh-Wh-What the hell is *that*?!"

"That would be what we're hunting," Dean answered, calming walking up to the pile and crouching down in front of it. He, of course, had known it was there from the last search of this office. And he'd been prepared to warn Ronald, had the man been paying any attention.

"The mandroid is…a pile of muck?" Ronald looked up at him, unsure, as he wiped what was left of the shifter's skin on his hand hastily.

"No, the 'mandroid' is a shapeshifter. It ditched it's skin – the bank manager's skin – when it realized we were onto him." No thanks to you, Dean wanted to add but resisted. Sam had antagonized their tag-along enough, and Dean might actually need Ronald's help by the end of the night if their luck continued at its current level. "They shed their old skin and change into someone else through physical contact. So now it could be anybody in the bank."

Hesitantly, Ronald leaned forward, poking at the wad of good with the tip of the letter opener. He managed to snag a piece of skin, lifting it

up into the dim emergency lighting. "It's so weird. So…lifelike."

"Because it *is* alive, Ronald," Dean muttered, reminding the man with a sparse glance that this wasn't a robot covered in skin. Ronald dropped the skin back into its goo with a disgusting glop. "A murderer - and a greedy one at that, given it's using its abilities to rob banks and jewelry stores - but not all that different from a human. Just as killable."

"And…silver will do the trick?" The larger man was looking at his borrowed blade, then glanced up at Dean. The hunter shared a half-smile. In another life – maybe *this* life – Ronald would make a halfway decent hunter. He caught on fast. So long as he didn't get himself killed with that charge-in-first heroism and stubborn levels of hard-headedness.

(Not that Dean would know anything about *that*.)

"Sure will. Now come on, let's go find it." Dean stood, Ronald scrambling to follow. The two were making their way towards the office door, only a scant few feet away, when a creaking moan stopped them. Dean glanced over his shoulder, first at Ronald, but then past him. Green eyes slowly tracked upward to the source of the sound as it happened again. It was coming from the ceiling.

"What's that, you think?" Ronald asked. Instead of waiting for an answer, though, he started towards the spot the noise was coming for.

"Wait, hang on a sec." Dean was getting another bout of déjà vu, and this time he was pretty sure what was causing it. The shifter had hidden the body somewhere, he just hadn't wasted time trying to find it. And good thing, too. He was pretty sure it was about to find them…the same way it had last time. "Ronald-"

The man let out his second scream of the evening as a body broke through the cheap suspended ceiling tiles and crashed down practically on top of him. Ronald managed not to go down beneath the body, but he certainly acted as a partial landing pad.

The naked, fit, dark-skinned man hit the ground with a thud and a quarter roll that left him face up on the ground. Ronald was shakily pointing his letter opener at the corpose once more, having scrambled a couple steps back after taking at least a hundred-eighty pound corpse to the shoulder and shoving him off. Dean hurried over, dread growing as he got a good look at their latest victim.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, immediately recognizing the man, even without the intense gaze. *Michael*, the guy in the vault who'd helped him carry the security guard out and left him worried he was going to have to shoot a human in a non-vital limb. The very same man he'd caught a partial of on the security cameras, only the pixelated quality had been too shit to make the obvious match. "He was in the vault."

Ronald frowned, looking back at the hunter and lowering his 'weapon' as he realized the guy wasn't getting up. "But…I thought you said you tested them all with silver. That's how you knew the guard wasn't the mandroid- I mean, shifter."

"Yeah, we did." Which meant the shifter had found a way to sneak in. Even the alpha shifter had been reactive to silver, so Dean knew there wasn't a way otherwise. But how? Sam and Ronald had kept the vault door under constant guard for that reason-

Dean closed his eyes with a muttered curse. The fight. The two of them had been fighting, way up by the hallway entrance, right after the lights shut off. Then Dean had joined and dragged them even further away. He'd done it to keep the hostages from over-hearing the argument, but damnit…he'd opened up the door for the damn shifter to sneak right in, posing as a terrified hostage who'd initially escaped but decided he had better odds with the others.

God damn it.

"Well…that's a good thing!" Ronald exclaimed with a bright smile. "Now we know what he looks like and where he is!"

"No, not good, Ronald," Dean interrupted sharply – probably more sharply than the man deserved. He let out a haggard sigh. He was tired and on edge, and dealing with a noob in those conditions was never easy or pretty. Still, it wasn't Ronald's fault. If anything, this was on Dean. "If he's in the vault, he has hostages."

"I thought…we had the…" The man frowned, tilting his head as he thought it through. Yeah, Ronald had the gusto to be a hunter, but he'd need a hell of a lot of practice and someone to keep him alive long enough to become a good one. His eyes widened as he caught on, though. "Oh. You mean he could hurt the others in there with him."

"Yeah," Dean sighed, standing up straight and turning away from the dead body below, "that's exactly what I mean."

He checked his watch for the time. Thirty minutes left if Henriksen

was on a fast jet. An hour if the FBI hadn't splurged on a speedy ride. That wasn't much time to figure out how to isolate the shifter from the other hostages and take him out. Shit.

"Come on, we gotta get back to Sam." Dean hoofed it back into the hallway, Ronald following behind with a tight grip on that letter opener. The older Winchester wasn't too worried about his brother. It was unlikely the shifter would attack at this stage, not if he thought he'd gotten away with his innocent-hostage deception and might make it out of the bank with the other civilians. Besides, Sam could handle himself. Even wimpy 2007 Sam (who was, admittedly, less wimpy with every passing day.)

No, Dean needed to get back to Sam because he needed the real brains of this operation. They had to figure out how to get the shifter away from the other hostages without tipping him off that they were on to him. Piece of cake. Sure.

-o-o-o-

In the end, after several minutes of hushed debate (too many minutes, given their ever dwindling time) held as a group at the end of the vault hallway (closer this time, and always with at least one eye on the door so there'd be no more surprises), the hunters and their tagalong decided to take the civilians out in groups of four. They'd start with the women, so they would know their shifter would be at the back of the group, with less hostages to potentially take. And if he bolted in his group, he'd only have three potential victims. It was the best they could do to limit the possible collateral damage without tipping their monster off before they could get in a position to kill him.

They'd test each group (even though it was highly unlikely the shifter could manage to change skins in a tiny room crowded full of people and *not* cause a massive freak out, Dean wasn't taking any more risks), then lock them in the conference rooms and offices that lined the lobby. That was the best option for keeping as many civilians as possible out of the way of the shifter should he bolt or fight, and out of the way of the police when they came storming in (in…Dean checked his watch again. Eight minutes at the fastest, and Dean sure hoped Agent Henriksen wasn't feeling particularly rushed tonight).

It was a win-win, or as much of one as the Winchesters could hope to get.

The toughest part of all of this would be not giving the ploy away to the shifter. Which meant little to no eye contact. Something that was *never* easy when you were a hunter and you knew there was a monster in the room, just itching to hurt somebody or escape. If Dean was reading this particular shifter correctly – and given the fact he'd willingly put himself in view of the hunters but also surrounded himself with potential hostages – this guy knew how hunters worked. Knew how much they cared about civilian casualties.

Sam and Dean would be on the front lines. The primary contact with all the groups. Dean, armed with their one and only silver knife, would go in, select the four hostages, and escort them into the hallway. Sam would stand guard at the vault door with Betsy. Bullets wouldn't kill the shifter, but they could slow him down enough to stop him from grabbing a hostage. Or deter him from trying all together. If the shifter didn't try anything, they'd close the vault door, test the group quickly with the flat side of the silver blade, and then escort them to the nearest lockable room.

In the event that their monster did try something, Ronald was their last line of defense. He'd man the mouth of the hallway. If the shifter got past Dean or Sam, it would be Ronald's job to take him down with the letter opener. It wasn't a great backup plan, as far as backup plans went, but it was what they had. Dean was far more optimistic about it than Sam.

(And while Sam was usually right about most things…Dean really hoped this wouldn't be one of them.)

So the two Winchesters approached the sealed vault door with a single decisive look shared between them, and then Sam pulled it open and Dean entered, knife visibly in hand. The older Winchester tried not to take it personally as the hostages backed away from him, hushed whispers and gasps and fearful murmurs the only sound in the small vault.

"Alright, people," he announced in a clear, firm voice, only having to clear his throat once when his voice tried to falter at the looks of fear that surrounded him. "We're going to be taking you out in small groups, four at a time-"

"Are you letting us go?" one woman asked, and Dean belatedly realized it was Ms. Bubblegum, who had first taken them to see the security guard. He tried to ignore the fact that from her point of view, he'd lied his way in to hold her and her coworkers hostage. He tried to

focus on his job, without glancing at the shifter in the back.

"Uh," Dean had to clear his throat again. "In a minute. We're going in small groups, and we'll get you out of the vault for now, then, uh, we'll escort one group at a time out of the bank."

He knew it hardly sounded convincing, given he'd made it up entirely on the fly, but Ms. Bubblegum and several others sure looked relieved. The shifter, as Dean glanced quickly his way and back again just as fast, didn't look sold.

Dean swallowed, lifted the knife as a way to point to the four women closest to him (there were only five women total, with another six men after that, including their shifter), and told them to go out into the hallway one at a time, and stand single file. They did so reluctantly, giving Dean a wide berth and Sam, standing at the door with the assault rifle, as much room as possible in the small space.

The older Winchester kept a sharp eye on the remaining civilians, trying not to pay their monster any more attention than the rest. "We'll, uh, we'll be back for the next group shortly."

He backed out of the vault, not turning his back on the shifter, and let Sam close the door after him. Dean let out a breath, catching his brother's eye before glancing at the four nervous women lined up between them and Ronald.

"One down."

-o-o-o-

Victor stepped down from the helicopter that landed a block from the bank, wind whipping at his FBI vest. The copter lifted off, disappearing into the night, as he and the other agent they'd sent with him – some mousey, bespectacled man he hadn't bothered to get the name of - jogged towards the crowd of officers gathered across the street from the bank. He flashed his badge at the first cop who tried to stop him, and the second didn't even bother as he hastened up the steps to the mobile base of operations, opening the door without bothering to knock.

"Lieutenant Robards," Henriksen announced, making what would be a question coming out of anyone else's mouth sound more like a command.

"Oh great," the man in question – yet to identify himself but definitely

in charge given the pissy expression and shit-eye he was spearing Henriksen's way – muttered under his breath. He blew out a breath, hands on his hips, before he turned to the FBI agent. "Yeah?"

"Special Agent Henriksen," Victor introduced himself without really caring if the local LEO remembered it or not.

"The guy our suspect asked for." Robards sounded less than impressed. More annoyed than anything. Victor knew he was throwing his non-existent weight around in retaliation, knowing he'd already lost this case to the feds. "Let me guess. You're lead dog now, but you would just *love* my full cooperation."

Henriksen plastered on a peaceful, cooperative expression. One he was well known for in the home office. The one that said he didn't give a shit, because he knew he was in charge. "I don't give a rat's ass what you do. You can go get a donut and bang your wife for all I care. What I do need is your S.W.A.T team locked and loaded, ready to breach in five, and the rest of your men canvasing a five block radius looking for a black, '67 Chevy Impala. You got that?"

Robards pulled his head back, brow furled in clear annoyance and bemusement. "You want to send S.W.A.T. in without even trying to talk the guy down? And meanwhile, what, waste my men looking for a *car*? Listen, *Agent*, I don't know who you think you are or what you've been told-"

"No, you listen," Henriksen cut off the Lieutenant, done wasting time talking to the man who was, in his opinion, now inconsequential. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, do you? There is a monster in that bank, Lieutenant. Now prep your men to go in and find me that damn car."

"This is crazy. You're crazy."

"Nah, Robards." Henriksen unzipped his jacket and grabbed the nearest phone, confident it would connect him to the bank and, consequently, Dean Winchester. "Crazy's in that bank, and I'm about to have a conversation with it."

-o-o-o-

"They're going to kill us."

The shifter wasted no time trying to counter whatever the hunters were up to on the other side of that vault door. He turned to the

humans around him, face dark but determined.

The tense silence that filled the small, stuffy vault didn't disagree. Nor did the panicked mumrering that came after. Still, the last of the female bank employees, the one who had earlier urged what she thought was her friend back into the vault, hissed out a gasp of air.

"Don't say that, Michael!"

He cast her a dismissive glance, tired of playing at one or more of her coworkers. He wanted out of this vault, and he didn't care if this bitch thought he was acting 'out of character' for Michael. Whoever that fool was.

"They're going to kill us," he repeated more firmly. "Why do you think they're taking us out in small groups? We're more manageable that way."

"It's still four against three," one of the other men – an older customer of the bank – muttered. "If they wanted to kill us, why not take us out of here one at a time? Why risk being outnumbered?"

"Outnumbered? Please, they have all the weapons!" Another man argued back, and the shifter focused on him. He sounded liked he might help charge the hunters and, if 'Michael' could rile him up enough, he might take the first bullet or knife, giving the shifter the chance to get past or take out a hunter.

"We should charge them," Michael said, waiting until he got a nod of agreement from the aggressive human before looking at the others. "You said it yourself, we outnumber them. Weapons or not, we could stop this before they kill us."

"And what if they are planning on letting us go?" that same woman argued, hugging herself like the pathetic human she was. "We could get ourselves – any one of us – killed, and for nothing!"

"I know a lie when I hear one," the shifter countered. It didn't matter if the lie had only been meant for him. If he wasn't walking out of this bank, than neither were any of the humans in there with him. And, with a little luck, none of the hunters would walk out of here alive, either. "They're going to kill us. This is our only shot."

"I agree," the human male nodded firmly. He reached up to his breast pocket, removing a ballpoint pen and uncapping it. He made a jabbing motion with it, locking eyes with the shifter he so wrongly assumed

was on his side. "It's not much, but just about anything can be a weapon when you need it to be. When they come back in, we charge them."

"No, not me." The female was shaking her head, staring at that ballpoint pen in true horror. "You want to fight them, you let me go in the next group first."

"Me too," the older man spoke up. He was maybe in his fifties, possibly sixties, and he was shaking his head solemnly. "I want no part of this. I plan to cooperate."

"Cowards, the both of you," the shifter hissed, letting a little too much of his lack of humanity shine through, perhaps. Several of the others shuffled away from him or shifted their weight nervously. He gave a frustrated sigh, but relented. "It's your funeral. But fine, walk headlong into it.'

He gestured for the vault door just as the lock once more began to rotate.

-o-o-o-

When Dean opened the door to grab the next group, the tension that greeted him was noticeably thicker. And that's what sent it to hell in a handbasket, he figured. Because even with all the mantras and determination in the world, a room that tense raised every hair on the hunter's skin, and his eyes darted right to the shifter. And then stayed on him for way too long.

"I-I'd like to go in the next group," the last of the women, a young, cute blonde who looked vaguely familiar to Dean's déjà vu, stepped forward. Just as Dean turned his head, eyes still locked on the shifter, to address the poor, scared girl, a phone started to ring in the hallway, signaling a call from the police. More importantly, it startled everyone and pulled Dean's attention away from the hostages.

The shifter didn't hesitate.

Before anyone could make sense of the sudden movement, the shifter had surged forward, ripping the pen out of his potential ally's hand, and stabbing it right into the same human's neck. The man started to cry out in surprise, more from the sudden movement and aggression than the thievery, only to be cut short in a gurgling mess of bubbling and squirting blood.

The woman who'd so nervously asked to be next to leave let out a blood-curdling scream. Dean pushed past her to do something – be it tackle the shifter or help the bleeding innocent – but the shifter intercepted him. The two slammed into one of the walls of safety deposit boxes, and Dean's silver blade went skittering across the floor towards the vault door. He wrapped one hand around the shifter's no-longer pristine work shirt, the other catching the monster's wrist as he tried to murder Dean with a friggin' pen of all things.

Sam's first instinct – to shoot the monster who'd probably just taken yet another life and was currently trying to add to that count with the oldest Winchester – was thrown out the window by the chaos of the vault. There were too many innocents that could easily get in the way (including Dean), especially with the overkill that was Betsy. They had hoped to get down to the last group before the shifter made his move, so there'd be less people in harm's way if it came down to a shootout. So much for that plan.

The younger hunter swore as his brother and the shifter grappled against the wall, slamming limbs and heads into the metal boxes with painful, loud bangs. Sam tucked the strap on the gun back over his shoulder, shoving the weapon towards his back, and instead darted into the chaos, in the direction of the choking civilian, still gripping his bleeding neck. Another man – older, probably mid-fifties with wrinkles around his steadfast, determined eyes – had caught the injured bank employee, and was desperately trying to get pressure on the wound.

"Move your hands, son," he murmured to the injured man, voice reasonably calm despite the chaos around him. A veteran, no doubt. Sam slid to his knees beside him, adding his own to the cause by pulling the bleeding guy's hands away from the wound. The older man clamped down and clamped down hard.

Given the amount of blood coming from his neck – impressive but not as much of a spurting fountain as Sam had seen before – the shifter had intentionally wounded the guy instead of going for the kill. *A good distraction to occupy a hunter*, Sam thought, uselessly. Not like he was going to change his course of action now. This man could be saved, if he got medical attention immediately.

A sharp grunt, the sound of flesh hitting flesh, and a heavy thud drew Sam's attention back to his brother. Dean was laid out on the floor, clearly still conscious but dazed. The shifter didn't waste the opportunity his punch had afforded him. He leapt over the downed

hunter and burst out the vault door, knocking into the blonde woman - who'd been trying to sneak out the vault door - hard enough to bounce her head off the wall. She hit the ground as a pile of dead weight.

"Hey!" Ronald's cry could be heard from the hallway, a lot closer to the vault then he had been before. He must have been coming to help.

"Damnit," Sam muttered, knowing the ex-security guard, for all his good intentions and *letter opener*, wasn't ready for a full-fledged fight against a monster whose strength he couldn't comprehend.

"Ronald!" Dean called out, best he could while still shaking off that punch. He climbed to his feet using the wall of security boxes for balance even as the shifter overtook the larger man in the hallway, thankfully just shoving past. Ronald wasn't hard to knock off balance, though he recovered a hell of a lost faster than the shifter – or Dean – had given him credit for. "Ronald, no!"

"Get back here!" Ronald yelled, stumbling back to two feet after hitting the hallway wall. The shifter was fast, already down the length of the hallway, but Ronald was determined. He took off after the monster.

"Not again," Dean muttered, loud enough for Sam to hear. He shoved off the wall, propelling himself out of the vault and after the pair.

"Dean!" Sam called after his brother to no avail. The two civilians left conscience and unharmed in the chaos fled out the door as well, risking the opportunity to escape. Damnit! The younger Winchester wasn't an idiot – Dean had told him how this all played out and they looked to be walking – no, *running* – right into the same end result as last time. Which meant Ronald was about to die and Dean was going to do something incredibly stupid to stop it from happening. Damn it, damn it, *damnit!*

Sam turned back to the older gentleman beside him, who was still trying to save the slowly dying man in their arms. "Keep pressure on the wound and stay in the vault. You're safest in here, and the cops will be here soon."

Of that, Sam had very, very little doubt.

Scrambling back to his feet, the younger hunter took off after his idiotically heroic brother and their idiotically heroic tagalong, picking up the discarded silver knife as he ran for the hallway. He hoped to

change what he knew was coming and, well, if he couldn't…maybe he could at least save his brother from a suicide run.

As he took off after Dean, he ignored the phone, hanging on the wall at the end of the hallway, still ringing.

-o-o-o-

Dean ran out of the vault like his life – and Ronald's life – depended on it. (Because, at least for Ronald, it friggin' *did*). This was *exactly* what had happened last time, damnit, as Dean ran into the lobby – darkened but for patches of bright, spotlight-streaked floor coming from the upper windows – he'd be damned if he let it happen again. Damned if he let Ronald run into one of those friggin' spotlights only to get shot through the back. Not this time. Not on his watch.

"Stay out of the light, Ronald! Damnit, stop!"

Ron hit the lobby floor, either unhearing or unheeding as he ran through the first beam, fist still tight around that damn letter opener as he chased after their monster. Dean doubled his speed. It didn't matter what happened once he caught up to the larger man – and at the breakneck, full tilt speed he was going, it wasn't going to be pretty – just that he caught up to him before that sniper did.

He couldn't help glancing between the upper windows – where he knew the shot would come from – and Ronald as he closed in on the heavier man. They had seconds, if that, and Dean didn't know if he'd make it. The shifter was on the far side of the lobby now, disappearing into the darkened tunnel that was the hallway to the manager's office. But the escaping monster was a secondary problem. Keeping Ronald alive came first.

"Dean!"

Sam's strained voice echoed across the lobby, bouncing off the high ceilings and marble-plated walls. Dean didn't stop, didn't slow down. Either unhearing or unheeding, he thought. Ironic. Instead, with only feet to go and absolutely no time left to close that distance, he tackled Ronald with dual grunts, giving up none of the momentum that had carried him lightning-fast across the darkened lobby and into the light.

One of the upper windows broke with a singular crack. Two bodies hit the floor but not before a sniper's bullet tore through one of them.

-o-o-o-

Victor frowned as the phone rang and rang and continued to ring without answer.

With Dean's insistence that he call once he landed, Henriksen had expected the pick-up to be prompt. Another Winchester ploy, most likely. The special agent frowned, considering his next move – the car was still his best bet; Dean was unlikely to leave without it – and reached over to set the phone back in its cradle. He didn't quite make it before all hell broke loose.

"Shots fired, shots fired!" yelled one officer sitting at a command module, a headset covering one ear and hand pressed to it. The radios around the multitude of cops in the small room burst to life, relaying similar information.

"What the-" Lieutenant Robards started towards the first officer to speak. Henriksen, phone abandoned beside it's empty cradle, went to follow – intent to reclaim control and get these people to calm down and report – when another voice spoke from the other end of the mobile unit.

"Confirmed sniper hit!" that officer called, turning to look at Robards, but finding Agent Henriksen staring him down instead.

"Report. *Now*," the agent insisted, the order leaving no room for discussion. "Who shot who, officer?"

"Uh…" The cop glanced at his lieutenant, who was standing just behind the agent and looking for all the world like he wanted that answer as well, regardless of who was asking it.

"One of our snipers had a shot," a third officer took over, more composed than her colleague. She was also wearing a headset, sitting at the last station in front of several screens showing the bank, security footage, and several media outlets reporting on the robbery. "They took it. Confirmed hit, fatality uncertain, but one of the perps is down."

Henriksen spun on Robards, eyes fierce. "We go in now, Lieutenant."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: A proper cliffy this time, as I don't think I left much in the way of clues on who got hit or how bad. Don't worry, I'm sure it's

just a flesh wound! ;)

Deleted Scene: I had a fun little exchange written down a long time ago, before the chapter kinda wrote itself and went in a slightly different direction, where Ronald was all mad about the not-FBI thing, but ended up realizing something. It didn't end up fitting into this version, but it's too good not to let you all have :D

Ronald: Hey, wait a second...if you're not FBI, how- how did you know all that stuff about me?

Dean and Sam: *exchange looks* We're psychic.

Ronald: Yeah right. Um...okay...so...you're crazy.

Dean: *waving Betsy around in the middle of a bank **they** took hostage* Really? Really, Ronald? Armed Robbery, Mandroids, no problem, you don't even blink. But Psychics? That's where you draw the line?!

XD

Next Up: Aaaaah, I don't think I can say anything without giving too much away. So...er...things happen! In...a particular order! And...some of them are good, and some of them are bad. And some of them are funny!

Happy New Year everyone!

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 112: Season 2: Chapter 78

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Holy crap did I struggle to get this one out. Not writing it, but editing! What the craaaaaaaaaap. I had all weekend and several calendar reminders and every day was just….ugh, I'll do it later. Anyhoo, sorry it was late, ladies and gents! Hope you enjoy the conclusion to our (of course) three chapter long bank episode (because nothing can ever be shorter than three chapters).

Quality Warning: So I did manage a full read through and lots of edits, but given my mood the entire time and the thick lines in the carpet from me dragging my feet, I have serious doubts about the quality of said edits. Please forgive any errors and I apologize for the interuption they may bring to the story.

Chapter Warnings: Some blood, some near death, some freaking out, some smoke, some barking, some laughing, and some serious Deus Ex Machina rescues going on (I think we can blame Chuck for that one). Oh, and some love from our new favorite dog!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 78

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

'Cas?'

Dean was aware of someone grabbing his ankles and dragging him across the floor, but it was a distant sort of awareness. The kind that says, *'sure, this is happening to us, but really…do we care?'* And the answer to that was no. Not really. All of his care was currently taken up by his shoulder and chest, which were on *fucking fire*.

'Cas!'

"Owwww, fuck. Fuck, shit, shit, shit, fuuuuck," he groaned once Sam had stopped pulling him across the lobby floor and his jaw unhinged itself from the death grip pain had on it. His brother rolled him onto

his back and that jaw went right back to clenching around every swear word in the book as the hard, unforgiving lobby tile jostled his entire upper torso and, oh yeah, *bullet hole*.

Sam frantically searched his brother for the wound that had left a trail of red gleaming over polished tile as he'd dragged him. Dean was clutching at his left shoulder, fingers digging in to cloth soaked red, his knuckles white. The wound was way too close to his heart, just a couple inches up and to the left, and Sam's own dropped into his stomach once he found it.

"Oh god," the younger Winchester whispered at the bloody mess that was his brother's chest. There was a small but gaping hole in Dean's torso, and it was *gushing* blood out in raging rivulets that Dean's fingers were doing nothing to stunt. Sam could feel the color draining out of him, matching Dean's pallor for entirely different reasons. "Oh god, Dean."

The older Winchester raised his head at his brother's whispered words, eyes bleary and half closed. He stared down at his own blood-covered hand and soaked chest, only to drop back with a thud and a groan. "That's- that's a lot of blood."

Sam's brain – momentarily stalled by shock and *'Dean's going to die' and also 'Again'* – kicked into survival mode. He tore his arms out of the security uniform he was still wearing, desperate to get to the flannel he had on beneath. Shrugging the long-sleeved shirt off, Sam balled it up, shoved Dean's hand out of the way with no extra time to be gentle, and pushed down *hard*.

Dean gurgled and grunted and groaned another set of swear words to make even a sailor blush, but he managed not to scream. He knew it needed to be done if he was gonna live through this (and he was significantly concerned about that bit. He was losing a *lot* of blood and the cold seeping through his body felt terrifyingly familiar).

"Okay…" the older Winchester shut his eyes against the pain and tried to reason with a brain that seemed to be shutting down inconveniently quickly. "T-time for plan, uh…E. Are we on E?" He let out a hiss as Sam shifted, applying as much pressure as he could which was *painful*, damnit. "Tell me you have a plan E."

The look on his brother's face – as close to panic as Sam was ever prone to get – was answer enough, and that answer was a resounding *no*. Dean tried to look around the bank for something,

anything, even though turning his head pulled at the wound, and wasn't that just peachy? "Wh-where's Ronald? What hap-happened to…"

Sam looked irritated at the question (and he absolutely would be annoyed – infuriated even – if he wasn't busy trying to keep his idiotic brother alive), but glanced back to the center of the lobby where he'd dragged Dean from. Next to a puddle of fresh red, Ronald was unmoving, stomach down on the tiles, upper body cast in the light from the windows.

His eyes were open wide, staring.

Dean met those big eyes – bulging and all but frozen in shock – and almost collapsed at the life in them. Those terrified, confused, *oh-god-oh-god-I-almost-just-died*, but very much *alive* eyes.

"Fucking finally," the hunter muttered, all but going limp against the cold, blood-slicked floor. "A win."

"Yeah, maybe don't celebrate just yet," Sam grunted right back, still applying the full weight of his upper body to his brother's wound. The blood just kept seeping through. Dean's head was listing to the side and Sam knew he was losing him, for all that he refused to admit it. "We still have to get out of here."

Which was looking less and less likely. Sam was holding back the panic but he knew – he *knew* – that wound was fatal. Even if they surrendered themselves to the cops, no medic was going to be able to save Dean now.

Shit. *Shit!*

"C-Cas can get us out," Dean mumbled like it was the most obvious answer in the world, belied only by slur starting to effect his words. Sam purposefully jostled his brother as he pushed just that much harder. The older Winchester groaned, but those slowly drooping eyes popped back open with momentary awareness. His fingers fumbled near his hip like he was trying to dig out his phone. "J-just gotta call him."

"Cas is still healing," Sam growled back, but there was little heat. Just desperation. "She can't help, Dean."

"Oh." Dean blinked, and it took half a second too long for his eyelids to open again. Just like it took his brain a good half a minute too long

to process his brother's words. "Shit."

Ron shifted, his expression (which was definitely shock along with a healthy dose of fear) slowly changing with the realization that he should try to help. As he started to rise, Sam sent him a fierce glare, barking, "Don't get up, you idiot! Stay low, and get out of the light."

The man froze, then glanced around him, realizing the light from the windows is what had given him away to the sniper. A sniper that had taken out Dean instead. Ronald swallowed roughly, his eyes already as wide as they could go, feeling the shaky shock of mortality racing through him faster than the adrenaline, but nodded hastily. He started inching his way out of the light like a wiggling worm. It took a couple minutes, but he was able to clear the line-of-sight from the windows and climb to his knees. He stayed mostly still, crouched in the shadow cast by one of the standing counters.

"Is…is he going to be okay?" Ron asked, voice hushed and trembling. His eyes remained wide as saucers, locked on the groaning older Winchester.

"I don't know," Sam responded desperately, even though he knew the answer to that question. It wasn't one he was prepared to accept yet, though.

"Th-they're gonna come in here. The c-cops," Dean muttered, his words becoming breathy and labored in an entirely un-encouraging manner. "You g-guys gotta go."

"Shut up, Dean."

"It'll be 'kay, S'mmy," the older Winchester whispered, and Sam refused to acknowledge the wetness in his eyes at his brother's tone. He wasn't losing him again. Not again. "C-Cas'll bring me back."

At least, Dean sure hoped the angel would be up for a rescue run to Heaven once she woke up. Dean could probably help, up there as a soul. At least once he figured out he was in a memory again. The actuality of a rescue was probably a lot more complex than the concept, but Dean's ability to think beyond *'ow, ow, and more ow'* was kinda fading.

"Man, I r-really wasn' plannin' on dyin' ag-gain anytime s-soon," Dean groaned in one long, mumbled breath. Next to the counter, Ronald had a cute little frown pulling at his brow, made far less cute by those saucer-sized eyes. He was mouthing the word, *'Again?'* and somewhere

in the back of his mind, past the blood and the leaching exhaustion, Dean thought that was funny. "'Sp-specially not from 'nother frig-friggin' b-bullet."

"Shut up, Dean!" the younger Winchester growled, repeating himself almost on rote as he looked around desperately for a Hail Mary. An exit, a miracle, something they hadn't thought of. But there was nothing. Nothing! And Sam was starting to feel the true panic creep in. "You're not going to die."

The look Dean gave him was a little bit sad, but mostly sardonic. And yeah, shit, this wasn't looking good, Sam could admit. But his brother could be *helping*.

"'M helpin'," Dean mumbled back, and Sam hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. His brother's eyes had fallen closed, and something deep down – something desperate and terrified that he often kept locked away – told Sam they wouldn't open again. "Callin' C-Cas. L-let him…uh, her... Let *her* know…to come get…me."

By the end, Dean was almost unintelligible, the words so slurred together and quiet. Dean's eyes stayed closed and, while his chest was still rising and falling, he fell too still. Too calm and peaceful. Dean Winchester was never at peace, and the thought terrified Sam.

"Damnit, Dean, you have to stay awake!" Sam yelled frantically, even as he took one hand off his brother's wound, soaked in blood, and scrambled for his own cell. He left bloody, smeared fingerprints on the buttons as he speed-dialed the number they'd gotten Cas after the fiasco with Gordon. They hadn't had time to teach her how to use it – she'd pretty much passed out the minute they made it to Bobby's – but the old hunter promised he'd keep it by her bedside. Just in case.

It took several attempts, between his trembling fingers and the slippery blood coating each button he pushed, to find Castiel among his contacts before he was pressing the phone desperately to his ear.

It rang, and rang, and rang, long past the point it should have switched over to voicemail. Distantly, Sam realized they'd never set it up for the angel.

The younger Winchester cried out in frustration and futility, letting the phone slip through his numb fingers to clatter on the floor. Then suddenly Ronald was freaking out, glass was shattering in the distance, and muffled shouts of police officers identifying themselves all erupted at once. There was a scream from far away. Probably one

of the civilians that had run from the vault, yelling for someone not to shoot.

"What the-" Ronald tried to scrambled back, away from Sam and Dean, but there was nowhere to go against the counter. "Wh-Where did you come from?!"

"Move, Sam."

Sam looked up even as heavy feet pounded down the stairs to the lobby and from the hallways that led to the back offices and alleyway exit. No doubt the police he'd promised their 'hostages' were on the way. Five minutes ago that had been a major concern. Five seconds ago it had been a resigned reality. But now…now…

"Cas," Sam breathed out, starting up at the angel in all her righteous, Warrior of God fury, tan peacoat and pantsuit. Two fingers pressed to his forehead, another hand sliding over Dean's wound as Sam stiltedly pulled his own away.

Then they were no longer in the bank.

They landed hard, or maybe it was an illusion of a hard landing that came with the adrenaline of Angel Air and the knowledge that Dean was seconds away from death yet again. Well, that, plus the chaos they'd landed in the middle of sure wasn't helping.

There was a dog barking close by – loud and scary and *way* too close for comfort – and Bobby hollering, his heavy footsteps pounding down the hall. Sam knew, instinctually, that they were in the den. They always landed in Bobby's den when Cas angel-aired them to safety. The dog was new, though.

Things got infinitely worse when Castiel disappeared in the next second, only to return with a positively freaking out Ronald. He was screaming in that kind of what-the-hell-just-happened manner, which definitely wasn't helping the dog barking in the not-so-distant background (in that extra fierce kind of way that you just knew meant you were about to get chomped on). Sam managed to shove all of that to the side and scrambled back to his brother's side. It was panic and instinct more than logic, especially considering Castiel's presence kneeling right beside them. Sam's knew, subconsciously at the very least, that the angel would have healed his brother. She *must* have. When his fingers found no torn cloth, no slick but cooling blood, no life-threatening wound, he almost collapsed atop Dean. His brother's chest was heaving with all the strength and surety of a healthy,

twenty-eight year old man.

"Thank God," Sam whispered. The younger Winchester closed his eyes, shutting out the chaos, the adrenaline and fear, and the sight of his brother, wide-eyed and still recovering from the near miss.

"Son of a bitch," the older Winchester muttered, hand pressed to his perfectly fine chest. His let his head thunk back to the floor of Bobby's living room as his body went limp, all that pain and tension suddenly gone. Sam could relate, sagging back onto his heels, struggling just to breathe normally in the wake of an adrenaline crash.

Ronald, on the other hand, seemed to be ratcheting up in anxiety.

"How are we…where are…but we were in the….what is happening?" The larger man spun around, eyes wide as he tried to take in Bobby Singer's house but likely saw none of it. "Did…did we just *teleport*?"

As his voice continued to climb in volume, Cas spun on her crouched knee, gracefully standing in one swift move, trench coat swirling, and pressed those two fingers to the man's head. He went down with a hefty thud that shook Bobby's bookcases. Then the angel turned once more, fierce blue eyes locked, this time, on the German Shephard still barking ferociously at them from the hall. It fell silent with a reproachful whimper.

"What the hell is going on here?" Bobby came charging in, still in his pajamas but shotgun in hand. He straightened, pulling the butt of the gun away from its braced position against his shoulder when he spotted the newest round of houseguests. He glared first at the not-so-comatose angel currently having a staring contest with his dog, then shifted his eyes to the Winchesters and the newest blood stain on his rug. Bobby lowered the shotgun with a look the entire household was coming to expect any time their resident angel wasn't upstairs on life support. "Balls."

Sam, on the other hand, was looking between him and the German Shepherd with wide eyes and a confused frown, brown hair flopping over his forehead. "When did you get a dog?"

Bobby huffed, sharing a look with the dog which was very much returned. Dean had the audacity to look insulted. Still not the oddest thing to happen that night, not by a long shot, Sam figured. The old hunter, meanwhile, finally relaxed and set the shotgun against the wall. Dean was clearly no longer dying if those were the first words out of Sam Winchester's mouth. Damnit. What did a man have to do to

get one good night's sleep in his own friggin' house these days?

"Cas," Dean interrupted, still a touch breathless (which left Sam frowning and visually inspecting him for any remaining injury, to which his brother gave him a *look*). The angel knelt beside the hunter, who hadn't attempted to get up from the ground any further than bracing on his elbows. "There's a shifter, in the bank. You gotta find him before he escapes."

Castiel nodded with all the intent and seriousness of a Warrior of God. She stood, prepared to take flight, but was stopped by a hand wrapping around her wrist. She glanced down, noticing the warm slide of liquid, and realized Dean Winchester's hands were still coated in his own blood. Blue eyes slid over to Sam, noticing a similar state. With a frown and a blink, the Winchesters were properly restored. Neither seemed to notice, though that was hardly a concern to the angel.

"Baby," Dean muttered, offering a weak grin that was hardly convincing. Beside him, Sam's forehead immediately smoothed out and he hit his brother in the arm. The expression did not relent, even when Dean yelped and rubbed at the targeted limb. "What? She's one of us and you know it." He turned back to the angel. "She's parked, like, a block south of the bank, in a parking structure attached to one of the buildings. Grab her for me, will you?

Castiel looked about as annoyed as Sam. At least, she did to Dean. To everyone else they may have only imagined it on the angel's face, whose expression hardly shifted. But Castiel disappeared once more, leaving Dean's hand hanging empty in mid-air.

"Really, Dean?"

"What?" the older Winchester grunted, rubbing at his newly wound-less shoulder as he hauled himself to his feet. Sam offered an assist halfway and Dean took it gratefully, clasping his arm and heaving himself upwards. "She's going back for the shifter, she might as well get Baby too."

"Somebody want to tell me what the hell's going on?" Bobby asked, sarcasm turned all the way up, just like his eyebrows. The boys turned to him, one sheepish, the other trying to get away with a hundred watt smile that clearly wasn't cutting it.

"Uh, sure, Bobby. But seriously. When *did* you get a dog?"

-o-o-o-

Glass shards crunched and shifted beneath the feet of police and SWAT and federal agents alike as they cleared the rest of the bank, securing hostages that hadn't made it out on their own or were locked away in private offices. Victor Henriksen stood in the middle of the organized chaos, staring down at a puddle of red that a sniper swore – on his job, on his badge, on a bible, and so on – had come from one of their perps. He couldn't be sure which one, but that didn't really matter now, considering Victor was short two, possibly three perps, one with a life threatening wound. And *no one* could tell him how *in hell's name* those men got out of the building, right underneath the noses of half of Milwaukee's finest and a damn federal agent.

The radio in his hand crackled to life and Victor raised it to his lips without looking away from that damn puddle of blood. "Tell me you found something."

Lieutenant Robard's voice was hesitant. No more pleased to be bossed around by the federal agent than he had before this newest round of shit hit the fan. But Victor knew by the clench in his gut that it wasn't just that.

"My, uh…. My men found that car you wanted."

Victor turned sharply away from the puddle, already making his way for the front doors. "Where?"

"A parking garage a block south of here, but…uh…"

"Spit it out, Lieutenant."

"It's gone."

Henriksen stopped mid stride, frowning harshly. "What do you mean, gone? I told you to have your men sit on it!"

"They were," Robards bit back defensively. "I don't know what to tell you, agent. My men had eyes on the vehicle one second, and the next it was gone. They can't explain it."

"Are your men drunk?" Victor accused sharply, though he knew it was unlikely and probably unfair to put this failure squarely on the Milwaukee police. Nothing about the Winchester case ever came easy, and although he refused to believe those boys had outsmarted him, he also knew there was something he'd missed. Something that let them

get away every damn time. Henriksen didn't know what – another partner, an inside man, *something*.

It made him furious just thinking about it. Certainly furious enough to take it out on the Milwaukee police.

"Listen here, Agent Henriksen," Robards barked back, clearly out of patience for being bullied about by the federal agent. "My men are good men. Good officers. You can talk to them yourself if you don't believe me, but that car is gone and security footage from the parking garage is going to back my men's story. I can tell you *that*."

Henriksen snorted, but didn't bother holding down the radio button for Robards to hear it. The lieutenant was probably right, but Victor didn't really care, and he certainly wasn't worried about wounding egos or making enemies. He had two monsters to catch, no matter the means or cost.

"It better, Lieutenant. And I will be talking to each of them. *Separately*. So bring them in and keep them apart. We'll see whose story holds up."

With that, he turned the radio off, resisting the urge to chuck it across the bank, and instead strode purposefully – angrily – out the front doors. How? *How* did the Winchesters keep slipping through his fingers, always leaving behind more questions than answers? Disappearing suspects – and not for the first time – and now disappearing cars?

Victor wanted to know just what the hell was going on. And how to put an end to it.

-o-o-o-

"Wait, *Andy* got you a dog?"

Dean's grin said it all – that hundred watt Winchester smile that was somehow charming as much as it was infuriating – and Bobby didn't miss a lick of it. His eyes narrowed at the boy, leaning against *his* desk like they hadn't just shown up in the middle of the night (*again*) half bleeding to death and scaring the crap out of his household.

"What are you grinning at?"

Which was apparently the wrong thing to say to wipe that smirk off Dean's face (something Bobby definitely should have expected). If

anything, it only got more damn smug.

"Nothing, just, uh…it's kinda sweet."

The old hunter harrumphed. It might be a lot of things, but *sweet* wasn't one of 'em. "It's a pain in the ass, s'what it is."

Sam managed to stifle his disbelieving chuckle behind an incredibly poorly faked cough. He blamed his recent trauma, only minutes passed and still buzzing through his veins like something ugly. Dean, meanwhile, had a big smile on his face that was just about ready to split in two. Sam tried not to stare. Tried not to think too hard, either.

Bobby glared at them both as Dean's eyes dropped quite pointedly to the dog sitting obediently by the old man's side, long snout resting atop his thigh.

"Oh yeah," the older Winchester said, eyes switching from Sarge to Bobby with a pair of eyebrows that were gonna get him kicked out if he wasn't careful. "You're really suffering there."

Bobby glared, expression saying what he didn't bother to: *Watch your tone in my house, boy*.

Sam, who was struggling to hide the shaking of his shoulders right along with the laugh causing it, cleared his throat. He turned on the puppy eyes, and Bobby knew he'd just lost any ground he had in his *own damn house*. "For only having him a couple weeks, he seems really well trained, Bobby."

The younger Winchester's sincerity didn't go far in soothing Bobby's ruffled feathers – what ever did? – but he allowed the change of topic. Of course, he sent Dean a look that said he was *allowing* the distraction and damn well knew it (to which the insufferable kid just raised those eyebrows again and Bobby reconsidered changing the locks and warding the house against late night, winged visitors and her cargo).

"Sarge is a retired K-9 unit." Ignoring the fact that he was being watched by two nosy brats, Bobby gave the dog a pat on the head and a scratch behind the ears. "Already knows his commands, fully trained."

Sam's smile turned more genuine, less teasing-slash-overly-pleased-with-himself-because-he's-a-damn-Winchester-and-it-runs-in-their-blood. "And now he gets a cozy retirement."

"With another retiree," Dean snuck in under a loud clearing of his throat. He ignored the look Bobby shot his way, immune by now, and pulled his head back as a thought occurred too him. "How the heck does a mute kid new to town wrangle up a retired police dog in, what, like two weeks?"

"Four." The old hunter just huffed again, shrugging uninterested shoulders with such controlled nonchalance that neither Winchester believed his disinterest for a second. No way he hadn't needled that story out of Andy the second such a particular dog showed up on his doorstep. "You can ask him."

Sam glanced around the study. Ronald still lying unconscious on the ground (though Sam and Dean had moved-slash-rolled him over towards the couch to keep him from getting stepped on) and the younger Winchester was pointedly avoiding the smears of red leftover on the carpet. The rest of the house was quiet. It was just the three of them, no stray psychic in sight. "Where is Andy, anyway?"

"Out in his van."

The way Bobby said it – the verbal equivalent of a head shake mastered by a parent in charge of a would-be rebellious teenager – had both boys equal parts curious and wary.

"What van?"

-o-o-o-

It wasn't much. An old Dodge Tradesman, probably a '77, maybe a '78, painted an absolutely hideous orange color that was now patchy with rust and faded from age and sunlight. The expanse of the driver side of the van, free from any doors or windows, had been spray-painted with a mural of…erm…something. There were two large blobs of white, with something resembling beady black eyes and a pink nose enough to vaguely (emphasis on the vague) identify them as polar bears. One sported a stick figure upon its back, adorned with a particularly large pair of boobs (just about the only detail added to the painting) and a sword raised high above her head.

Dean snorted out a laugh at the attempt of a Viking Queen and her polar bear warriors. An ode to another van from another life.

"Is that what that's supposed to be?" Bobby muttered under his breath as they circled to the other side of the van, where an impressive dent suggested she wasn't exactly in working shape. Dean wondered if the

poor thing even had an engine in her. Bobby banged his fist on the cargo door twice. "She don't run, but the look the kid got when he saw her…"

The hunter just shook his head rather than finish the thought (which was unnecessary anyway. It was obvious Bobby hadn't been able to deny the kid the van the second he saw how happy it made him) then the doors were sliding back with an obnoxious creak of poorly treated metal. Smoke poured out of the van, revealing what could only be a contained wildfire given the amount. Dean let out a choked sound caught between a cough and a laugh as both Bobby and Sam stepped back, waving away the tainted air in front of their face.

Through the clearing haze, Andy recognized them with slowly widened eyes and a smile worthy of one of those sloths from Zootopia (shut up, Dean could enjoy kids movies if he wanted to. It wasn't like he watched them on purpose, of course. Just channel surfed and gave up when nothing else was on. Yup, that's how it went down, always.) He raised his hands in joyous greeting, mouthing their names with such excitement that he almost dropped the bong he was holding. Sarge jumped into the van with no hesitation, tongue lolling as he settled against Andy, happy as could be and soon to be high off second hand smoke alone. Andy lazily scratched behind his ears, grin never fading.

The images that flashed through their heads made absolutely no sense, but Andy was cracking up like he'd mind-said the funniest thing. Bobby just harrumphed, shaking his head once more, and both Winchesters got the feeling this was a pretty standard occurrence when the kid got stoned.

Sam, ever the mother hen and absolute rain cloud ruining the city parade, made a little frowny face with his brow. "Andy, should you really be doing that?" he chastised, still waving away the haze. "I'm pretty sure someone with a throat injury as severe as yours, even healed, shouldn't be smoking anything."

Bobby let out a snort that clearly said he'd tried and lost that argument at least once (probably more). Andy, however, developed a thoughtful look. The next image they all received was a whole lot clearer and Dean barked out laughter.

"Yeah, kid, definitely go for the pot brownies," he said, still chuckling.

Before Bobby could retort - face already screwed up and ready to start

hollering about exactly who could be cooking what in *his* house, damnit - the sound of wingbeats interrupted the group. They turned almost as one to find Cas standing behind them, stoic as always even as she tucked a bloodied angel blade back into her trench coat.

"The shifter is dead," the angel announced, then turned directly to Dean. "And your 'baby' is in the front yard."

Despite the finger quotes, Dean looked so damn thankful that Cas was slightly – just slightly – less annoyed by the request to 'rescue' the car in the first place. Then, as humans were wont to do, he opened his mouth.

"That's my girl," Dean said with a bright smile. The moment of silence that followed seemed to stretch longer than just a moment and was certainly long enough for Sam's cough-covered laugh to fill it, before Dean's eyes went wide. "Not *my* girl, I mean. And not a girl! Woman. Or, uh…not…woman. Angel. Definitely an angel. Not my angel, just… you know…*an* angel."

As Bobby sat there staring, wondering when Dean would just go ahead and shove the whole foot in his mouth, and Sam had to press a fist to his mouth to keep from laughing (an almost hysterical relief bubbling up that he was trying not too hard to examine), Dean groaned.

"This is definitely blood loss talking," he announced, rather loudly.

Cas tilted her head to the side, frowning at the insinuation that her healing job may not have been adequate. She scanned her charge from head to toe, looking for proof. "You are no longer suffering from blood loss."

Sam's face said it all. Or it did before he had to turn away to hide the growing laugh. And if that laugh sounded a little off…well, he'd almost just lost his brother. *Again*.

"Thanks, Cas" Dean said, grimacing. The angel frowned, but righted her head.

"You are welcome, Dean."

Several seconds too late – minutes really – Andy's eyes lit up through the new layer of smoke he'd just finished expelling. He waved his hand lazily in a big arc and, given the flashes of wings, a halo, Gilmore Girls (for…some…reason), a TV-rating, a clock, and the letters U, S, and T presented Sesame Street style (again…*what*?), said

something along the lines of *'Whoa, hey Cas! When did you get here?'*

Dean let out another groan, this time completely unrelated to his own foot and mouth, as Sam shook his head in bewilderment. Bobby was harrumphing again, staying well out of this one. The angel only stared, momentarily concerned by the state of one of the humans under her protection, if not charge.

"You are intoxicated."

Andy's shoulders shook with a silent giggle and lazy grin. He raised his hand well above his head and they all saw a classic red and white kite fly through their brains.

'*High as a kite.*'

He held out the bong to Cas.

'Want to join me?'

The angel looked just curious enough that Dean immediately reached out, took the bong, and tucked it right back into the van out of sight. Images of a human Cas drugged to the gills, holding orgies and just… *wrong* flashed through his memory. So that was gonna be a hard no for the angel there.

"Not happening," he growled lowly to Andy, who shrugged hardly apologetic shoulders, but raised his hand in truce. Dean pulled back, crossing his arms over his chest. Time for a pointed change of topic. "Alright, kid. How exactly does a mute psychic find a retired police dog anyway?"

Andy's grin shifted from lazy to downright pleased with himself. He raised his hands, and body language alone spoke the words faster than the ASL he started rapid firing.

'*Let me tell you a story.*'

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: How's that for a crazy turnaround? Cliffhanger, blood, blood, blood, near character death and then Wham! German Shepherds, marijuana, polar bear riding Viking queens, and Cas! Not my usual style – and oh boy was it both hard and *weird* to suddenly go goofball with it (but very fun). Hope you all enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Next Up: Guys, guys, guys! Next chapter, heehehehe, next chapter is an entire filler chapter. But don't groan! I swear, it's the best filler chapter to ever fill a chapter, cuz it is allll about Andy and how he managed to get Bobby a new dog XD

See you all in two weeks!

Cheers,

Silence

P.S. Happy Martin Luther King birthday to those in the US. I hope you'll join me in honoring the holiday by giving back to your Black community, patroning a Black-owned business or artist, or donating to a charity that helps fight racial inequality in our country. Black Lives Matter!

P.P.S. Not to take away from Doctor King or the BLM movement, but today is Betty White's 100th birthday as well. If you can spare it, please donate just $5 to your local animal shelter in her name! Together we're going to change the world, one injustice and one animal in need at a time <3

Okay, I'm done preaching causes now. Have a wonderful day everyone!

UPDATE: 2/1/2022 - Hey guys, so sorry for the missed chapter this weekend! I went skiing with a friend for his birthday and didn't end up getting the chapter edited beforehand like I had hoped I would. But it'll be up this weekend! Thanks for your patience <3

Chapter 113: Season 2: Chapter 79

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Alrighty, we're back! Sorry for the extra week delay. This chapter's a bit of a beast and it took me extra long to edit it. I've been kinda slow these last couple weeks as well, both busy with Real Life and unmotivated overall (damn you, Covid Fatigue and Depression! [shakes fist at sky]), so it took some extra time to get this done.

Sioux Falls: So, while the actual Sioux Falls, SD is a decent sized city, I noticed that the show kinda plays it off has having a small town vibe. Not super small, but small enough that there's a Sheriff rather than a police department (where as in reality, Sioux Falls has a PD because it's a city), implying that wherever Bobby lives, it's an unincorporated community. I like that vibe for Bobby way more than a decent size town anyway. So the way I'm going to play this to keep to both show-canon and reality is that Bobby lives far enough outside of Sioux Falls to be another town – a sub-division if you will that has its own name and everything, but is so small and unknown everyone just refers to where they live as Sioux Falls for simplicity's sake. It has its own Sheriff department, small downtown area, etc, and only enough residents to warrant the small-town feel the show plays. Sound good? Sweet.

P.S. On that note, if anyone knows any better than that or has more specific info on where in Sioux Falls the Salvage Yard is supposed to be, lemme know! I didn't find anything in my research, but that don't mean it doesn't exist :D (I also tend to slack on in-depth research when I'm happier with my own head canon and don't want to find research that discredits it, LOL)

Chapter Warnings: Andy goes digging about Bobby's house outta boredom, finds a couple of things, gets yelled at, goes digging again, finds a couple of things missing (namely a dog), and decides to make a new friend in town. Not really in that order. The cutest, fluffiest, furiest, and most heart-warming of filler chapters to ever fill a chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 79

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

- Three Weeks Earlier -

It hadn't taken long for Andy to get bored once Dean and Sam left.

There was only so much to do around the salvage yard, and one could only take so much ASL learning before needing a break. Castiel was comatose, in a 'healing trance' or so Dean had said (with a very stern threat of *'leave her alone or I will murder you via death wedgie and you **will** regret it'* completely implied by glare alone), so she was out as a source of entertainment. As far as Andy could tell, his new mental abilities either didn't work on angels or didn't work on comatose bodies anyway.

Not that he'd tried of course...in any way that might have left evidence for Dean to murder him with, at least.

Bobby wouldn't let him venture into town until he could speak 'properly' to normal folk, his words not Andy's. He could accompany the hunter when he went, but Bobby, it turned out, was pretty much a hermit. And Andy could only poke and prod him into leaving the house, doing something, *anything*, so many times before Bobby's hackles started rising.

The old hunter's first instinct (okay, that's a lie, it was more like his sixth or seventh after telling the kid to learn ASL, practice it, clean his damn room, go for a walk, do the dishes, *anything* other than bothering him) was to start teaching him about the occult. Mostly so Bobby would have a hand in the research for the next hunter to call for a little help. Andy had a genuine interest in learning, so that worked out fairly well, but it still wasn't enough to keep the kid's attention all that long. He scoured books with a zeal that almost rivaled Sam's, but had so many questions that Bobby ended up with two jobs instead of less of the one he already had: juggling other fools who were too damn lazy to figure out what they were tackling before they charged in half-cocked, head first.

Not that Andy was a fool. The kid was incredibly smart. Just…still a kid, with the energy of a twelve year old about six root beers in.

'*Just go…do **something,**'* Bobby groused one afternoon, caught between

a book about five centuries old and a laptop almost as ancient. Olivia Lowry had managed to stumble into a nasty sea witch off the coast of Maine. The cavalry was already on the way – she'd managed to filter just about every curse word in the book between explanations of how the bitch had nearly gotten her and this was definitely not a solo gig – but they'd need all the backup they could get when it came to killing the thing.

Witches. They really were the worst.

When Andy threw up his hands, one forming a very clear *'like what?'* even as the images flashed through his brain, Bobby sighed. He rubbed at his forehead, bumping his cap off his head and the headache starting to form there.

'I don't know, kid. Go…explore!' Bobby turned back to his research, grumbling in addition, "There's enough stuff in this house to keep anyone busy. So just…don't touch anything that might kill you, and *get*."

The look Andy gave him required neither ASL nor psychic powers: '*How am I supposed to know what might kill me?!'* But he took off regardless, and Bobby spent the next several hours trying to ignore the sound of a kid rummaging through his closets.

He was getting too damn old for this.

-o-o-o-

The object in the kid's hand wasn't what Bobby was expecting when he looked up from the desk in his den, still neck-deep in sea witch lore. The two hunters he'd sent as backup for Olivia had arrived, and the three were getting ready for a second attack. But something about the case wasn't sitting well with Bobby. He was missing something, and that usually meant trouble for the hunters on the other end.

The flash of a question mark searing itself across the inside of his eyelids for a second time in as many minutes brought Bobby back to Andy, standing in the doorway to the den, holding a thick, leather dog collar and an old, dusty tin bowl.

Considering his hands were full, Bobby would forgive the lack of Signing for the easier, headache-inducing telepathy. (To be honest, the kid was getting good enough – or Bobby was getting too used to – his new powers to even cause much of a headache anymore.)

'*Rumsfeld*,' Bobby signed, spelling his name out. '*My old dog.*'

As silence settled like a weighted blanket in the wake of that statement, a third question mark (well, actually three question marks all together now) flashed through his brain once again. Bobby sighed, realizing he wasn't gonna get this research done for Olivia while Andy had *questions* apparently. Like, given the raised eyebrows and exaggerated nod to the disused items, the whole story.

'*Demon*,' the gruff hunter admitted with a single Sign. No point expanding, the end result was obvious without further detail. Bobby managed to hold back most of the emotion that welled inside at the thought of Rumsfeld, and kept his head buried in the book to hide whatever leaked out. He'd gone quick, at least, but Bobby had sure wished Dean had left something of that demon bitch for him to kill himself after what she'd done to his dog. He'd been a damn good boy and hadn't deserved an end like that. Dogs were meant to grow old, damnit.

He turned back to his research.

Andy audibly huffed, entering the den and setting the items on Bobby's cluttered desk. *Loudly*. Bobby knew he could chase the kid off with some not-unjustified anger at digging through his personal belongings, at bringing up some painful memories and then continuing to poke at that bear. But he'd been the one to tell the kid digging around was fine as long as it kept him busy.

Andy was gesturing to the collar, and forming the word for '*another*' in Sign, eyebrows up to make it a question. Bobby did not want to be having this conversation, but considering the kid was using his hands and not his mind, he begrudgingly answered.

"Getting too old for training a new pup," Bobby muttered aloud, almost under his breath. Too old to lose another one, too, not that he'd ever admit that part out loud. Unfortunately, Andy was a perceptive twenty-something toddler. Bobby turned back to his books, gruff rising like hackles. "Got enough strays as it is, kid."

It was Andy's turn to look sad at that, but Bobby chose not to notice. It was a terrible mistake, in hindsight. If he'd been paying more attention, he might have seen that sadness turn into the furled brow of thought, which evolved into the wide eyed delight of an idea, followed ultimately by a dangerous amount of determination.

-o-o-o-

Andy was, indeed, determined. Bobby almost never answered him out loud, whether or not he signed or psychic'ed his questions. Bobby *always* signed back as long as his hands were free. Andy figured it was something between gruff poking and sincere encouragement, but whichever it was, Bobby was damn stubborn about it. Andy could count the times Bobby'd answered him out loud on, like, one hand. And in just one conversation he'd done it *twice*.

(The kid didn't actually know when Bobby had time to become an expert in ASL, but it seemed overnight. He'd only managed to stump the old man once, and they'd looked the Sign up together for that one. Andy was still pretty slow with it, himself. Like learning any new language, it took time to deconstruct what he wanted to say and rebuild the sentence in gestures, which he had to remember or spell out letter by letter if he couldn't. Bobby was patient, in a gruff way. He stood silent and expecting, but never pushed. He corrected Andy when he reversed hand positions or words, but was never discouraging. He was a great teacher. A great, scary, scary teacher.)

No, Bobby was clearly torn up about his old dog, and it was a snowball of sadness resulting in a lack of current dog. Well, Andy was going to fix it…somehow.

Which meant a trip into town.

-o-o-o-

The first time Sheriff Jody Mills met Andy Gallagher, she'd been on her way into McGregory Grant's hardware store. Bobby Singer - the town drunk - was on his way out, led by a scrawny little college-aged kid who'd held the door open for him with a flourish that screamed sarcasm, but well-intentioned. Jody had bit back a grin as the gruff old mechanic walked the door with half an eye roll and absolutely no comment.

Noticing the Sheriff on her way in, the kid continued holding the door open, adding a low, utterly exaggerated bow and gentleman's tip of his non-existent hat to the flourish this time. Jody dipped her head in his direction with a wink.

"Why thank you, sir," she'd said, with no shortage of well-intended sarcasm of her own. The kid straightened but didn't say a word in response. He just smiled and gave her a little two fingered salute. Which was when Jody noticed the bruises and cuts scattered across his face - old and starting to fade, but no less startling for their

severity - and the bright white bandage wrapping most of his neck.

Startled by the injuries – clearly extensive – on a pretty young man who certainly gave off a charming first impression, Jody wasn't able to form another response before the kid bounded off after Bobby Singer, practically skipping to the man's truck. She watched from just inside the door of the hardware store as they pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road, headed in the direction of Singer's salvage yard.

Still a little shaken – that boy certainly hadn't looked the type to get himself into a fight, and definitely not one so bad it ended with him through the ringer – Jody headed directly for the counter rather than the aisles.

"Morning, Sheriff," Grant greeted with his deep voice and generally unshifting, weathered face. "What can I do for ya today?"

"Morning, McGregor. Was that Bobby Singer I saw heading out just now?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at the front doors.

"Sure was."

Jody turned back, offering what was supposed to be a smile but felt a little tight. "And the kid with him? Ever seen him before?"

McGregory shrugged, which wasn't much more or less than the Sheriff had been expecting. Grant wasn't known as the gossiping sort. "Last week, but not before that."

"Any idea where he got those injuries?" Jody raised an eyebrow questioningly, but kept her tone as neutral as such a question could be.

The store owner just shook his head, eyes serious but face impassive behind his graying beard. "Far as I know, kid can't talk so I didn't ask. Bobby's a good customer and I don't take to prying."

Jody nodded, understanding that. Midwestern hospitality was a thing Sioux Falls residents took great pride in, but part of that hospitality included a knowing respect that some people's business was their own to keep private. It had been a long shot asking, but those bruises were enough to peak her curiosity as a law officer…and perhaps her concern as a mother. She thanked Grant, heading into the aisles for the road salt and buckets she'd come for.

That had been a week ago, and Jody Mills hadn't seen Singer or his

new tagalong since. Not surprisingly, really. Bobby was known for being somewhat of a recluse, only coming into town for supplies as needed. He wasn't one to mingle or dally. No reason a new face hanging around would change that much. And between Mrs. Hutchins starting another row with her neighbor over dog excrement in her yard and Digger racking up yet another drunk and disorderly for his record right alongside a night in the drunk tank, Jody hadn't found much time for digging into the new kid.

Which was why it was somewhat of a surprise that he was hanging around the parking lot of the Sheriff's office, kicking off the wall he was leaning on when she came out the front. He jogged up to her without Jody even noticing the young man at first, tapping her on the shoulder just as she got to her car.

He was moving his hands in a series of gestures before she even got a word out, and Jody blinked at the rapid movement. She supposed that confirmed one theory, at least; the kid was mute.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie. I don't know Sign," she offered with an apologetic smile, but turned fully to give him her attention. The man waved away her comment like it was no big deal, and instead mimed holding a pencil and scribbling through the air.

Oh, right, paper. She snapped her notepad off her belt, flipping the small thing open to the first blank page, and handed it over. The kid pulled the little attached pencil free from its fastening and started scribbling away. As he wrote, Jody took a moment to study him more closely.

The bruises across his jaw, cheek, and brow were faded significantly more, now a mere smattering of yellow-ish skin with very little swelling remaining. The cuts and scratches were a mix of fading red and healing scabs. A couple had the telling, white dotted scars of removed sutures, but looked decently cared for overall. The bandage around his neck was a mystery, hiding away whatever had happened there to take away the kid's voice.

Overall, hell had clearly happened to this young man, but he seemed well on the other side of it, and at least caring for the injuries properly.

"You're living with Bobby Singer, right? At the Salvage Yard?" Jody couldn't help but pry. It was her job, after all. When the kid looked up, pausing in his writing to give her a smile and a nod. She returned both

gestures absently. "You a relative of his?"

He tipped his head to the side in a contemplative, sheepish, wishy-washy way before nodding again, with a grin that said *close enough*. Jody could understand that, chuckling lightly.

"Uh-huh. He treating you right?" At the puzzled look she got in return, Jody decided to be a little more direct. She eyed the bruises across his brow, down his cheek and jaw, to the bandaged around his neck and finally down at his hands, where healing cuts marred the fingers wrapped around her pen. He followed her gaze down. "Is he drinking too much?"

The kid's head snapped back up, mouth forming a perfectly readable, '*Oh*' before scrunching up comically. It was clear from his expression of horror, shake of head, and then sheepish grin that Jody was barking up the wrong tree. He hastily shook the hand holding the pen back and forth in such a cartoonish symbol for no that Jody huffed, unable to help the smile.

"Alright, then." She decided to leave it at that. This kid could tell her in his own time about the wringer he'd been through, if he wanted to. Just so long as it hadn't been at the hands of anybody in her town.

Then he was holding the pad back out, and she took it with piqued interest.

Jody's eyebrows climbed into her bangs as she read his - Andy, as he'd introduced himself in the first line - request. When she glanced back up, Andy Gallagher was grinning widely.

-o-o-o-

When Bobby got back from an errand run later that week, Andy was lying stomach down on the rug in the den, feet swinging in the air behind him, occasionally tapping his shoes together while madly tapping away on his phone. He was surrounded by books, both open and stacked, that looked familiar enough Bobby figured they were from his own collection.

"That the boys?" Bobby asked aloud, if only because his hands were full of a brown paper bag of groceries and a six pack. Andy looked up at the question, eyebrows climbing for clarification. The old man gestured to the phone in the kid's hand with his chin, Andy's thumbs still going at it despite his attention now being on Bobby.

The kid glanced down at his phone, then back at the older hunter, shaking his head.

Bobby frowned, torn between the kitchen to put away his slowly melting tub of Bluebell *Pecan Pralines 'N Cream* and the curiosity lying on the ground right in front of him, texting an additional mystery. He huffed, surrendering to his curiosity. "Then who you talking to?"

Andy pulled a face, using one hand to gesture aimlessly in dramatized confusion. Bobby wasn't buying it for a second, but the kid set the phone down, freeing his other hand for proper Sign.

'*I'm allowed to have friends.'*

Bobby blinked once at the defensiveness of Andy's hands, then a second time at the juxtaposed expression of mischief written all over the kid's face. A bad feeling, entirely unlike that of a hunt gone south and much more what Bobby imaged parents of toddlers and teenagers alike felt all the time, settled in the pit of his stomach.

"Uh….never said you weren't…"

Bobby turned, paused, almost turned back, then just shook his head and resumed his way to the kitchen. He had ice cream to save, after all, and the combo of the kid surrounded by his occultbooks while texting 'friends' wasn't something Bobby planned on touching with a ten foot pole. Not till he had to, at least.

Several weeks later, he'd look back on that moment and realize it had been his second mistake.

-o-o-o-

It was midday when the van showed up. Andy was out back, leaning against the house, smoking a joint lazily in the sunshine. Bobby had told him on day two of living with the man that he could inhale whatever crap he wanted into his lungs, just so long as he didn't do it in the house. So Andy took to smoking outside, which didn't really bother him. It was chilly, what with it still being winter in South Dakota, but he'd bundle up with a knitted sweater Bobby had handed to him one night with a grumble and what Andy had obviously incorrectly identified as a rosy tint to his cheeks. Bobby Singer didn't *blush*, so obviously he'd been having a heart attack or asphyxiating after choking on his own spit or something. Anyway! The thing had been hand knitted (which led Andy to further incorrect suspicions that Bobby had a hobby on the side belonging to little old

ladies, loving mothers, and adorable housewives). It was also at least two decades old, given the pattern and clear aging of the yarn (leading Andy to even more conjecture about Bobby's own mother, or possibly one of those adorable housewives, which meant the next time Andy went snooping around the house he had a new goal in mind). The kid had been expecting some itchy, threadbare monstrosity that provided a bit of warmth but not much else when he'd slid it over his head the first night, only to find its age had left the sweater properly worn in and downright *snuggly*.

When Bobby handed him the matching, hand knitted beanie without making eye contact, Andy's little trash-tv-obsessed heart just about lost it.

So there he was, smoking in the chilly sunshine in Bobby Singer's mysteriously loved sweater and cap, when he heard the noise coming 'round from the front. The Salvage Yard didn't get a whole lot of visitors. In the four weeks Andy had been there so far, there'd only been a handful of customers (muggle and magical alike, or so Andy Gallagher liked to think of them), and the Winchesters returning from that fake hunt in Indiana. So the commotion wasn't common. Andy clipped off the end of his joint, having only imbibed about a third of it, and pocketed what was left. He gave himself a light pat down – it would be no good running into a local townie smelling like weed and getting Bobby in trouble – before walking almost lazily around the house to the front.

He froze when he saw her. Gleaming in the sunlight, all gorgeous curves and aging paint, edges rusting and the rest an absolutely hideous burnt orange. Dented on one side, a side mirror hanging loose, swaying dangerously given all that was left of its attachment point was a single, precariously frayed wire.

She was *perfect*.

Bobby was talking with a rough and tumble gentleman unhooking the Dodge Tradesman from the tow truck he'd driven into the yard. Andy barely gave the guy a chance to shake Bobby's hand before he was between him and the hunter, signing furiously to Bobby.

'*I want her.*'

The old hunter blinked at him, then glanced at the trucker over Andy's shoulder who shrugged and, with raised hands, headed back for his rig. Bobby shook his head, raising his own hands to reply.

'*She doesn't run,'* he signed, before giving a wave to the guy climbing into his truck, which started with a heavy rumble. "Thanks, Joe."

'*I want her!'* Andy repeated, ignoring the grumbled, "Yeah, Bobby, see ya next time," that came from the so-called Joe as the truck's door slammed shut with a metallic creak. The kid was busy grinning hopefully as he glanced between his future lady and his current landlord. Bobby followed the gaze, eyebrows up. He was clearly torn between confusion and amusement.

'*What for?'* he asked. '*What do you need with a car that doesn't run?'*

Andy's grin widened. Bobby worried the kid might hurt himself, smile that big. '*Live in it!'*

The old man offered an unimpressed stare. '*My house not good enough for you?'*

To the kid's credit, he had the decency to look horrified, which amused Bobby to no end. He, of all people, understood the need for space. He'd lived alone since Karen – with the exception of a pair of boys now and then, growing up through the years – but now he was playing permanent host to a twenty-something kid he had no idea what to do with. And he'd always liked his space being, well, *his.* Hell, Bobby could use some alone time himself, which meant he'd been totally fine from the start with the kid camping out in this piece of junk and making it his own if he wanted to. Not that he needed to let the boy off that easy, of course.

Andy was floundering, flailing his hands in messy sign after sign as he attempted to explain himself without insulting Bobby further. It was pretty adorable, not that the gruff old man would ever admit to such a thing aloud. He let the kid go on for another minute before finally cutting him loose.

'*Stop,'* he managed to sign, only barely keeping the smirk buried under his mostly manufactured grump. He had a reputation to keep, after all. '*I get it. She's all yours.'*

It wasn't like there was much left of her to strip anyway. The only thing with much value would be bits and pieces of the engine, and if Andy didn't care whether or not she ran, then Bobby could clear it out for anything worth some money, or leave it for the next time he needed parts for a Tradesman.

'*But!'* He signed quickly before the kid could start celebrating. '*I expect*

some compensation.'

At the '*what'* gesture Andy made, not quite signing but reading clear all the same, Bobby crossed his arms for the sake of intimidation and clearly stating who was – and would remain – the boss around here. Which, he realized a moment later, made Signing real damn difficult.

"Chores, kid. You gotta pay for her somehow." Even as he said it, he dug a hand into his pocket for the keys as a cover for why he hadn't signed back. Damn kid always gave him grief about communicating in a not-psychic manner, and Bobby wasn't one to back down about a point. Especially when he was right.

Andy, however, was giving him a look torn between indignation and suspicion, like he might be onto Bobby's game.

'*But you got her for free!'* Andy was pretty sure he had, anyway. He hadn't seen money exchange hands and…well…. He glanced over at his beauty, his life, his soon to be everything. The side mirror took that perfect opportunity to break fully free with a snap and fall to the ground.

Yeah, he wouldn't have paid anything for her either.

"Don't mean I give her away for free,"Bobby answered verbally, but also half-signing with his free hand. "Running a business here, kid."

Andy might have snorted at that if he wasn't trying to weasel a free van off the old man. This had been so much easier when he'd had his powers. But alas, such days were behind him. So he promised to do a gazillion chores, even spelling out the word one letter at a time (both because gazillion wasn't a real word and so didn't have a sign, and just to make the hunter happy that he was getting faster with hand spelling). The extra charm seemed to appease Bobby, who harrumphed but handed over the keys, more symbolically than for any purpose they actually served.

The kid fist-pumped the air and then turned and bodily hugged his new van. Bobby rolled his eyes and turned back to the house before anyone could catch him smiling.

-o-o-o-

Andy was in the den once more, spread out on his stomach in front of Bobby's desk, clicking his heels together like Dorothy trying to get home from Oz. It was something he'd taken to doing as a kid –

working on homework on the floor rather than at a desk – and he'd never really shaken the comfort of that habit. It probably started with coloring books way back when and he just kept it going into school, surrounding himself with workbooks and textbooks instead of coloring pages and crayons. Even years later as a senior in high school, the carpet in his bedroom had always held more appeal than the desk his dad made sure he had. By the time he'd finished with school and decided there were other pursuits worth his time that didn't involve homework, that surface had never been used, buried under books about six deep, pencils and pens and whatnot, a beat up PlayStation on its last leg, and an old TV his dad had let him have in his room when they got a new one in the family room.

(Not that they'd ever been much of a family, or ever watched TV together. All the more reason to have one in his room, he supposed.)

It's probably what made living in a van after he left home so easy for Andy, bumming it however he wanted whatever way he wanted. Sitting at a desk all day, stuck in a cubicle or coming home to a white picket fence and a family dinner table had never been his style. Especially once he got his powers and didn't need an income to survive.

His new Lady wasn't quite ready for living in yet, though. And, to be honest, Andy figured it would be a part time thing at best anyway. More like a place to smoke freely, read and relax while having a little space to himself than an actual *living* arrangement. He and Bobby usually tag-teamed meals, anyway, so he'd have to be back in the house every morning and evening anyway (something so ridiculously domestic it never failed to leave Andy smirking, which usually led to nothing short of banter and bickering – moments Andy wouldn't trade, even for a van, since he walked away almost always the victor. Almost.)

Plus, it got friggin' *cold* in South Dakota, and his Baby didn't have a heat source. Yet.

Has the eagle landed?

Andy tapped his feet again, bumping the balls of his ankles together twice before dropping his legs back down, toes bouncing off the carpet as he waited for a reply to his text. Bobby was on the phone at his desk – talking to a hunter by the sound of the conversation – but Andy was only half listening to the case. He had his own mission underway.

I'm not using codewords, kid. Especially such cliche ones.

The psychic grinned as his phone buzzed in his hand and the return text came through. He chuckled silently to himself, thumbs already at work crafting his most excellent response.

But has it landed?

His phone buzzed almost immediately.

NO.

A few moments later a second text came in, which Andy had been anticipating. Some people had a pattern to their texting habits, and his new pen pal was shamelessly predictable in her lecturing.

I told you, these things take time. Give me a couple weeks.

Andy went back to tapping his feet together, grin wide across his face. *It's been a couple weeks!*

It's been ONE week.

Right, which is only one less than a couple!

P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E

Andy sighed dramatically, tilting his head back and lowering the phone to the ground. The Sheriff was such a *mom.*

"You saw *what*?" Bobby's voice grew in volume, a sure sign that he was as surprised as he was increasingly worried. Andy looked up, watching the older man's expression as Bobby rubbed at his forehead, pushing his hat almost off his head in the process. "Well that don't make a lick o' sense."

Andy's phone buzzed again, but he was focused on Bobby's case now, trying to recall what the man had been talking about just before. He knew he was talking to a pair of hunters and that they were investigating something in a forest somewhere cold, given the jokes about snow and 'freezing' one's 'balls off.' Andy frowned, something about that poking at his brain.

"I don't know what to tell ya, Isaac," Bobby sighed, resettling his baseball cap to its rightful place. "I'll keep digging for something that's got antlers, red eyes, and is also somehow *invisible* at the same time. Just…." Bobby let out a noise reminiscent of someone starting a fight

they knew they weren't gonna win. "Don't go after again it till I get back to ya, alright?"

The kid stopped listening, those three things Bobby had said pinging off the inside of his skull like a pinball machine. He propped himself up to the point of looking like a seal, eyes wide. He must have read about it recently. That's why it sounded familiar! Andy's eyes fell to the dozen or so books surrounding him. They weren't the only ones he'd read in the last couple weeks of living at the Salvage Yard, but they were a good place to start. He jumped to his feet, staying in a crouch as he started shuffling through the various tombs, checking the titles and table of contents for a subject that made sense with creatures that took on animal forms, liked the cold, or lived in the woods. It had to be one of those things that he was triggering his memory.

When he found it – a lengthy read about Indigenous myths, creatures, and legends he'd started out of sheer boredom earlier in the week and actually found completely fascinating – Andy jumped to his feet in excitement, book raised high. Bobby's head lifted for a minute in surprise and confusion, giving the kid a hell of a look – before going back to his phone call. Which…okay, fair. Andy was pretty well used to getting that same look by now, and not without having earned it along the way.

But this was important! He knew what those hunters were facing.

He waved his arms in equal parts excitement and to get the older man's attention, but Bobby was now in a heated argument with someone else, some lady named Tamara. So Andy did the only thing he could without a voice.

Bobby jerked at the sudden flash of images – illustrations from a book, exclamation marks, and flashes of text that came and went too damn fast to ever have a hope of reading – and glared at the man standing in front of him pointing to a book.

"Damnit, kid, I'm busy here!"

Andy dropped his hands at that, momentarily taken aback at the biting delivery of Bobby's equally sharp words. It was the first time he'd ever raised his voice at the kid, and the gruff old man could already feel the guilt welling. Not that he had time for that right now. Damnit, he'd apologize later, once he made sure Isaac and Tamara didn't go get themselves killed hunting something they didn't even

know the identity of yet.

But Andy was a trooper – a strong kid and a hell of a hunter, really – because he walked right up to Bobby's desk and dropped the book right in front of the man, tapping it twice with his finger pointedly.

'The last thing you said,' Andy signed determinedly, and Bobby watched his hands carefully, phone still pressed to his ear and Tamara hollering on the other end. *'About antlers and red eyes.'*

The kid tapped the book again, and Bobby read the title, frown forming as he realized Andy had only been interrupting to help on the case.

"I'll call you back, Tamara. *Do not* go after it yet, ya here? We're figuring out what this is, just give us a second." With that, Bobby lowered the phone back to the desk, the tinny sound of her reply, "*Who's, 'we?'"* lost to the beep of Bobby hanging up on her.

The old hunter picked up the book, eyeing the cover for another moment before holding it out to Andy, gaze serious. "Show me."

So Andy did. The creature was called an Ijiraq. It was a pretty obscure creature, mostly lost to time and the lack of a written history over an oral one. Plus the fact that they lived almost exclusively in the arctic and only prayed on the kids of Inuit tribes way up north. Which kind of spoke to why no American hunter had so far encountered one. There was hardly an entire page dedicated to it in the book, but it was all in there. A shapeshifter that always had red eyes, no matter the shape they took on. But they often took on the image of caribou – hence the antlers – and could be spotted out of your peripheral, only to disappear whenever you looked straight on at one. Which had given validity to the local legend that they could turn invisible.

Bobby called Tamara back as soon as he was sure, but Andy had done good work. He relayed the information, including best known ways to kill one, and where to find the kids the thing had taken. Then he hung up and eyed his house ward, who'd gone back to lying on the carpet texting his pen pal.

"You…uh…" Bobby made a clucking sound with his tongue, knowing what he wanted to say but also knowing he owed the kid an apology. "Damn. I'm sorry I snapped at ya, kid."

Andy's hand reached up from the ground, just visible beyond the edge of the desk, and flapped back and forth forgivingly.

"So. You ever thought of helping out around here?"

The kid's head popped up over the edge of the desk next, a frown bordering on a pout firmly on his face. He waved around the room, then signed, *'What do you think that was?'*

Bobby snorted. *'I meant on a regular basis.'*

Andy's jaw dropped open in a moment of surprise, and his eyes blinked the *'oh...'* he needn't bother signing. He settled back on his calves, having bounced up onto his knees to converse with Bobby. The hunter leaned forward on his desk, making a *'well?'* gesture with one hand.

The kid seemed to be giving it serious thought before raising his hands. *'Like a job?'*

Bobby developed a frown of his own. *'Yeah. Sort of.'*

Andy's grin spelled trouble from a mile away. He raised one hand, rubbing his fingers against his thumb in a universal sign, no ASL needed. *'Money?'*

This time the snort Bobby gave was about as clear an answer as that non-Sign gesture had been. He spread his arms out even as he climbed to his feet. "What do I look like, a bank?"

He headed to the kitchen for a beer, leaving Andy in the den. Bobby already knew he had the kid; Andy was too good a soul not to help out and, more than that, he could tell the kid was already hooked. He was too good a researcher. But, not one to give up on a good argument when he was most definitely winning, Bobby tossed over his shoulder, "It's called room and board, kid."

The hunter was sure of the laughter happening behind him, silent though it may be. It was confirmed when an image flashed through his brain of a certain Dodge Tradesman waiting out front. He harrumphed – something he did anytime he wanted to cover up the fact he was laughing – and shook his head in amusement as he opened the fridge.

"Yeah, yeah, alright. And yer van."

-o-o-o-

The box wasn't anything particularly special, not to Andy. Just

another piece of so-'n-so yet to be discovered in Bobby's house. He'd gone snooping, just like he promised himself he would, next time the older man was out running an errand or, in this case, helping another hunter. Bobby had only done the latter twice now, and only after extensive persuading (more than Andy had anticipated) the first time. He'd been surprised how much assurance it took to convince the man that he was *fine* on his own for a single hunt. All grown up and ready to sit in an old, drafty house on his lonesome without supervision.

(The look Bobby had given him at *that* had not been a pleasant one, and probably added an extra twenty minutes of convincing to the already day-long streak he'd been swinging.)

So, Bobby was out helping a friend on something he promised would be quick – a day or two max – which left Andy ample time to start looking around for evidence of that loving mother or adoring housewife. He'd found what he'd been looking for on the evening of the second day; there was a picture tucked away behind some boxes in the closet of Cas's room (one of the last rooms Andy had left to explore. Something about poking about while an angel lay comatose ten feet away was…disconcerting.)

Whoever she'd been – Andy also found a tattered booklet from a memorial service long since passed and instantly felt like crap for digging – she was beautiful. And the smiling face of Bobby, arms wrapped around her, was almost foreign.

Andy had tucked the picture away just like he'd found it, and retreated.

Now he was snooping just for funsies. Hey, come on, he was *bored* and left without supervision. Bobby really should have known better. Which was how he found the box, shoved in the back of one of the desk drawers in the den. It wasn't much, just five pieces of wood seamlessly fit together and a sixth top piece painted with a blue, oblong, squished up star he'd never seen before.

Well-used to occult objects (and their dangers) randomly tucked in the nooks and crannies of Bobby's house, Andy did the cursory check for any traps or spells. Bobby had taught him the basics on day one, shortly after giving him the all clear to explore the house as he pleased and realizing what a terrible mistake that had been. He didn't see any telltale signs here, so, gingerly, he slid open the top.

Huh. There was nothing inside but an old, antique key.

Andy shrugged, a little bummed by the lack of something exciting, and was sliding the top of the box back on when the phone rang. He almost fumbled the box in surprise, head jerking to the kitchen where the row of landlines hung on the wall. Quickly, as if Bobby was on the other line and new *exactly* what he'd been up to while the hunter was gone, Andy shoved the lid back onto the box, the box back into the drawer, and the drawer shut as fast as he could. Then he hopped off the desk and bolted for the kitchen.

It was Bobby's main line – none of the duplicate ones meant for verifying some hunter's alibi or identity as a cop or whatnot – so Andy went ahead and picked it up. Given his recent communication… er, *challenges*, he wasn't supposed to answer any of those other phones, but since helping out on the Ijiraq case, Bobby had gone ahead and told some of those hunting buddies that he had a research 'colleague' (Bobby's words, not Andy's). He'd told 'em to spread the word, that the kid might be the one to pick up but he'd only be speaking in Morse.

So Andy put the phone to his ear, grabbed a pen off the kitchen table, and started tapping away for the hunter in need on the other end.

It was time to earn his new Lady!

-o-o-o-

Can't believe I'm saying this but….

At the vibration against his thigh that indicated a new text, Andy paused in his retro-fitting on said Lady – working an old twin mattress into the back for a cozier place to hang out – and pulled his phone out.

The eagle has landed.

Once he read the newest texts, Andy's grin grew until it couldn't possibly be any bigger. And it was only half because Sheriff Mills had finally caved to the use of codewords.

Even without magical powers that could people bend to his will, Andy still had it.

Roger that!

-o-o-o-

Andy waited excitedly for Bobby to return from the hunt. He'd told

Sheriff Mills to hold off, since the old man wasn't in town yet. He'd wanted to take the dog – Sarge, Jody said – in right away and just surprise Bobby when he got home, but the Sheriff assured him it didn't work that way. If it was going to be Bobby Singer's dog, Bobby had to be there for the drop-off.

So there Andy was, waiting excitedly for the tell-tale rumble of Bobby's truck. The hunter had phoned from the road a couple hours out, and that was a couple hours ago now. He was practically twitching with excitement, leg jiggling as he alternated between staring at his phone and looking out one of the front windows at the empty road. Bobby was taking his sweet-ass time, dangit.

The minute he heard it – the rumble of that old truck turning off the paved highway onto the dirt lot – rapid-fire thumbs sent a confirmation text to Sheriff Mills, giving her the all clear to come on over with Sarge.

Papa bird is back in the nest!

His phone buzzed almost immediately in reply.

Sigh.

He cackled noiselessly at the single word and tucked his phone into his pocket. His new pen pal had literally written out the word *sigh*. Oh yeah, he definitely still had it.

Bobby stomped through the front door looking tired and in need of a beer, which Andy presented to him on cue. The old hunter eyed the drink warily, definitely aware of a pot-sweetener when he saw one (even if he was unaware of the existence of a pot or what exactly was already in it), but took it all the same. He surveyed the house with the same amount of hesitant caution.

Andy raised his eyebrows.

"Just checking you didn't throw a wild rager or something," Bobby grumbled, but nodded approvingly at the state of his home. He popped the beer, taking a swig. Nothing much was out of place, if you took into account that a kid had been living there for the last couple days.

The look said kid gave him was a wounded one. Dramatically so.

'You don't trust me?' he signed, adding big puppy dog eyes and huge

brows for emphasis. Bobby snorted. *'Besides, who would I invite?'*

The hunter got to raise his own eyebrows in response to that one, pointedly dropping his gaze to the kid's cell, which was buzzing away on the kitchen table. No doubt the kid's new 'pen pal'. Andy just smiled, though it was far from innocent.

'Who, that?' he signed, the picture of incorruptibility but with an air that Bobby was missing out on a joke. The hunter wasn't buying it for a second. He hadn't been born yesterday, thank you very much. Still, Andy just kept on smiling. *'It would have been a really short rager.'*

He even took the time to spell out the word, rather than use the easier sign for party. Specificity was important, here.

Bobby didn't know what to make of that, eyeing him. Which was right about the time the doorbell rang. The hunter's eyes narrowed in suspicion at the still idyllic grin on the kid's face before setting down his beer.

"Uh-huh," he muttered, turning and heading towards his front door. Andy skipped along behind him, doing a terrible job at concealing his excitement.

Opening his door and expecting…. Well, Bobby didn't know what he was expecting, but Sheriff Mills standing on his front step with a canine unit sure as hell wasn't it. The German Shephard was panting lightly, tongue lolling as he sat patiently by Jody's side, and the Sheriff gave a warm smile to the old hunter. Bobby wasn't buying that, either.

"You got a warrant, Sheriff?" was his first question, second only to *'what did I do now?'* which he didn't bother voicing aloud. He eyed the dog warily. It had to be something big if she'd brought a search dog with her. At least he didn't currently have any bodies buried on the property. Thank God for that timing.

Jody's eyebrows went up. If he didn't know any better, she looked damned amused. "Do I need one?"

"If you're planning on bringing that mutt in here, then yeah, you'll be needing one." Bobby crossed his arms, not one to mince words with the local officers. Jody was a nice enough woman, but he couldn't say it was the first time she'd shown up on his property with one complaint or another. Stolen vehicles, public intoxication, that one brawl fight that led to a bogus assault charge, yada yada yada. He'd

heard it all.

The Sheriff, much to Bobby's surprise, just chuckled. She shook her head with nothing short of a disappointed soccer mom expression intermingled with amusement and a dash of *'oh boy, I can't believe this. No, wait, I'm raising a toddler, I absolutely can believe it.'*

"He didn't tell you," she said and Bobby immediately became a whole different type of suspicious. His first instinct was to turn back into the house and find that troublemaking stray who absolutely had to be the 'he' in this conversation, but the Sheriff was still talking. "Alrighty then, guess I'll just have to leave Sarge right here on the porch."

The look on Bobby's face made Jody absolutely wish she had a camera, a thought that only doubled down when Andy came barreling out onto the porch past the frazzled older man. The kid wrapped Jody in hug – the Sheriff letting out a startled explanation that turned genuine enough as she returned his embrace one-armed – before he knelt down on the increasingly crowded porch and gave Sarge a good scratch.

"What in hell's name is going on here?" Bobby tried to holler, but his frustration was outweighed largely by exasperation, especially as Andy immediately climbed back to his feet, taking the leash from Sheriff Mills and trotting inside. The dog followed obediently as Andy started signing – at first over his shoulder and then, realizing how not-well that was working, spun on his heel, slipped the leash over his wrist, and started signing with both hands while still walking, only to run into the first available piece of furniture with a loud thud and a cringe – about the dog's sit command.

Not that Jody Mills could understand what he was asking. But Bobby sure as hell did.

"Oh, no. No, no, no, no, *no*." Now that he was properly hollering, he added a shaking finger for extra emphasis. But before Bobby could follow the kid and their absolutely-not-staying canine guest, Jody pushed some papers into his chest, interrupting his path back inside. He grabbed at them distractedly, momentarily caught off guard until he glanced down and realized they were adoption papers.

He glared at the woman, mostly for daring to sit there smiling that smug little smile, like this was all somehow *sweet*, and instead went back to yelling at his kid. This time waving the papers around. "I told you I didn't want another dog!"

Andy perked up from inside, where he was crouched in front of a sitting Sarge trying to get him to shake. He immediately gave up that endeavor in order to reply. *'No, you said you didn't want to train another dog! Well, Sarge comes fully trained!'*

"What'd he say?" Sheriff Mills asked, leaning in to see the kid past the doorway. Bobby huffed something unseemly, but also along the lines of what Andy had said. Jody straightened back up, puttering her hands on her hips with a simple smile and a nod. "That's right. Sarge is retired K-9 unit. Fully trained. There's a page in there on all his verbal commands and hand signals."

She pointed to one of papers Bobby was holding and out of politeness and *absolutely nothing more*, he flipped to it.

"His handler died in the line of duty. As is tradition when that kind of tragedy happens, Sarge was retired and put up for adoption. The family of the fallen gets first say, then other cops, then the general public." Jody smiled something a little more sad than sweet. "Andy said you were looking for a new dog, fully trained, already grown. Sarge is seven years old and sure could use a loving home. It hasn't been easy on him since his owner died, and he's got no one else.

Bobby Singer could spot a guilt trip well more than a mile away…but it didn't mean he was any less susceptible to it working on him, damnit.

The kid looked up at the absolute worst damn moment, too. The way his eyes lit up and that damn happy smile across his face – like a kid at Christmas who just gave the best damn gift instead of getting it himself – cemented it. No turning back now. But Bobby didn't have to be happy about it, damnit.

"*You're* taking care of him!" he hollered, for show if nothing more. Andy nodded far too enthusiastically. Bobby held out the pages he was holding, the one with Sarge's training right on top. The kid practically stumbled to his feet, grin never fading, to come grab the pages. "That means walks and exercise! And keeping up on his training."

Andy was still nodding, already back in front of Sarge, who'd stayed waiting, sitting patiently. Bobby tried to think of something grumpy to say, or more chores to demand from the kid. (Who wasn't even a friggin' kid, dangit, but a full grown man definitely acting like the five year old. But, well, a responsible five year old at least).

He was already practicing one of the hand signals with Sarge. The dog followed along perfectly obediently, lifting a paw to set it perfectly in Andy's hand. Jody Mills was still on his front step, grinning herself silly too.

So Bobby just sighed. Guess they had a new dog.

-o-o-o-

- Present -

Andy summed all of that up in like three images and eight hand gestures from within a new cloud of smoke that was once again so thick they could barely see the kid. Which made his signing about as clear as the story had been.

Not that Dean, at least, had been expecting much more.

"Cool van," he said in response, grin matching Andy's, both entirely too pleased with themselves.

Sam, meanwhile, was frowning, those big puppy dog eyes looking between Andy, Dean, and Bobby with clear confusion, like he was missing a piece of the puzzle everyone else seemed to have. "Who's Jody Mills?"

Then Ronald woke up, and they all knew the moment he did, because his screaming was clearly audible even out in the yard.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: When this chapter started, I was seriously worried about being able to fill the entire thing with just Andy's time at Bobby's. I was so worried I wouldn't have enough material that I started coming up with backup plans on what to fill the second half of the chapter with. For reals, 113 chapters in, three years, seven novels worth of words, you'd think I'd have, you know, PICKED UP on the fact that I'm VERBOSE AF. ALWAYS. But nope! I was legit worried I wouldn't be able to fill out this chapter. And then the Muse heard the name 'Andy Gallagher' and was all "hold my Chai Tea Latte."

[head thud]

Bobby Losing His Temper: Also, writing Bobby getting angry at the kid was *hard*. I had to quit that part and come back to it

several times. It was just *one* line and everyone is allowed to lose their temper but gaaaaah, I did not like it.

Bunker Key: Also, Also. How'd you all like that reminder that the bunker key's still just hanging out in Bobby's desk, just **waiting.** Huh? Huh? Huh? [immediately ducks for cover, chortling in many a no good, dirty rotten way] I swear, I am teasing and taunting because I can, but it *is* coming. By the end of Season 2, cross my heart! (and we're finally, finally not that far away from that finale!)

(…which still means like…twenty chapters away because…you know, verbose af [head thud])

((because we're only got one episodic case left between us and the finale, but that'll be at least three chapters, probably four or five, and then there's setup for the finale, and that'll be at least three damnit, and then the actual finale and lord knows how long that'll actually be. Sweet jesus.))

(((but I swear, we're close. So close.)))

Sarge: Also, Also, Also. About Sarge. So waaaay back in Season 1, I allowed Rumsfeld to meet the same fate as he did on the show, but I couldn't bring myself to write or even acknowledge that I'd done it. I swore to myself many, many years ago that I'd never kill off a dog in my writing – it's something I can't really handle to be honest. I can beat Dean within an inch of his life and put Sammy through withdrawal, but hurt a dog? NOPE.

But then I ran headlong into this story without thinking, at all, about Rumsfeld and changing his fate, right up to the point where Meg had already shown up and I realized I had done *nothing* to change how that happened. So I had to stay committed to the canon story line because there was no reason it would change on its own and I'd messed up by not realizing I needed Rumsfeld mentioned, safe and inside, earlier. But rather than admit that, I just…ignored it. And then felt bad about it for years. Years, guys. Because it wasn't just sloppy of me, it's that I knew even then that I could do better and just…chose not to. I've been a bit ashamed of that ever since.

So! Sarge is my apology to myself, to all of you, and to Bobby for taking away his dog without even acknowledging that I'd done it. And while I will never promise the well-being of any other

character in any of my writing (because I'm a no good, dirty rotten author), Sarge is safe. I will never kill another dog in my writing.

Alrighty, that's it from me! (Damn was I chatty today) See y'all in two weeks! :D

Cheers,
Silence

UPDATE 3/5/2022: Alright, once again total apologies for the radio silence for weeks! It's been a very busy month at work which hasn't left much free time + I'm exhausted when I do have the free time. Also, and this is the most devistating: I'M OUT OF WRITTEN CHAPTERS D: [insert image of me wailing here. No, no, that's not dramatic enough. Really amp it up. Yeah, there you go. That's me right now] I've got the next chapter half written but dangit...I should never have said aloud that I thought these next few chapters would write themselves. That damn Muse perked right up and said, "What? Sweet! VACAY!!" To which I cried out "No, wait, I meant that you're the one who's going to write them-aaaand she's gone." Then, of course, the cosmos chimed in to say "dun, dun, duuuuun" Really, it's been a very exciting couple weeks over here -.- I will keep writing as much as I can as often as I can, and get you a chapter soon as it's written. Until then, thank you so much for your patience, understanding, and pokes!

Chapter 114: Season 2: Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I'm so sorry for the long delay again, everyone! I am still trying to establish a writing routine while working from home (aaaand struggling with the 'routine' bit of that). Luckily, I keep writing these beasts of chapters in the meantime, so you guys get nice long updates when they come.

Chapter Reference - Andy Losing his Powers: Quick reminder since it has been a long time now, Andy lost his powers when another psychic, Jonathon slashed his throat with a knife.

Chapter Reference - Dean Missing Chest Cas: Since Rivergrove, the warmth in his chest that was the sliver of Cas's grace has been missing. Castiel has confirmed it is still there, just weak and slowly growing in strength again, but Dean hasn't felt evidence of that yet.

Quality Warning: Man, I edited this thing so sporadically over so many days that I can't even tell you I got it all. I may have missed some sections. Please forgive any errors and, as always, apologies for any disturbance they cause to the story. I'm working on that beta thing (I...think)

Chapter Warnings: What started out as your favorite author writing five paragraphs about the boys calling it a night turned into five pages of Sam calling it a night and then Dean, the next morning, adding another five pages about him calling it a night the night before -_- But after we spend an ENTIRE CHAPTER'S LENGTH just saying goodnight to one another, we spend another chapter's length educating Ronald, eating pancakes, painting fences with blood, and playing fetch with Sarge. Yup. We got a lot to cover (and also...like, nothing at all?) so let's get to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 80

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

They decided to call it a night not long after. Ronald finally subsided in his panic (mostly), promised by the Winchesters several times over to have the rest of the supernatural world explained to them – specifically the teleporting bit – and the guarantee that the shifter in the bank had been taken care of. Well, that and the threat of being knocked unconscious by their resident…erm…. Actually, Dean had avoided telling the freaked out (if not normally entirely too enthusiastic) man the identity of their rescuer. He left it at, 'Yes, Ronald, she's not human. It's fine, she's with us.'

Dean couldn't exactly say he trust Ronald not to run his mouth to every single hunter he might meet from this day onward about the angel who'd rescued them from a shifter. Most hunters wouldn't believe him, which might be lucky for the Winchesters, but not so much for the future hunting career Ronald may or may not take up. Dean was more worried about the hunter that *did* believe him. All it would take was the wrong one and they'd have a whole new can of ugly to deal with.

Luckily, just Cas's presence in the same room as the panicking man made him…well, not any less panicky, but slightly more behaved.

With the promise of more information tomorrow, Ronald reluctantly agreed to let it be for the rest of the night. Bobby fetched a spare sheet and blanket, tossing both of them at the larger man then pointing at the couch in the den with the kind of eyebrow that begged to be argued with. With the boys upstairs and Andy camping out in his van for the evening, the couch was the last open bed in the house, minus Angela's hospital bed upstairs. Of course, Bobby wasn't fool enough to offer that up to anyone, both for the questions said person might have as to why there was an empty hospital bed in his guest bedroom, or the rage-storm it would surely stir up from Dean. Boy was damn sensitive about things he perceived as his angel's, and Bobby'd sure caught onto that quirk damn quick.

Ronald obediently set up his makeshift bed without a word (though not without at least some pouting, definitely some lingering confusion, and occasional wary glances towards the angel standing next to a yawning Dean in the kitchen).

Sam had to be dragged away from his laptop, which he'd immediately set up while everyone else in the house had been calming Ronald down. News coverage of the bank robbery was not looking particularly good for them on the internet. Dean told him to 'leave it' which got him a lecture from Sam *and* Bobby, before he reminded

them both he was from the damn future, he knew what it friggin' meant for them, thank you very much.

(Which triggered an entirely new, second round of freaking out on Ronald's behalf until Cas, without prompting, did just knock him out again. He fell perfectly onto the couch he'd just finished making up, and they left it at that with the guarantee from the angel that he would not be waking until morning.)

Dean gave up trying to pull his brother away from the news hunt despite the wee hours of the morning they were creeping into. He needed sleep more than he needed Sam to get sleep, so he gave up with a toss of his arms in the air and headed for the stairs. Cas followed the older Winchester without a word, and Bobby pushed the laptop closed much to Sam's protests. The older hunter just pointed towards the stairs with a no-nonsense glare, and the younger Winchester retreated with a pout all his own.

-o-o-o-

When Sam walked into the room he shared with his brother, the hunter pulled up short at the sight of Cas sitting on the edge of Dean's bed. His brother was already passed out, snoring on his back with one arm thrown over his head. The angel, however, was perched on the very edge of the bed, somehow simultaneously looking solid as a rock and like she might fall off the sliver of mattress she'd taken for herself with the smallest of weight shifts.

The hunter did a second double take when he realized Bobby's new dog, Sarge, was laying at the angel's feet, watching him with dark eyes.

Sam didn't move from his spot at the door, feeling for just a moment like he was interrupting something private. Something weirdly intimate. Well, except for the dog. That was just plain weird.

The whole thing was weird. And silly, really, because Dean was asleep and Cas was…well…*Cas*. As far as Sam knew, she didn't do intimate. At least not in any form that she'd then be embarrassed of.

So instead the younger Winchester cleared his throat, gave the angel a nod, and headed for his own bed. Pajamas were for people significantly less dead on their feet than the Winchesters, so Sam just pulled off his boots and prepared to climb under the covers. He paused again, eyeing Cas out of his peripheral, but the angel hadn't so much as twitched a muscle, let alone move.

"Thank you," Sam blurted out suddenly, though the unintended comment was no less sincere for its abruptness.

Cas turned her head to meet Sam's eyes, a slight pinch in her brow and miniscule head tilt giving away her confusion. Sam cleared his throat again.

"For, uh…" Saving Dean's life? Coming for them? The rescue from the bank and a last second save from life in prison? What Sam settled on, with a dart of brown eyes to Dean's sleeping form, was, "for watching out for him."

Which was really what the angel was doing now, wasn't it? Watching over the older Winchester. Over all of them, really (though Sam couldn't help but note it wasn't him Cas had followed upstairs). Dean had said, on more than one occasion, with more than just a little grump, that Castiel had no sense of personal space. Liked to watch them while they slept, he'd said, but even back then Sam had been pretty sure 'us' was really a 'me.' And sure enough, that's what Cas seemed intent to do. Watch over Sam's brother.

Intimate or not, private or not, it made Sam feel a lot better. And that's what he was thanking the angel for, he supposed, even more than saving Dean's life. His brother was a moron and a martyr. If anyone needed an angel watching over him, it was Dean.

Cas opened her mouth to respond but then tilted her head further to the side, listening. Sam was sure it was Angela she was listening to, so he waited. After a moment, Castiel righted her head and just nodded at Sam, accepting his thanks without verbal reply.

The younger Winchester was too tired to contemplate the conversation he hadn't been privy to, or what Cas might have said without Angela's input. So instead he climbed onto the mattress, just barely holding back a groan as his body sunk into the springs and his eyes closed without conscious thought. Before he could reach for the light that sat on the nightstand between the two beds, it went off on its own. Another thing to thank the angel for, Sam supposed, but didn't bother vocalizing. Instead, he lay on his side, covers pulled up to his chin, and opened his eyes to the outline of brother and angel, visible in the faint moonlight filtering through the window.

"Cas?"

"Yes, Sam?"

The younger hunter wondered if Castiel could see him in the dark. Did angels have night vision? He worked on slowing his breathing, even though he knew sleep was far away that night. It wouldn't really do much good to have an angel know how on the brink he was. Even now, safe at Bobby's…at least for the moment.

And wasn't that just the whole thing? For the moment. *For the moment* was turning into the rest of his life, wasn't it? Just one more quiet moment between next storm, and the one after that, and the one after that.

Sam didn't know how he was supposed to keep doing this.

"How did you know?" The younger Winchester hesitated to say more. Unsure how to say more. But when Cas didn't respond, and Sam could basically picture her head tilt in the dark, he amended, "That Dean…." He cleared his throat, past the lump that had formed there hours ago and didn't seem ready to disappear anytime soon. "That we needed you?"

"The wound in Dean's shoulder," Cas replied after a moment. Her voice was deep as always, but she wasn't whispering despite the snores beside her. Dean kept right on sleeping, though. For some reason, that annoyed Sam instead of comforted him. "It was too close to the grace in Dean's chest. I felt the injury not unlike it was my own."

If Sam could see in the dark like Castiel indeed could, he might have noticed the pensive look that stole over the angel's face. It was a troubling fact, her ability to sense Dean's wound from so far away, whilst in the middle of a deep trance. A troubling fact she added to the list of other troubling things regarding that sliver of grace that Dean always immediately disregarded.

"I woke from the healing trance due to the irritation."

Sam had to cough to cover the snort. Of course an angel would feel a two inch, brass-coated, .300 caliber sniper round as a minor *irritation.* But that cough cleared quickly as the angel's statement sunk in. Sam propped himself up on an elbow, staring at the silhouette of Cas in the dark.

"Shit, are you- are you okay?"

It hadn't even occurred to him that Cas might still be injured. She'd appeared so perfectly fine he'd almost forgotten she was hurt to begin

with. Another of the things Dean would gripe and grumble about during those stories: Cas's tendency to dismiss damn near mortal injuries like they were papercuts.

"Yes. My healing was near completion. I can finish recovering while fully cognizant from now on."

"Oh." Sam realized with that exhale of sound that he'd been holding his breath. He let the rest of it out as well, lowering himself back to the mattress with a squeak from an errant spring. "That's- uh, that's great."

"You should sleep, Sam," came Castiel's voice once more, no quieter but somehow…softer. Or maybe Sam was just imaging it.

"Yeah," he whispered, then cleared his throat and repeated the word louder. "Yeah, um, of course. Thanks. Again."

And so the household slept under the guard of an angel. Now known criminals on the run, hunted by the FBI, having narrowly escaping death or arrest. Dean slept like the dead. The same couldn't be said for Sam, who kept track of his brother's breathing well into the night.

At least until their angel stood up, walked over to his bedside, and placed two fingers to his forehead. The last thing he remembered was the mattress dipping as something dog-sized jumped onto the bed and curled up next to him.

-o-o-o-

The milk was almost bad.

It tasted alright, mostly, with just a hint of sour tinge on the tip of his tongue, but the smell was worse. Not bad enough not to drink. He'd already poured the cereal, after all, but he'd probably have to dump the rest of it when he was done. It wasn't going to last another day, and he didn't want it stinking up the fridge once it did go.

It was pretty full, too. What a waste.

Cole Trenton hunched over the cheap laminate countertop of his temporary accommodations and ate his breakfast standing. He wouldn't call this place home; it wasn't. It was just the place the military most often put him up in when he was stateside from his latest tour. A week here, a month there. They insisted he take the time off and 'recuperate.' Problem was, Cole wasn't the recuperating type.

He'd tinker with a couple side projects, dig into that old file he had on his father's cold case, which had turned over no new leads in more than a decade. Really, he'd just putz around, pretending he wasn't twitching to get back out there and onto the next deployment.

The TV flickered on the edge of his vision, and he glanced at the screen showing the outside of a bank, helicopter flying by and search lights illuminating the skyscraper. A newscaster was narrating over the footage, discussing an incident with armed robbers and a handful of hostages. One of the bank employees had been killed and the robbers were still at large.

Cole wasn't really paying the story much attention. He liked having the news on in the background whenever he cooked. Which, considering this was his usual breakfast routine, wasn't that often. But he was a damn good cook when he actually took the time.

He raised a spoon full of cheerios, dripping milk back into his bowl, when the TV flashed to three images the men who had robbed Milwaukee International Bank. Cole dropped the spoon, heedless of the splash of milk it created as he stared down the face of his father's murderer.

The man in the photo was older, as well he should be given the ten years that had passed since Cole had last seen him. But it *was* him. He'd never forget those eyes. Those cold, monstrous green eyes that had watched him, stared up at him, standing over his father's body, covered in blood that was still warm and dripping.

Cole set the cereal bowl down with a calm that only came from years of training and the kind of patience that let a man pursue his father's murderer without stop for more than a decade. He jabbed a finger against the television screen, right between the eyes of the man identified as Dean Winchester, wanted by the FBI.

"Got you."

The FBI would have to get in line. By the end of the week, Cole Trenton would be reported AWOL when he failed to show up for his next assignment.

-o-o-o-

When Dean woke up the next morning, Cas was gone. It was kind of a relief as much as it wasn't. When the angel had followed him into the bedroom the night before, it took Dean several moments to even

realize she was there. Moments that he spent stripping off his flannel and grabbing the hem of his t-shirt before he noticed. Then he just stood there, arms crossed, shirt half raised, belly bare as the day he'd been born. And Cas just stared right back.

Dean had thought about it. He really had. But he also knew the answer. He'd lived through the answer multipletimes.

Do you mind?

And Cas would just tilt his – uh, her – head and say, *'No'* or *'Mind what?'*

So, with a near silent sigh (because seriously, where was Dragon Lady in moments like these, huh?), Dean lowered his shirt back down without a word. Guess sleeping in his clothes was one less step between him and bed, and he was too damn tired to have that conversation or the déjà vu that would come with it. But he was taking off his jeans. Jeans were damn uncomfortable to sleep in, exhausted or not, and it wasn't like angel or dragon had never seen a man in underwear before.

Once down to boxers and tee, Dean climbed under the blankets with a groan that was purposefully lecherous, just because he friggin' could. Let Dragon Lady explain that.

God, he was tired. It wasn't hours of grave-digging in the cold kind of exhausted. Not the burning muscles, numb fingers, and aching feet. Nor the sorta dog-tired you got after a beat down, drag-out fight filled with bruises and the adrenaline of life or death. Nah, the bank hadn't been any of that. Not like their usual cases. Just four hours of pure stress and tension that left him tight and twitchy.

Not to mention the bullet he took to the chest.

The hunter took a deep breath and tried to let go of all that tension as he let it out. It didn't work worth a damn, so he tried again. All that yoga shit, meditation, calming crap Sam had tried to teach him over the years. Not that any of it had taken.

With a frustrated sound, Dean gave up any pretense of sleeping and rubbed at his shoulder and the memory of that pain. He'd been damn tired years ago of near death experiences, and traveling back to a younger, fresher body hadn't changed that one bit. He was so damn tired of nearly dying.

"Is something wrong with your chest?"

The hunter practically jumped under the covers. Shit, he'd nearly forgotten Cas was in the room. Habit, he figured, from all those times when the angel had literally watched him while he slept and he'd eventually tuned the presence out. Only way he could sleep, knowing he was being watched.

Dean picked his head up, eyeing Cas who stood at the literal foot of the bed. With a much more reasonable groan, he dropped his head back to the pillow.

"Phantom pain," he muttered, keeping his eyes closed like that, alone, could put him to sleep. There was something else, though, and he knew it. Despite reassurances from Cas that her counterpart still existed in his chest, Dean hadn't felt him. Weeks – *weeks* – since Rivergrove and he hadn't felt that warmth in his chest, that physical guarantee that his friend was still there. That he wasn't alone.

Right now, all he felt was the phantom cold of death, spreading from his shoulder and into his soul.

He shivered violently, which just pissed him off all the more, and then Cas was next to him. Dean's eyes popped open, looking up at the angel staring down at him. She was silent, those piercing eyes waiting him out. It only took a second – either he was too used to losing to those eyes or too tired to play the game – before Dean sighed, closing his eyes.

"Is Cas- uh, chest Cas…is he alright?"

At the silence that didn't answer his question, Dean slid one eye back open. Cas was staring down at him, head tilted ever so slightly to the side like she was solving a particularly difficult puzzle. Dean cleared his throat self-consciously, already beating himself up for even asking in the first place.

"The, uh, the bullet didn't…you know…hurt him or something?"

God, it sounded stupid out loud. So stupid. Cas was an angel. Not even one with a body, just pure grace, however sliver-y and small, so of *course* a bullet wouldn't hurt him. But Dean couldn't shake it. Not being able to feel his friend's presence, after all this time with him as a roomie…. Call it some co-dependent shit, whatever. He needed to know. He needed to hear it, if he couldn't friggin' feel it for himself, damnit.

Cas stared at him for another second, eyes as unreadable as they always had been before the angel fell that first time. But she reached her hand out, splaying it across his chest. Dean managed not to suck in an expectant breath in anticipation of that flip-flop joy he knew he wouldn't feel. God, he only felt colder.

As he stared at the angel expectantly, waiting for her verdict (telling himself it was so stupid the entire time), he tried to ignore his brain. It was busy telling him he'd be warmer if there wasn't a couples layers of cloth between her hand and his chest.

He shut his eyes and pretended he hadn't just thought that. Pretended there wasn't *something* happening in the room with them. Between them.

Stupid female vessel. That's all this was, dangit.

"He is still there," Cas spoke quietly, hand splayed against his blanketed chest. Green eyes popped back open and the human took a shaky breath in. "He is unharmed, Dean. Just weak."

"Thanks."

She withdrew her hand, but remained like a statue beside him.

"You gonna stand there all night?"

That head tilt was unfairly cute on a female vessel. (Which was a total lie. It had been unfairly cute on a male vessel too, Dean just tried not to think about that. Cute like a baby in a trench coat was cute, of course.)

"Yes."

Dean snorted, but ultimately moved his legs to make space on the mattress for an angel's ass (and he was absolutely not putting adjective – cute or otherwise – in front of that one). "At least sit down, or something. You're gonna give yourself a cramp."

The angel seemed about to respond to that (and Dean could already hear the answer: *Angels do not get cramps*) but instead closed her mouth and settled, primly, on the very edge of the mattress. And he meant *very edge*. Dean doubted she even had one full cheek on that bed, but that was an argument he was so not ready to have. It's not like he'd win it anyway. He hadn't in the past, after all. Er. Future. Future past. No…past future? Whatever.

"Sleep, Dean," the angel ordered, voice deep and gravely as ever, but also soft. She leaned towards him, two fingers reaching for his forehead. He didn't fight what he knew was coming. Told himself he was too tired to, rather than admit how much he was craving that comforting touch or the oblivion it would bring. "You are thinking loudly again."

Dean didn't even finish the next snort before it turned into a snore.

Unbeknownst to the man riding high to snooze-town on an Angel-Ambien, Sam walked in only seconds later. Not that the Sasquatch was there now. The second bed was empty, though the tussled blankets at least reassured the older Winchester that Sam had gotten some level of sleep. Dean quickly changed out of yesterday's clothes, digging out a pair of jeans and a faded band shirt from the closet. He'd have to restock the spare threads they usually kept at Bobby's house. But hell, it was about time to do laundry anyway. Maybe they could stay a day or two, lay low, refuel a bit.

Although, with Henriksen on their tail (surely both desperate and *pissed* after this latest disappearing act…) they should probably stay on the move for a while. God, he hated being wanted by the feds. Life on the run was nowhere near as glamorous as Hollywood made it out to be.

Dean ventured downstairs biting back yawns and hoping someone had the grace (translation: intelligence) to make coffee. He could hear the TV – or what turned out to be Sam's computer playing a news broadcast – before he made it to the kitchen. Kid had apparently picked up the search right where he'd left it the night before.

At least there was coffee, he thought, making a beeline past Sam, Andy, and Castiel, all sitting at the kitchen table like some sort of obliviously effed up family breakfast time straight outta the twilight zone. Speaking of breakfast, Bobby was standing over the stove wearing an apron that said, '*kiss the cook*' andan early-morning frown that said '*don't even think about it*', while making honest to god *pancakes.* Not that the man hadn't cooked plenty a time for the boys as they stayed throughout the years, but never for a crowd, and never under such odd circumstances.

Okay, not true. Dean definitely remembered weirder 'family' breakfasts or dinners, usually right before they were gearing up to take on the end of the world. Last meal of sorts, when they had time to have 'em.

But there was nothing like that happening now. Unless Bobby thought making the FBI's most wanted list deserved a Last Supper.

Actually… knowing Bobby like he did, Dean really wouldn't put it past the man. As a statement of protest to the situation if nothing else. Not that Dean would listen to such a thing. He'd sure eat his weight in pancakes, regardless, though.

Bobby gave him the side-eye first and a raised brow second as Dean settled against the counter beside him, sipping at his mug of liquid gold. The hunter ignored him in favor of observing the little crowd gathered at the old man's rickety old kitchen table. Cas and Andy were speaking together. At first, Dean just stared at the angel fluently Signing with the kid before he remembered, oh, right, *angel*. Cas knew *every* language (not that Dean knew where he stored it all). Why wouldn't American Sign Language be included in that? Beside them, but not actively part of the conversation, Sam was glued to that damn computer once again. It didn't take much listening for Dean to figure what it was he was watching, too.

"One bank employee is confirmed dead, though we cannot release a name at this time. It is believed all three suspects are at still at large, two of which have been linked to previous crimes in California and Maryland. If you have seen any of these men, or have any information on their whereabouts, please contact your local authorities immediately or call the number appearing on your screen now to be connected to the FBI tip line."

Dean spared half a glance at the pictures now on display on Sam's laptop screen. There was a still image of himself, popping his head out of the bank while escorting the guard to the medics (he knew he should have stayed inside and just wished Mr. Okie Dokie the best with the panic attack, but it's not like this was much of a change over last time), a photo of Sam the authorities clearly got from Stanford at some point (probably after the Baltimore fiasco), and possibly the most awkward photo of Ronald, wide eyed, crazy-haired, with nothing but a white wall as a backdrop. An ID photo presumably taken by his last job.

Sheesh. No wonder he got let go.

The hunter turned away from the screen, using the opportunity to refill his already half-empty coffee cup before crossing to the table to oversee what Cas and Andy were up to. Whatever passionate discussion they were having, Dean wasn't privy to. Unlike Sam, who'd

spent whatever free time they got – in the car, in the motels before calling it quits at night, or in the cafes and diners while waiting on food – learning ASL, Dean hadn't picked up much more than what Andy taught him in person.

He probably should have gotten Sam to give some lessons as well, come to think of it.

"Whatcha chatting about?" he asked conversationally, leaning against Cas's chair, hip brushing her shoulder. He could feel the muscles in her arm flex and extend as she Signed.

Andy smiled up at him, but gestured at Cas to speak in his stead.

"I offered to heal his injuries."

Dean was gobsmacked for a second time that morning, once again staring at the angel while his brain caught up. It didn't help that despite the clear miracle she was offering, the angel spoke so monotonously.

"Well, that's great!" Dean exclaimed before he'd really thought about it. Pretty much just blurted out the first thought that came to mind when that mind started functioning again.

Although, inevitably, that thought came.

If Cas had healed the kid, why were they still using Sign?

Andy was already shaking his head with quick little lurches side to side. He raised his hand, first to point at himself and then, so fluidly that Dean almost missed the first part, flattened it out, raising that hand to his nose and swiping down into his other palm in what was almost a passing clap. Dean frowned, completely unaware of what the kid had actually said, but a bad kinda feeling was forming in his gut from context alone.

"He declined," Cas translated, craning her neck to look at Dean.

"What?" the hunter blinked, then blinked again, gaze darting between the two like he was watching a tennis match. Or, since Dean Winchester would never attend a tennis match, two scantily clad strippers about to get in a cat fight. Although, in this case, he was way less excited about the outcome.

He settled incredulously on Andy. "Why?"

The kid just smiled at him, that kind of peaceful expression so full of both regret and acceptance it practically floored the hunter who'd seen – and done – just about everything. Dean kinda felt the need to sit down under the glow of that sad little smile. Andy shrugged, but the hunter didn't need ASL to understand him in that moment. Memories of his own sins and the payments he'd made in their name over the years – on Earth, in Heaven, and down below – flitted through his brain like a bad home video. Nothing but regret for the sins and acceptance of the costs.

Son of a bitch.

He got it. Even if it didn't make sense – shouldn't make sense – it made sense to him. Sometimes the talents you had put you in ugly places. Just like sometimes, the ugly places you got put in gave you talents you didn't always wish you had.

Hell, Dean would get rid of several *talents* of his own if he could. Or, in this case, might not ask for back if they had been taken away by, let's say, a psycho kid with a knife.

So he clasped Andy on the shoulder and squeezed. Yeah, he got it. The kid's hand settled briefly on his, Andy giving him an understanding nod, before Dean withdrew his hand. The silence stretched, one second ticking into the next, and then they were shuffling or shifting weight or mock-coughing to pass the awkwardness of the man-moment they'd just had.

Enough so that even Sam picked his head up from the laptop to glance at them, clearly wondering why no one was talking.

Dean cleared his throat, ready to say something to change the topic, when a plate plopped down on the table loudly enough to do it for him. It was stacked high with pancakes, and when Dean looked up, Bobby had his hands on his hips, apron hitched up, eyebrows raised. The the older man reached over Sam's shoulder a second time and closed his laptop for him, just in case the continued news obsession seemed like an open option.

Cackling, Dean pulled up a chair and sat on the corner between Andy and Cas, grabbing himself a pancake (which he passed between his hands like a game of hot potato before Bobby, muttering under his breath and yet *very audibly*, grabbed a stack of plates and set them on the table as well. Loudly). Sam rolled his eyes, but decided he would at least eat something before daring to open the computer again. As

Andy dug in third, Dean gave the angel on his right a side-eyed glance. When it was clear she had no intention of indulging, he nudged her with an elbow.

"Come on, Cas. Grab a pancake." The *'you've earned it'* was more than implied, not that Cas would hear it or understand even if she did.

The angel frowned at the diminishing pile of fluffy, lightly steaming discs sitting in the center of the table.

"I do not require sustenance."

And Dean was glad for that. An angel that required food was a hurting angel, and Dean didn't want to see Cas like that if he could help it. Shit, they'd just gotten Cas *back* from that. But this was pancakes they were talking about. That wasn't 'sustenance'. It was…well, come on. It was *pancakes!*

"Come on, man. This is what saving the world's all about."

Dean reached for a pancake, realizing too late that Bobby had only put three plates on the counter. Fair, since it's not like he'd ever seen the angel eat before. So Dean pushed his plate between himself and the angel, offering Cas his fork.

Across the table, Sam damn near choked on his own syrupy breakfast. In his life, outside of himself when he was a kid (and that had ended when he'd turned about thirteen) he had never seen Dean share food *willingly*. Even when Dean had offered up some of his meal for his kid brother, it was only ever after Sam pulled out the big puppy eyes. The dangerous ones that Jess had once told him were the equivalent of the nuclear option, and he ought to use those things more carefully.

But here Dean was. Going halfsies over breakfast with an angel.

Thank God it wasn't dinner with Bobby cooking pasta or they'd have a straight up Lady and the Tramp moment on their hands, Sam was sure of it.

(Given the waggling eyebrows and barely bit-back grin Andy was sending Sam's way, his thoughts were right along the same page.)

Castiel eyed the fork with clear wariness, but took it from Dean's hand. "I do not see how a mixture of flour, water, and egg, heated and covered in tree sap is a worthy cause to avert the Apocalypse."

The whole table blinked at the sass (even Bobby over at the stove, cooking up a second batch, glanced over his shoulder at that one). Andy wasn't even hiding how hard he was cracking up anymore. Dean looked at Sam, who had no idea how to respond, before grinning like an idiot.

"Well, now you're definitely having one." He pushed the plate a little closer as if to emphasize the statement. Diligently, Cas used the fork to cut a triangular shape in the top pancake, then gently stabbed it and placed the food in her mouth. She chewed slowly while the entire table watched, at least until Dean rolled his eyes and stole his fork back.

"It's world-saving," he affirmed, almost grumpily though the entire room knew it was for show at that point. He stabbed his own piece, far more violently, swirled it in syrup, and popped the ridiculously dripping mess into his mouth. Still chewing, he used the fork to jab in Cas's direction. "Totally worthy. You just don't know."

"Are you still feeling alright, Cas?" Sam asked, seemingly out of the blue for the others in the room. "No lapse in healing, or anything?"

Swallowing, Cas tilted her head as if the question didn't make much more sense to her. "Yes, Sam. You needn't worry. The healing trance-"

"Oh yeah," Dean interrupted through the same mouth full of food. "You were supposed to be sleeping. How'd you know we were in trouble anyway?"

Sam stared at his brother, wholly unimpressed. Dean pulled his head back at the look, even as Cas responded, "I heard your prayer and also felt-"

"I didn't pray to you." The older Winchester was staring at the angel, frowny face in full on frown mode.

The angel just raised her eyebrows. It was a look Dean had come to equate, on any vessel, as *are you an idiot or just special?* He was pretty sure he'd seen it on Anna first, and she must have taught Cas. Cuz it wasn't long after meeting her that his angel started using it plenty.

"You did."

Dean grumbled into his stack of pancakes that *no*, he *didn't*.

"I also felt the wound."

His fork slipped on the plate with a ceramic screech. "Sorry, *what*?"

"The injury was too close to your soul. The grace there alerted me." Dean blinked, exchanging worried looks with Bobby and Sam. It was news to Bobby, who sure as hell didn't look okay with it. Sam, on the other hand, was nonplussed. Castiel seemed to agree with the concern of the first two. "It is worrying. We should discuss options to remove the grace-"

"Yeah, yeah, we can talk about it later. You're okay, right?" The room shifted into a stunned, awkward silence as Dean changed the topic, pretty damn blatantly too. Not that his innocent, let's-move-on-it-doesn't-matter look gave it away. He was busy looking Cas up and down, like there might be residual physical damage from her injuries (not that there had been before). "Your healing got cut short and you said you, uh, felt the bullet. But, um, you're okay now, though… right?"

Cas nodded. "The trance was almost complete. I will be fine healing while awake."

"Hell yeah," the hunter beamed, digging back into his food. "Angel on board!"

"On board what?"

Dean didn't even let Cas's obliviousness bother him. He nudged the top pancake with his fork. "Just shut up and eat your breakfast."

Cas continued to glare – or the equivalent of a glare for the angel – but grabbed the fork from Dean's hand, much to his protest. Sam considered getting up and grabbing another fork, but why interrupt the happy couple?

"It takes like molecules," Cas practically muttered before stabbing another piece and diligently eating it.

"Molecules of deliciousness," Dean grumbled back before reclaiming his fork and plate, declaring her and her taste buds a lost cause.

Another plate clattered down on the table, *loudly*, causing all occupants but Andy to jump. Unlike the others, he'd seen Bobby coming with the newest plate-load of food. The benefits of taking the seat that faced the kitchen.

"You all wanna keep honeymooning, or shall we talk business?" the

old man grumped. He was eyeing both hunter and angel, the former of who choked on his bite of pancake and blamed *that* for the reason he was blushing redder than a tomato. Cas just looked up at Bobby expectantly, not entirely sure what businessthere was to discuss and waiting on him to indicate a topic.

"Sure, Bobby." Sam, ever the mediator, took the opportunity (excuse) to open his laptop back up.

They took a few minutes in and among bites of pancake to talk about what being chased – really chased – by the FBI meant for all of them.

"Don't suppose you can fix that for us, huh?" Dean asked nonchalantly, casting the angel beside him a side-glance that was equally nonchalant. Perhaps a bit too much so. Cas was less beat-around-the-bush with her return look and the hunter shrugged. "Yeah, didn't think so."

Which meant they were going to need a whole new type of laying low. The topic turned to the how of it, which was when Dean remembered their lack of hex bags (geez, that felt like *years* ago now) and turned to Cas.

"We need more of those human toe mushrooms."

Andy choked on his tree-sap covered flour, water, and egg to the point where several at the table would have intervened, were it not for his flapping hand indicating he'd survive.

The unblinking stare the angel leveled Dean's way after that told him Cas had no idea what he was talking about more than any words she could have used would have. Dean opened his mouth to clarify (or make things worse, who knew) when Bobby harrumphed from where he was leaning against the counter. He lowered his fork, pancake hanging from the prongs, to give Cas a look that could only be described as *kindergarten teacher*.

"The idjit means they're outta the makings for those hex bags, and need more."

"Oh. Of course," Cas replied immediately once she understood what was being requested of her in a manner which made infinitely more sense. While she understood Bobby about as well as she understand any human (which was, admittedly, not particularly well), she did appreciate his tendency to be more straightforward than the older Winchester brother. "However, I believe the time for a more

permanent solution to hide your whereabouts has come."

Dean pulled his head back for a third time that morning, frown forming between his eyes. "What do you mean more permanent- Gah!"

The hunter doubled forward with a gasp, Cas's hand pressing flat to his chest with little force but serious impact. There was a flash of pain – gone so fast he hardly registered it all – across his ribs. Then the angel was pulling back, leaving Dean sitting there, no worse for wear but certainly stunned. There was a vaguer sense of déjà vu than he was used to lately floating around the back of his eyeballs.

"What the hell," he breathed out, trying to remember how to do that normally. He rubbed at his chest, then poked at his ribs experimentally, suspicion forming pretty quickly as the surprise passed.

"Dean?" Sam asked cautiously, glancing between his brother and his brother's angel, computer momentarily forgotten. Behind him, Bobby had started forward, plate still in hand, that piece of pancake poised on his fork now forgotten about entirely. But Dean straightened up with a shake of his head to clear it and call them off. Both hunters settled back hesitantly.

"I'm alright," Dean confirmed, then glared at the angel who had surely just imprinted Enochian warding on his ribs for a second time in his life. "A little warning next time?"

Cas tilted her head, no doubt thinking about that little bell chime she'd used to announce her departure from the car last time Dean had a similar request. The human opened his mouth to tell her not to even dare when Sam interrupted. Unlike them, no one else in the room understood what had just happened.

"Uh, Cas?" he asked, drawing the angel's attention. "What…was all that?"

"I inscribed Enochian warding onto his ribs, as I will for the rest of you as well."

The physical step Bobby took back, bouncing right back off the kitchen counter, suggested that was going to be a big ole' *no* on his part. Sam looked slightly less apprehensive, but only slightly, as he glanced between brother and angel.

"It's fine," Dean grumbled, still rubbing at his chest. "Only hurts for a

second and it's the damn definition of tamper proof. Trust me."

"I'll bet," Bobby huffed, still eyeing Dean up and down as well as Cas, like the angel might pounce on his rib cage if he turned his back for even a second. "Gotta be pretty damn hard to scrape that shit off."

Cas looked slightly perturbed by the imagery, but settled for a brisk, "Precisely. If I may?"

She held her hand out to Sam, whose reluctance was obvious in the way his gaze flickered to the appendage, then Dean. His older brother gave him nod, which was more reassuring than any single gesture really ought to be. So Sam nodded at the angel. She pressed her outspread hand to the larger man's chest and Sam took in a sharp breath, both surprised and pained, then surprised to no longer be in pain. Just like that, it was over and the angel retreated, turning to Andy. While Sam recovered his breathing, rubbing at his ribs just as Dean had, Andy stuck out his chest with absolutely no qualms whatsoever.

He let out the fist-equivalent of a "whoop!" followed by signing, *'What a rush!'* once Castiel was done.

The angel turned to Bobby but the hunter raised his fork, pointing it at the woman before she could raise from her chair like he might beat her back with utensils alone. Dean didn't actually doubt he'd find a way to do it, too. This was Bobby, after all.

"Don't even think about it, Feathers. I'll pass."

"But-"

"I'm good," Bobby insisted sternly, eyeing Cas's hand like she planned to burn him rather than help hide him from prying eyes. "I'll stick to my own devices, thank you very much."

Castiel retreated back to her seat, glancing at Dean who just shook his head subtly. Confused but aware of her own shortcomings when it came to the intricacies of human nature, she relented, settling in the chair once more.

At least until their last houseguest came to, shooting himself right off the couch in the den, yelling to boot. Again.

-o-o-o-

Thinking it was best to get some distance between Ronald and the angel he kept eyeing warily all through their discussion of the events at the bank, the supernatural, and where they were and how they got there, Dean mentioned offhandedly that maybe Cas should go for a walk. When she stared uncomprehendingly at him, about to ask why she, an angel, would need to walk anywhere at this precise moment, Dean rolled his eyes, cleared his throat, and told her to go somewhere else for the next half hour, kay?

Picking up on what the hunter was getting at as he motioned not-so-subtly at the wary Ronald, Cas not-so-casually mentioned improving the warding around the Salvage Yard and promptly disappeared. Ronald leapt out of his seat at the sudden and visual proof of teleportation. At the same time, Bobby leaned backwards to holler out the nearest open window about how his house was perfectly damn safe as is, thank you very much.

Sarge picked his head up at the angel's departure, having been dozing on the rug in the middle of them all. Hardly caring about the human reaction to it all, which was far from quiet or calm, the Shepherd climbed to his feet and trotted out of the room, into the kitchen where they heard him push the screen door open. It closed behind him and Bobby shook his head, eyes raised heavenly, like he was praying for patience. He had no doubt the mutt would go walk the perimeter right alongside Cas. Sarge had formed some sort of natural affinity to the angel ever since she glared him into silence the night before. Never let her out of his sight, so much as he could help it.

Bobby was pretty sure the dog had gone upstairs with the angel last night. Which didn't have him grinding his teeth at all at the idea of *his* dog (technically Andy's dog, Bobby would insist (at least in any other argument but this one)), groveling after some angel just because she bossed him around with her mind, or whatever it was angels had that controlled their powers. Not at all.

Of course, Sarge was far from subservient in any definition of the term. The dog made for an intimidating figure even when he was dogging after Cas like she was the damn sunshine. He looked more like a personal bodyguard than a loyal companion.

Poor pup didn't seem to realize Cas needed little protecting. Not that the angel seemed to mind the company as the two disappeared among the cars that littered his property.

Angels.

Bobby snorted.

Dogs.

The departure of the angel left Dean and Bobby to finish explaining how things were to Ronald somewhat in peace. Sam might be in the same room, but he wasn't contributing to the conversation, instead focused on finding as much information as he could on Victor Henrisken and the FBI's file on them. His opinion of Ronald in general wasn't hard to figure out even if he hadn't put it into words since the bank. He wanted nothing to do with getting the chaotic, haphazard man into a life of hunting, believing the idiot would get himself killed the first time he went after something.

Dean figured the man was headed down that path no matter what anyone had to say about it, might as well prep him the best they could. Hopefully that would extend his lifespan further than Sam anticipated.

Andy was doing what Andy did best: sitting next to the man, occasionally commenting (to which Bobby had to translate), spooking the hell out of him with his telepathic imaging (to which Bobby still had to translate), messing with him after he was done freaking out, and just generally putting Ronald at ease in the most counter-productive, unlikely of ways. Like only Andy could in tense, unpredictable situations. It was clear within half an hour of the two men being in the same room that Andy was automatically Ronald's favorite, and the one he trusted most.

How Andy could do that every dang time, Dean would never really know.

By the end of the second hour mark, Ronald knew a little more about what was out there in the world, and how to fight it.

"But…if all that's real, how come nobody knows about it?" He glanced between Bobby and Dean, the spokespersons in this situation, even for Andy.

"Because it's just not that common," Bobby answered with his trademark harrumph. "Sure, hunters always got enough work between 'em, but there's what, three hundred million people in this country? Supernatural deaths don't account for more than one, maybe two hundred a year."

"Easier to write off the occasional unexplainable death than accept

something you've been told your whole life isn't real," Dean added with a touch of bitterness. Ronald blinked at him, then lowered his gaze to his lap, where he was fiddling his fingers.

"And…her?" he glanced nervously out the window, in the same direction where Bobby had hollered at Cas. Dean followed his gaze, even though he couldn't see the angel out there. He could picture her, though, walking the perimeter, adding new sigils to the fence. Probably in her own blood.

"Cas is with us," Dean reiterated what he'd said last night, for all the good it did them. Ronald wasn't going to feel better about their mysterious savior until he knew who or *what* she was. And Dean wasn't telling him that. "You don't need to worry about her."

"But…she's….what is she?" he asked, not for the first time. "I mean… she's not…not *human*…right?"

"No, she's not," Bobby confirmed, earning himself a glare from Dean which he shot right back. He wasn't dumb enough to go talking about angels to a man he barely knew. Didn't his boy know that? "But Dean's right. She's on our side, and that's all you need to know."

Ronald didn't look satisfied, returning his gaze - significantly grumpier now – to his lap. Dean's gut twisted with a weird feeling he didn't like. "So…what now?"

"Now, we get you some wheels, set you up with a fake ID, and send you on your way." Dean put it pretty bluntly, leaving no room for an open ended invitation. They didn't need the mess that was Ronald Reznick added to the mess that was their own lives. But he could tell from Ronald's wide eyed look that getting him on his way wasn't going to be quite enough. He pointed at the man, waggling his finger until those big ole brown eyes focused solely on that digit. "You can't go home, Ronald."

"But-"

"You robbed a bank, you moron," Bobby grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Your old life is over. You can do whatever you want – hunt, don't hunt – but from now on you do it under the radar or off grid. You're wanted by the FBI for christ's sake."

"There's a bar," Dean interjected before Ronald could, "called the Roadhouse. Common hunter hangout. If you want to pursue this life, you can start there. Find someone to teach you the ropes, make sure

you don't get yourself killed."

"Why can't you guys teach me the ropes?"

"Because we've got our own shit to deal with." It was Sam who answered, the first words he'd spoken in the conversation so far. He didn't even look up – kept his eyes on his laptop screen.

Dean cleared his throat. His brother wasn't wrong. "We're kinda busy with…something, Ronald. We don't have time for a trainee, alright?"

The larger man didn't look happy at that, but didn't argue either. Andy nudged him with an elbow and made a gesture that needed no translating. It would be okay. Amazingly, Ronald seemed to relax at that.

Both Dean and Bobby shook their heads. Andy, the friggin' mute Jedi.

-o-o-o-

When Dean found Cas, she was, indeed, painting Bobby's fence with her own blood. The hunter just shook his head at the sight – it was apparently a morning for headshakes – and walked up to her as she finished drawing the last sigil. They flashed with a bright, pure white light before fading out of existence entirely, soaked into the wood.

"Hello, Dean."

"Hey, Cas." He fell in step beside her as she moved to the next section of fence, arm still freely bleeding (which he tried not to think about). Sarge was a dozen feet back, sniffing at the pine needles and patches of dry grass smattered along the ground. Every so often he would freeze, duck his head real slow, and then pounce on the ground and start to dig.

Probably chasing mice, Dean figured, ignoring the amusement he felt. He didn't like dogs, damnit. Even if Sarge was a Shepherd like the Colonel, and the Colonel had maybe changed his mind, *a little*, about dogs.

Then again, he'd been using witchcraft that day, so who's to say the spell didn't mess with his mind. Because Dean Winchester didn't do dogs.

"Have you finished your conversation?"

He wasn't sure if that was an angel's way of asking if it was safe to return to the house. Close enough to it, probably. "Yeah. Ronald's gonna head out soon. Bobby's finding him some wheels."

The frown that formed on Cas's face, pinching her brow together between her eyes, was unfairly cute. Dean kept that to himself, wondering – not for the first time – what his brain's deal was lately. He could practically hear the angel asking what Ronald needed wheels for, but unlike the Cas from his time, this one had a dragon lady to explain.

That frown disappeared, and Dean told himself he was *not* disappointed. God, he needed to a drink. Or to get laid.

…That thought did not help *anything*, and Dean had to actively hold back a groan.

He cleared his throat awkwardly – not that Cas noticed – and decided to get to why he'd joined the angel out here in the first place. "I, uh, was thinking maybe you could…adjust his memory a bit."

Cas turned her head somewhat sharply in his direction from where she'd started painting on the last of the wood posts. She did not stop her sigil work, but her eyes were intense enough Dean wondered if he'd maybe just crossed a line. His Cas had done it before, not that the angel had been much happier about it that time, either.

The man from the future had to remind himself that were he came from, extreme measures weren't so out of place. Desperate times and all that. But they weren't in his time. At least not yet.

(*Never*, he promised himself fiercely).

Maybe he shouldn't have asked so cavalierly.

"I mean, erm…" Dean cleared his throat again, for entirely different reasons this time. "Ronald's gonna talk. Maybe not on purpose, but just look at the guy." He gestured offhandedly back towards the house, and Cas followed his arm like she might actually spot Ronald in that direction. "We didn't tell him what you were, but he's seen enough to cause trouble."

Not to mention that Dean was pretty sure he'd let slip a time-travel comment when he was bleeding out on the floor of the bank. He didn't really remember what – he'd been a little preoccupied at the time – but if Ronald got chatting with other hunters, it could come up.

They'd already had one near-fatal run-in with Gordon Walker. Dean really didn't want to find out what other hunters thought of the psychic, time-traveling Winchesters and their supernatural guard dog.

Dean had no illusions that Gordon had hunting buddies of his own. Some that might even visit him in prison. It was how he'd gotten out last time, Dean had been sure of it at the time. Which meant they were already going to have to keep an eye on that situation and the shit Gordon might spread. The Winchesters did not need one of those buddies running into a loud mouth Ronald Reznik.

"Is this something I did for you often in your timeline?"

The question wasn't necessarily unexpected, but it still hit Dean like a punch to the gut. He could tell from Cas's reserved tone that she disapproved of the request. Which meant she was now asking if this was something she was expected to do in her service of the Winchesters to save the world.

Something about that bugged the shit out of him, but Dean wasn't sure what. He was pretty sure it had to do with knowing his Cas had fought for them – with them – and Fallen because of his admiration – his love, really – for humans. For their free will, more than anything. A freedom that Dean was asking her – had asked him before – to violate, however minimally.

Or, you know, something like that. Probably.

"No," the hunter muttered somewhat hastily after catching his breath from that sucker punch. A sucker punch Cas didn't even know she'd delivered. "I, um…just once. And that time, it was…"

It was Lisa and Ben. They were…they were an exception. They'd been in danger, and he'd had to save them. He'd *had* to.

Now he was just sucker punching himself, damnit.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important," he tried instead. Which, of course, made him immediately realize how much it wasn't. Not the way that really mattered. This wasn't like Ben and Lisa.

Ah, shit.

Dean rubbed a hand through his hair, scratching at his scalp in what should have been soothing but was, in fact, more punishing than anything.

"Forget it," he mumbled, dropping his hand.

Sarge, who was wondering up to them at that moment, startled at the sudden movement, then leaned in to sniff at Dean's fingers. He gave a quick, investigational lick, causing the hunter to let out a startled noise that sounded a lot like "Gyah!" The Shepherd tilted his head at the reaction, ears huge and sticking straight up. Dean, rubbing his hand on his jeans, stuck his tongue out him, but the dog's attention was suddenly elsewhere. His ear twitched, then turned towards the house. Sarge took off with a bark and ferociously wagging tale.

Probably a squirrel this time.

When Dean turned back to the angel, Cas was still watching him. She seemed to have forgotten that blinking was a thing. Dean cleared his throat for a third time, rubbing the back of his knuckles on his jacket absentmindedly. They still felt slimy.

"I, uh, I should probably take a page out of Sam's book on this one and just talk to him."

"Yes," Cas said with so little hesitation it was almost friggin' rude. Dean gave her some side-eye, not that she would notice. Dragon Lady would, though. Angela could explain it to her. "Communication does seem to be a less dramatic course of action."

The side-eye tripled in power. In fact, it turned into direct-eye by the time Dean was done whipping his head her way.

"Did Dragon Lady tell you to say that?" he asked, tone more than just a little suspicious.

Cas didn't answer, just stared with those piercing eyes. Dean was pretty sure he could see that dang devil lady behind those stupidly blue pools. The angel broke eye contact to heal her bleeding arm and pull down the sleeve of her coat.

Dean sighed, turning back towards the house with a resigned step. He could feel Cas at his back, following. Bobby and Ronald were out front, standing next to a roughly idling Camry, Sarge already with them. Guess Bobby had been the squirrel, then.

The dusty, sun-faded-gold sedan had clearly seen better days, but she was running and that was more than any hunter new to the game could really ask for. Ronald was eyeing it like the whole thing might fall apart at any minute. Dean knew he'd get over it by the time he

realized how hard the life of a hunter actually was.

"Hey Ron, got a sec?" He walked up to the larger man, using his head to gesture away from the running vehicle and Bobby. The gruff old man reached through the driver's side window to turn the car back off even as Ronald, wide-eyed, followed Dean several paces away. "Look…about the bank, and how we got out of there…. You can't tell anyone."

The noobie hunter's eyes went wide, but Dean cut him off before he could interject.

"Other hunters, they don't know about Cas. And we gotta keep it that way." He tried to get Ronald to see the importance of this with the intensity of his gaze alone. He doubt it worked, but it did seem to scare the shit out of the man. Dean would take fear over understanding if it got him where he needed to be. "Cas is on our side, but some people aren't gonna see it that way. You get that?"

Ronald clearly didn't. He looked put out and confused – mostly the latter, but the guy pretty much had two types of expressions: ecstatic or pouting. Every emotion fell somewhere into those two. This version of the pout said he was torn between arguing and asking a thousand questions.

"I mean, we could just have Cas erase your memory," Dean continued, cheating a bit. Whatever got him where he needed to be, right? He could practically feel Cas's eyes snap onto his back, but he mentally told the angel to fuck off in case she was listening in. "I'm trying to give you a chance to do the right thing, here."

He might be compromising a bit, but a compromise was still *communication*. Dean was pretty damn proud of himself for this one, and he thought his angel should be too.

Ronald, on the other hand, made a sound suspiciously close to *'meep'* and Dean sighed.

"Come on, man. She doesn't *want* to do that to you. She saved our skins back there," Dean exclaimed, gesturing vaguely back towards Bobby and the angel without actually turning to look at them. "Least we can do is make sure no one comes after her for it, right?"

Oddly enough, that seemed to click with the other man. He straightened up slightly, a glint of determination in his eye like a knight excepting a quest. Ronald nodded, his expression turning

serious. Dean probably should have realized sooner that putting his request in terms of *saving* someone was going to get him where he needed to be with a lot less hassle. Ronald had the makings of a hunter, after all, and they all spoke a similar language: heroism or revenge. Or both.

Ronald gave another, more parting nod that wasn't awkward at all (no, not at all, Dean thought with a roll of his eyes), then turned and walked over to the angel. Cas, standing next to Ronald's new vehicle, all but milling about with Bobby (and what an odd sight that was), looked at the approaching man with a curious tilt of her head.

"I won't tell a soul," Ronald proclaimed, seemingly out of nowhere for the two who weren't a part of the conversation. Not that they couldn't figure out what had been said. Ronald raised one hand, folding his thumb and pinky together to leave three fingers raised. "Scout's honor."

Despite knowing that this version of Castiel had no idea what a scout was, Dean watched his angel nod back with all the same solemnity. A queen all but blessing her white knight. Dean resisted burying his head in his hand and wondered if he'd maybe taken a harder hit back at the bank (perhaps to his skull rather than his chest).

Maybe he was caught up in another one of Charlie's LARPing games. Or one of Gabriel's tricks. This had all the makings of a bunch of nerds. He was sure of it.

Bobby, who seemed to be on the same page as Dean, exaggeratedly cleared his throat, eyebrows near his hairline. "Well, now that *that's* out of the way…"

He gestured to the car in a less than gracious form of *'get in and get out of here already.'*

Ronald made a little exclamation of "Oh, right!" and climbed in. It took a couple tries to get the engine going again, but then he was backing out of the salvage yard and flipping the Camry onto the main road. He turned left, heading towards state lines and the Roadhouse.

Dean exchanged a glance with Bobby, then gestured with his chin for Cas to follow them back inside. He wondered how long it would be before Ellen called, hollering at them for sending her such an unprepared mess.

-o-o-o-

It took four hours. Which was about six and a half minutes longer than it took to drive from Bobby's home to the Roadhouse.

Sam picked up the landline as it rang, immediately wincing and pulling away from the phone at the volume of whoever was on the other end of the line. He held the thing out for his brother with a scrunched up face. Dean took it with all the wariness of a member of the bomb squad.

"What do you think my bar is, a daycare?"

The older Winchester flinched at the tone even as he grinned. He couldn't help it. Ellen was a damn scary lady, but he didn't think he'd ever get tired of the tough mom routine.

"He's gotta learn from someone, Ellen, and all the best come through you."

The woman grumbled several things not fit for ears belonging to anyone but the dead or about to be, then the line clicked and he got a dial tone. Dean just laughed, tossing the phone back to his brother who hung it up.

They should probably make a point to swing by Nebraska sometime soon and drop off at least a case of beer and some info worth trading. Knowing Ellen, that would just be a start. She'd have them earning her forgiveness with months of the crappiest hunts.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: So, for reals, this chapter started out as five paragraphs about the boys calling it a night, Bobby forcing Sam to quit the computer, and then they slept, wanted men. AND THEN. I was like…oh, I should squeeze Sam chatting with Cas into that. That became FIVE PAGES. And then I took a break, and when I came back I was all, Oh, and some Dean and Cas! But…where…. And that turned into TEN PAGES which included a non-linear shift back in time to the night before [facepalm] Five paragraphs saying they went to friggin bed turned into TEN PAGES of just trying to go to bed. [insert staring at the ceiling here] Sweet Jesus, I am hopeless.

Not Healing Andy: For those of you who were asking me about Cas healing him, I hope this chapter explains it. Cas wasn't in any shape before now to do so, otherwise you know she'd try it as soon as she noticed. Hopefully it makes sense why Andy might

refuse. Yes, part of it is pure author's motivation to keep him from becoming an overly-powerful character, but the majority of it is actually character-based. With the growth I gave him through this story, I think Andy might naturally come to an acceptance of his injury and his new place in the world due to it. I think Webber's power and the possibility of his own scares the shit out of him a lot more in this story than it ever did in the show. I hope I adequately showed how he woke up to that realization, and that he might be afraid to regain his voice and power for what he might do with it.

Update: Okay, I have awesome news and not so awesome news. The awesome news: GABRIEL IS UP NEXT!!!! FINALLY!!!! [insert me flailing here and calling it dancing] The not so awesome news: Iiiiiiiiiit's not written yet [insert me sobbing here] And what I do have written has, of course, spiraled into a tangent of Dean/Cas, Dean hugging Cas, a Sam-to-Dean heart-to-heart that is really more of a heart-to-an-oblivious-idiot-who-thinks-he-doesn't-deserve-to-be-loved and WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE GETTING TO GABRIEL.

[headdesk]

[headdesk]

[aaand one more for good measure. HEAD DESK]

Sigh. So I will keep working on all...er...that, but I don't know when I'll be able to post it. Hopefully in two to three weeks (I'm on vacation this week, and it's the fun, chase-around-a-two-year-old-at-DisneyWorld type vacation, but also the no-time-or-energy-for-writing-after-all-day-at-the-park kinda vacation)

(...I just realized that wording makes it sound like I plan on chasing random two year olds around DisneyWorld. While...frankly hilarious, I actually meant my two year old niece XD)

So, I will get you all a chapter just as soon as I can, but it may be a stretch again. Thank you all so so so so so so SO much for your patience, understanding, and, always, your encouragement.

Cheers,

Silence

Additional Note 4/6/2022 - Cole: I forgot to add a note about Cole! Okay, so for anyone who hasn't read the deleted scenes connected to this story, I originaly thought about including Cole towards the end of Season 1. However, when I first got the idea I did the appropriate reasearch to make sure it would work and learned...it totally wouldn't [insert facepalm here] Cole was supposed to be 13 when Dean murdered his father in 2003, which would only make him 16 or 17 now. But I don't want teenage Cole. I want badass Marine Cole. To add insult to injury, the timelines don't line up on the show, either. If he was 13 in 2003, then he was 24 or 25 when we first meet him on the show. But he's done two tours and he's special ops (not something easy to get into with little experience), plus he has a kid who looks at least 8 (I think older, but I'm being generous here). While all of that is plausible it still seems unlikely to me. To rub salt into that insulted injury, the worst part of all is that Cole's actor looks far older than his twenties (and indeed was). Which makes MUCH MORE SENSE for a two time tour, father of an 8-12 year old, special opps marine. So anyway, long story short, I asked readers to vote on whether they were okay with me breaking already-broken-but-cannon-timelines to fit Cole into the story. The almost unanimous response was yes, and so here we are!

We're gonna have a lot of fun with him, I promise XD

For all you accuracy nerds out there (my people! ;P), the plan is to have Cole be in his early thirties when he first meets Dean in 2014, and still have his dad get killed when he's 13. Which means Dean stumbled onto that hunt the exact same way, just in 1995 instead of 2003, making Dean about 16. Which also makes more sense that a young, teenage Dean doing a solo hunt might mess up so badly as to murder a man in front of his kid. The only real break in the timeline you'll notice is that Cole doesn't have a wife or son yet.

Anyhoo, that's the plan! Hope you all are here for it :D

Chapter 115: Season 2: Chapter 81

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: OMG, it begins! IT FINALLY BEGINS! I have been waiting for this chapter for MONTHS. Years, really. I think most of you have too. What is 'it', you might be asking? Well, I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise. Read on, dear readers. Read on XD

Beta-Reader - I have exctiting news and a thank you to give! Vaesse is now helping me out as a Beta reader editing chapters prior to posting. She is muuuch better at catching all those mispellings and grammar bits than I am, so hopefully you will see a lot less errors :) She and I are also going to tackle all of the publisheed chapters as well. At some point I'll do a full update including an adjustment to the chapter numbers. But I'll definitely post an A/N when that happens to warn everyone of the shift. Until then, enjoy the beta'd chapters! So thank you Vaesse and also yay!

Chapter Reference – FBI Data Analyst David Attingwood: David is an FBI agent who's been helping Henriksen out on the Winchester case. The last we heard about him, Henriksen had him comparing phone records for the area around Sturgen Hospital, hoping to find a common link between phone numbers that might identify the Winchester's numbers or identify someone helping them. For a refresher, see the end of **chapter 82**

Chapter Warnings: Oh boy, what to say. Hmmm, Sam's packing like a girl, Angela's giving Cas all the good advice, Dean's the butt of all of Cas's newfound good advice, Victor's doing things he doesn't want to do, and the boys are off to their new case!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 81

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Two days passed without further word from Ellen. For once, no news was good news coming outta the Roadhouse. If Ronald hadn't made it,

she'd have called. If he'd paired up with another hunter and headed out (likely to his death), she'd have called. And if he was such a mess she refused to help and turned him on his tail, she'd have definitely called to yell at them some more.

So yeah, no news was good news for now.

The Winchesters had decided to take the rare break to lay low at Bobby's. Between hunts, apocalypse chores, and being chased by the feds, they just didn't get that much downtime these days, so the boys would take what they could get. Dean slept for that whole first day. Sam didn't seem as at ease with their stolen break, but he did catch up on some sleep, at least at night.

The nerd of the family spent his time mostly conversing with Andy, improving his ASL with the kid as his teacher. Bobby would join on occasion if his hands were free, leaving Dean to feel like they were definitely talking about him (even if he knew they weren't). He spent the first two conversations grumbling and pouting about it, and finally sat down during the third to start taking some instruction from the other three.

Cas spent much of her time adding additional warding to Bobby's property, much to Bobby's begrudging respect. And constant pestering-slash-supervision so she didn't mess anything up, or so he insisted to the angel. Everyone else knew well enough the grump was a cover so he could learn as much as he could about advanced Enochian warding without seeming particularly interested in the subject or anything Cas had to teach him.

If the angel realized his legitimate interest, she never said a word.

By the seventh or eighth conversation with Andy where Dean was busy feeling like the dumb kid in class (all over again), Sam came up with the idea of having Cas create an Enochian dictionary of sorts. The angel perked up at the potential to be useful (Dean was going to have to keep an eye on that) and together with Bobby, the three started outlining what would be helpful for a hunter to know. Cas began translating at once. Which left Andy alone to keep talking-slash-teaching Dean ASL.

So, naturally, Dean walked away half an hour later with a repertoire of dirty words under his belt and not much else.

They couldn't hang around forever, of course. Bobby was likely a known associate of theirs in those ever-thickening FBI folders, and

someone would be by asking questions sooner or later. Either way, they had to be long gone by the time that rolled around.

Dean was leaning against the hood of the Impala, well-rested for the first time in what felt like years (and well fed, despite all of Bobby's grumbling about getting eaten out of house and home and yada, yada, yada). He hollered towards the house for Sam to get moving, adding – helpfully – that his kid brother packed like a friggin' girl.

Cas was standing in front of him, immobile as a stone statue (as always), the hem of her coat flapping almost lazily in the light breeze. Her gaze, which had been locked on Dean since she came outside (when wasn't it locked on him, Dean complained internally), turned intense. It was the type of intensity that usually suggested the angel was contemplating something dangerous.

"How do girls and boys pack differently?"

Dean resisted the sigh and instead settled for a glare. "I'm not falling for that trap."

Cas's brow furled. Dean looked away, refusing to so much as acknowledge the fact it was cute.

"Trap?"

The hunter rolled his eyes, uncrossing his arms to shift his weight against his Baby. "Dragon Lady knows exactly what trap I'm talking about. Tell her nice try."

The angel, who looked thoroughly confused, narrowed her eyes. "Angela can hear fine. She does not need me as a messenger of your statements. You should know this by now."

Dean threw his hands up, not bothering to spare either woman the dramatics. "I can't win with either of you."

Cas tilted her head, hair shifting across her shoulder. Dean ignored it with a fiery passion. "I do not understand why…"

The hunter looked back at her, already trying to wrangle up the patience it would take to explain gender roles to a genderless angel, when Cas finished her statement.

"…But she is laughing again."

His glare could have melted sand to glass.

Castiel did not understand how a human eyeball could ever– but Angela insisted it absolutely could. It was a human thing, she reassured her. Castiel did not feel particularly reassured in her understanding of humans at all.

"So you're on board, right?"

The question, which did not make sense to her, brought the angel back to the conversation Dean had apparently steered in another direction while she was learning about human eyeball powers.

"I still do not understand that reference."

This time Dean did sigh. "You're coming with us."

Castiel did not immediately answer, weighing the best way in which to formulate her response so as not to anger the very easily angered human in front of her. Apparently, she took too long, and that angered him as well.

"Cas."

The way he said her name spoke volumes. Volumes she was still deciphering. Humans were…difficult.

'*Men*,' Angela corrected within their shared mental space. *'Men are difficult*.'

Somehow, Cas did not believe that clarification to be entirely accurate, but kept her opinion to herself.

"I believe my time is better spent preparing for the Apocalypse to come."

Dean frowned, and Cas prepared for yelling. When he spoke though, his voice was only mildly irritated. "I thought you said the best way for us to do anything was to stick to the timeline. So…hunt."

He gestured to the car, like it was a symbol for that very activity. Castiel supposed it was, in many ways, at least for this hunter.

"Yes, for you and Sam that is the wisest course of action. Now that I have irreparably departed from my own timeline–" Dean looked away guiltily, but Cas's tone did nothing to hint at her own feelings on the matter– "there is nothing to follow. Therefore, I should go where I will

be most useful. We will need supplies: safe houses that are properly warded, weapons, an ample storage of salt–"

"Medical supplies wouldn't be a bad idea either. And money," Sam added as he jogged down Bobby's front steps, duffle bag tossed over his shoulder. He chucked it into the Impala's trunk, closing her up before turning to Cas. "Not sure how you'll manage it, but…"

"I will find a way," Castiel promised with a solemn nod. Sam was correct; the humans would need money. The Apocalypse would not afford time for jobs or easy income, and any time she could save them by procuring money beforehand was more time they could dedicate to the cause. Locating and collecting money could not be that difficult. Not for an angel, she was sure.

She turned back to Dean, sensing his hesitation even if it was not the outright fight she had expected. "I can accompany you on hunts if you would prefer–"

"Nah, I get it," the man from the future interrupted, shaking his head. He might not like it – in fact he was pretty damn unhappy about it – but he also knew Cas had a point. Besides, there were plenty of times before he lost his wings when the Cas of his time was off in search of weapons, or God, or any other way to stop the Apocalypse. That probably *was* as close to sticking to her timeline as she could get now. So Dean would deal. For now. "Having all that stuff ready for when shit hits the fan… it's smart."

Next to him, Sam nudged the older Winchester with his elbow. "How much did that hurt to admit?"

Dean shoved him hard and, laughing, his kid brother climbed into the car. The older of the two pointed a finger Cas's way, daring her to defy the seriousness of such a gesture. Blue eyes locked on that finger. Dean resisted wiggling it just to see if Cas's eyes would follow.

"Keep your phone on and *charged.* You remember how to use it, yeah?"

"Your lessons were sufficient," she answered, then paused for a long moment, eyes drifting to the side along with her head. A telltale sign she was talking with Dragon Lady. "Angela says 'yes' would have been a more 'sufficient' answer."

Dean rolled his eyes for the second time that morning, ignored the air quotes the angel still insisted upon no matter how many times he begged her to stop, and went to climb in the car when the angel spoke

again.

"She also says that hugs are a customary form of farewell."

The hunter froze, one foot already in the car, grip on her roof hard enough to leave dents. Sam was biting his lip, staring up at him from the passenger seat with eyebrows nearly hitting the damn roof and clearly trying so, so hard not to laugh. Dean's grip got tighter and Baby's metal friggin' *squeaked*.

When he still didn't move, Sam gave him a metaphysical nudge with a gesture of his head. "Aren't you going to hug her goodbye?"

Dean was back to glaring sand-melting daggers again, but his kid brother had long since become immune to those. So the hunter pulled away from the car, slamming the door shut in a way Baby absolutely didn't deserve but *someone* in this situation was going to feel his pain, damnit.

He stomped over to the completely un-expectant angel standing there with the same, unchanged expression. "You really want to hug it out, here, Cas?"

She tilted her head, not understanding the point of the question, as she had already implied the answer in her initial request. "Yes."

"You, Cas," Dean emphasized, gesturing to her with his chin. Castiel resisted the urge to look to either side, as if there was someone else to answer for her. She really didn't understand humans. "Not Dragon Lady. Speak for yourself, man."

The angel narrowed her eyes slightly at the haughty command, insulted at the insinuation. So she repeated herself, firmer. "Yes."

Well, Dean figured, he walked right into that one. Never challenge the nerd angels, man. So he went for a quick hug – not without an aggravated noise of resignation – and tried to pull away almost immediately after making contact. Only there was a set of immovable arms pressed around him.

"Uh, Cas? We hugged. You can let go now, buddy."

"Angela says that goodbye hugs are often long."

"Angela's a god damn liar," Dean muttered under his breath. Then louder, because he could hear Sam sniggering in the car, damnit, he

added snarkily, "You gonna jump off a bridge if Angela tells you to?"

Internally, Angela translated Dean's meaning for the angel, as she was uncertain what jumping off a bridge had to do with hugs.

Castiel pulled away, releasing her embarrassed charge. She couldn't fully admit to understanding his embarrassment, but it was a pleasant feeling to be the one to have caused it. Especially since she so often seemed to cause far less satisfying emotions in the human.

"I do not do everything Angela says. For example, I do not compliment your 'fine ass' nearly as often as she suggests I do."

Both Dean and Sam choked simultaneously, one on his own spit, the other on his laughter, and both for very different reasons.

Thank god she hadn't given up the air quotes. Dean might not have survived Cas calling his ass fine without the benefit of visual – if not fully understood or vocalized – sarcasm.

"I also do not think she would instruct me to do anything that would harm myself, or her."

"Goodbye Cas," Dean said *loudly*, deciding this conversation was most definitely over, and so the hell was their *goodbye*. He headed back for the driver side door with something between a groan, a mortified whimper, and a sigh. If anyone asked, he walked back to Baby in perfect, manly, stoic silence, *thank you very much.*

"Goodbye, Dean. Sam."

Ignoring Sam as he waved at the angel, still chuckling, Dean climbed into the car and rolled the window down so he could get the last word.

"See you around, Cas."

And what a word it was. Jesus Christ he was going to have to work on his game. There was no way in hell Dean was losing to a friggin' *Dragon Lady*.

-o-o-o-

Victor took a moment to collect himself before entering the room. The file in his hand felt far too light for how thick it was. His tie seemed obnoxiously tight today, despite it being the same tie he wore

yesterday, in the same knot he wore every day. He closed his eyes, tilting his head back to deal with this damn stupidity he'd all but volunteered himself for by making the call. But the job was more important than his ego.

He would just have to keep telling himself that.

The agent opened his eyes, determination steeled, and opened the door to the near-empty cafeteria space the prison had set up for this. He gave an acknowledging nod to the guard standing just inside, not that he thought the man was needed, and crossed to the one occupied table.

Gordon Walker stared up at him, expectant and smug, and Victor reminded himself again that his ego could take a backseat if it meant catching the damn Winchesters.

"Agent."

"Walker."

Victor settled at the table, placing the folder he'd brought with him onto the table, just to the right of himself. He took a moment to straighten it, bottom edge perfectly parallel to the table's. Gordon's eyes flickered to it, just as the agent wanted them to.

"You have something for me?" the prisoner asked, dark eyes betraying nothing. They remained locked on Henriksen now, even as he took his hand off the folder and leaned back in the chair, a picture of nonchalance.

"I might. Depends if you have something for me in return."

Gordon eyed him for a good long while, and Victor let him. After several minutes had passed in judging, weighed silence, the felon suddenly smiled. It was anything but friendly.

"You ain't got nothing for me, Agent." Gordon leaned back in his chair as well, mimicking Victor's posture but nailing the nonchalance a hell of a lot better. It helped that he wasn't forcing it. "Nothing that I want, anyway."

"What makes you say that?" Henriksen folded his hands over his chest, never taking his eyes off the dangerous man sitting across from him.

"Because I want out, and you're not ready to do that, yet."

"I'm never going to be ready to do that, Walker. You're a convicted felon, and as far as I'm concerned, you're a murderer, too."

The man's sharp smile was anything but innocent. "I'm in here on a weapons charge, Agent."

"We both know you're capable of a lot more than possessing illegal firearms. So why don't we stop dicking around, here."

Henriksen had to work not to hold his breath as Gordon sized him up, maintaining even, un-concerned breaths.

"Alright," the other man said after a moment, shrugging a single shoulder. The handcuffs wrapped securely around his wrists clinked with the movement. "What is it you want from me?"

Victor waited for a second, sizing Gordon up in return. He couldn't tell what the man's game was, yet, but he doubted Walker was ready to play ball so easily. Still. He'd come here for answers, and he wasn't going to get them just sitting there chatting up the criminal.

So he reached over to the folder, flipped it open and grabbed the top piece of paper. He slid it over to the convicted felon, who sat up to get a look at it.

Victor's gut tightened as Gordon's eyes lit up with recognition. A smirk took over his lips, but his eyes were so dark when he looked back up that, any doubts Victor might have had about this man's crimes, which were few and far between, were gone. Those were the eyes of a murderer.

"You know her, I take it?"

Gordon chuckled, the sound deep and foreboding. He pushed the photo back to Henriksen, the still from Milwaukee International's security footage glaring up at him tauntingly.

Dean Winchester was on the floor of the bank's lobby, bleeding from what could only be a fatal wound given the amount of liquid puddled on the tiles beneath him. His brother was at his side trying to stem the blood flow while a third man, identified as Ronald Reznik, crouched nearby, hiding from the searchlights. But it was the fourth person in the photo that Henriksen cared about right now, though.

It was the same woman from Baltimore, who'd apparently broken Dean out of an interrogation room in the middle of a damn police

station, filled with officers who'd neither seen her come or them go.

Just like Milwaukee International. What Henriksen wasn't saying, though, was that the entire footage had revealed her appearing out of nowhere, and the group disappearing just as unexplainably. The footage had obviously been tampered with, but Victor wanted to know how because none of his tech guys could explain it. They swore it hadn't been edited, at least not by any technology or technique they knew. And they were the FBI. They knew it all.

"Let me guess," Gordon drawled, leaning back into his chair again with an irritatingly smug look. It was like he held all the cards, which infuriated Henriksen. He wasn't the one locked up and never getting out of there. He had the cards. "They disappeared. Vanished into thin air, and you don't know how they did it."

Henriksen stared at the man. Alright, so he held one card: he knew about the disappearing act. Knew what this woman was capable of, whatever that capability was. He must know how she did it, as well.

That, or he truly was insane, and the Winchesters had convinced him of their delusions.

"You gonna tell me how they managed that in front of an entire police department?"

"And the FBI," the criminal added, like he was genuinely reminding Henriksen that the Winchester's had pulled one over him too. He clenched his jaw, teeth grinding, but didn't say anything. "No. I'm not gonna tell you."

Victor repeated his mantra, and tightly controlled his reaction to hide the frustration. He wouldn't give this asshole the satisfaction of knowing he was annoying the agent. "And why is that?"

"You're not ready to hear it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Victor snapped, reigning it in only seconds too late. He couldn't afford to let this man get under his skin. It didn't matter if it was what Gordon excelled at. Henriksen couldn't afford to get riled. He had a short temper as was, but he wasn't going to waste his one shot at the Winchester's just because Gordon Walker was a piece of work.

"It means you won't believe me even if I do tell you, so why bother wasting my breath." Gordon shrugged again, still leaning back like a

king on his throne rather than a man sentenced to twenty years in this shit hole. Victor was getting tired of the superiority act.

"Oh, right, because you think this is all some sort of... supernatural thing. That it? Because you're a, what do you all call yourselves? Hunters?" Henriksen tapped the photo of the mystery woman, the missing puzzle piece, the pain in his ass. "What's that make her, hm? Some teleporting ghost?"

"Oh, she's no ghost. She's something a lot more dangerous."

"Right." Henriksen stood, grabbing the photo and tossing it back onto the open file, which he closed and scooped up. "Good luck with the next twenty years of your life, Walker."

"Wait." The command stopped the FBI agent as he turned away from the table. And that's absolutely what it was: a command. Not a plea, not begging, or anything else spoken out of desperation for Henriksen to deal. Gordon still thought he was completely in control of this exchange, this relationship of prisoner and law officer. And it rankled Victor to no end, because it felt like he was missing something. Something he could see, couldn't place yet. Something that was the key to all of this. To catching the Winchesters.

He looked over his shoulder, brow raised in question. That question being, *why should I?*

"You don't want to hear what I have to say. Not yet." Gordon spoke with every confidence, and that feeling in Victor's gut - the acknowledgement of that missing puzzle piece - twisted a little bit more. "But you will."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." It was something in the way Walker spoke. Either he was a damn good liar - maybe the best Victor had ever seen - or he was crazy. A true psychopath with some serious delusions on top. "Until then, we'll take baby steps."

Henriksen turned fully around at that, his deadpan glare saying what his words didn't. He didn't have time or patience for this crap. "Baby steps."

"Baby steps," Gordon repeated, drawing his cuffed hands away from the table and toward the pocket of his orange jumpsuit. He pulled a folded piece of paper out and offered it to Henriksen, slotted between

two fingers.

Victor reached over the table, not bothering to sit again. He was still of the option that this entire thing – coming down here, talking with a lunatic, shit, even *thinking* he could have panned out as a lead – was a massive waste of his time. He plucked the paper from Gordon's hands and the man settled back in his chair as the FBI agent unfolded it.

There was nothing but a phone number written inside. Done with the games, Henriksen held it up, ink facing his convict. "What is this?"

"Bobby Singer's number." The way he said it was suggestion enough as to what Victor held in his hand. "His personal, *traceable* number."

Singer was a suspected associate of the Winchester's, but they'd never had anything on him. He had some system set up that kept his phones from being tapped, he was a damn suspicious bastard who never left his house, and when he did the FBI had neither warrant nor reason to attain one so they couldn't get in to see what the hell he'd done to his landlines.

If what Gordon said was true and they could tap this phone, or at least trace the person on the other end, then they could wait until the Winchester's came calling. And, finally, Henriksen would have a solid lead again.

If the information was real.

"And what are you expecting in exchange for this?"

"Nothing." At the agent's *don't-bullshit-me* look, Gordon raised his hands. "Honest. Call it a show of good faith. My Intel is solid, and it will help you catch the Winchesters."

Henrisken narrowed his eyes at the man, but tucked the paper into his breast pocket and turned to leave.

"If you get me out of here, that is."

The agent froze once more. There is was. He scoffed, but didn't rise to the bait. Let Gordon think that deal stood a chance. As long as it kept getting Victor these crumbs, he'd continue using that avenue.

Henriksen pushed through the door, telling the guard he was finished with the prisoner. As the door closed behind him, shutting out Gordon's smug, confident, and stupidly patient expression, Victor dug

his phone out of his pocket.

"David, it's Henrisken. I've got a number for you to compare those cell tower records to."

The responding, *"Oh thank god"* wasn't particularly surprising. Neither was Henriksen ignoring it.

-o-o-o-

They were headed south, just passing through Omaha when Dean finally snapped.

"Spit it out or choke on it Sam. One or the other."

His brother, who'd been eyeing him from the passenger side on and off for the last three hours shot him an innocent look so fake that Dean considered punching it right off his face.

"You're really going to make me say it?"

Dean tightened his grip on Baby's wheel until the leather creaked and kept strict, no-eye contact focus on the road. "Say *what*?"

His kid brother just shot him another look, and now Dean just wanted to punch anything. Sam included. When the younger Winchester held out, not saying a word, Dean finally shot him a warning glare.

"Seriously, Sam?"

"What?" Sam was back to sounding mostly innocent, except for the knowing look on his face. The one that said Dean was in so much trouble and Sam wasn't the perpetrator. "I mean… Dean, you shared your *food* with her. What else am I supposed to think?"

Dean very physically and not at all dramatically – threw out his hands in clear vexation. The car started to drift into the oncoming lane, and he quickly re-gripped the wheel and corrected before more than one car gave them a cursory honk. He glared at his brother, screw focusing on the road. "*That's* what you're on about? Seriously!"

But Sam, who knew he had the winning offensive in his argument, hands down, didn't budge. "Dude. You don't share food with anyone, Dean. Not even me, and I'm your *brother*."

The older Winchester pulled his head back, clearly affronted. He switched between glancing out the windshield and sending dubious

looks Sam's way. "You don't think that's just a little bit of an exaggeration? We share food all the-"

"Last week," Sam interrupted, apparently prepared for this rebuttal. "That diner in Kentucky. You got the strawberry rhubarb pie – because you thought rhubarb was a type of chocolate-" Sam shook his head, eyes heavenward. Dean opened his mouth to argue, but the kid kept right on going, "-and told me I had to try some. So you ordered a second slice."

Dean gave him an honest-to-god-he-didn't-believe-in incredulous look. "What, I thought you'd want a whole slice!"

"Which you then ate," Sam continued without missing a beat, "when I didn't."

"Not my fault you don't like deliciousness."

"Because, as I told you before you ordered it, I don't like strawberry rhubarb pie."

Dean didn't have a comeback for that one, so instead he sat, brooding in the front seat, trying to think of a time when he had willingly shared food with his brother. Hell, even unwillingly.

He kept coming up blank.

"Dean."

It wasn't his fault he liked food, unlike his weird-ass, nerd brother. Maybe if he just ignored Sam, this whole conversation would go away.

"*Dean*."

"It's not a big deal, Sam!" Or maybe not. "It was *Cas*."

His brother just snorted, giving him a single raised brow before finally breaking the one-sided staring contest he was holding. "Yeah, Dean. That's kind of my whole point."

At first Dean just rolled his eyes, but then his mind went right on going, straight through a myriad of various emotions. They flew by too fast to really focus on just one – let alone start picking them apart, not that he wanted to do that – so he settled on anger. Anger was easy. Anger was familiar. "We're done talking about this. It isn't a thing, so drop it."

"Alright," came Sam's answer, way too easily. He leaned back against the seat, arm propped up on the door, the picture of moving on. Dean knew it couldn't possibly be that easy. "We don't have to talk about it. But if you ever want to-"

And there it was.

"Can it, Sammy. I'm serious."

"Come on, Dean," Sam sighed, but it was a resigned sound. The kind that came from a conversation he'd had a million times. Which made no sense, because they'd never had this conversation before. Dean was sure of it, cuz he would have shut it down immediately. "Haven't you ever wanted it?"

The man from the future frowned, not following. "Wanted what?"

"To be loved, man."

The silence that stretched between them could have been poked with a stick and it probably would have poked right back. Dean didn't even know how to start responding to that, so he didn't try.

"I'm serious. My whole life, Dean, I've never seen you let someone in. Not like that. Isn't it something that you want?"

Dean stubbornly stayed quiet, refusing to speak. He wasn't having this conversation with his brother.

Sam huffed out a breath, maybe annoyed at having a conversation with himself only but not letting it stop him. "Well, if it is… you shouldn't let something like that go. Shouldn't waste it."

There was something in his brother's voice, in the way it dropped in volume, like he was talking as much to himself as he was to Dean. He was clearly thinking about Jess, about what he'd lost. Maybe time he thought he'd wasted.

Some of Dean's anger eased as he glanced towards the kid. Maybe he was being too hard on his brother for diving headfirst into chick territory. Sam wasn't trying to poke the bear, he was just… looking out for him, he supposed, in his own way. Trying to keep him from passing up on something that Sam, at one time, might have sold his soul to keep.

"It's not like that," Dean said after a moment. He wrung his hands

around Baby's wheel, fidgeting to distract himself from the fact that he was, more or less, resigned to having a touchy feely conversation for his brother's sake. And he *hated* touchy feely conversations, damnit. "It's not like, you know… you and Jess."

Or him and Lisa.

What he had with Cas was… well, it wasn't like what he'd had with… well, anyone.

Dean could only claim to have loved so many people in his life, and that number was nothing to write home about. There was Shawna Moore, the first person he'd ever… well, thought maybe he could be with for longer than a one night stand or a high school fling to pass the time in yet another town. It had been 1996, Arkansas, Fillmore high, the last trimester of junior year and he and Sammy had been in the town for almost all three months of it, for once. He'd met Shawna beneath the bleachers on the sports field, having snuck out there for a smoke. Apparently she'd had the same idea.

She'd been gorgeous, smart, a total badass. For a teenage girl and a civilian at least. Real rebel with a cause type and all that. Couldn't wait to get out of that town – that school, that life – and go do something big. Something real. Something that mattered.

She'd been one of the first kids his own age to just… get it. That there was more to life than textbooks, tests, and school dances. Or what college your rich daddy's gonna get you into. At seventeen, Dean was a friggin' hero. A hunter who saved people. Who did something that *mattered*, like Shawna talked about. Nothing any school teacher was gonna teach him would make him better than that. To hell with school, he didn't need it. And Shawna got that. She got all of it.

John had even let them stay the summer after the school year ended, getting a job as a mechanic to make some money while fielding hunts in the area from Bobby, just a state over. He and Shawna had spent those months smoking, drinking, sneaking into movie theatres, and talking about futures that didn't involve homework.

But the monsters eventually showed up elsewhere and Dad had called it. Didn't matter that Dean had a gig at the local movie theatre and the beginnings of some savings, or that Sam had what he would call friends (bunch of nerds and losers, is what Dean thought). They always moved on. Always went to the next hunt. Dean would pack up, have the inevitable argument with Sam before herding him into the

Impala, by force if necessary, and they would leave.

No more Shawna Moore.

She'd asked him to stay in touch and he'd told her okay, but never bothered. Even his seventeen-year-old self had known hunting was no place for a relationship.

Then he'd met Cassie. And thought… he'd thought just maybe he could make it work. He could tell her the truth. Dad was off god-knows where, and Dean wasn't a child anymore. He could make his own decisions. Could make his own life. He'd go on hunting trips when they came calling and come back to a… well, maybe not a home, but a town he could call home when he wasn't on the road. With a girlfriend whose bed he could crash in and whose fridge he could raid. Who he could poke and pester all night while she stayed up studying and he watched infomercials on the couch, trying to talk her into buying half the things. Whose hand he occasionally held in public, no matter how much it made him sweat or look around like someone might start calling him out as a charlatan.

She'd even brought him home for dinner with her parents over Easter, and fuck had that been terrifying. And awkward. Dean didn't do *parents.* But she'd argued it was a holiday, and he couldn't spend it alone. And somehow, he'd let her talk him into it. He'd even enjoyed himself. At least a little.

On weekdays he'd wake to the smell of coffee that she'd bring him in bed before heading out to class. He figured out her washer and dryer and even folded their laundry, like some sort of… *civilian*. It freaked him out almost as much as he secretly enjoyed it. They grabbed burgers and shakes at the local diner on 'date night' and she'd bitch about her mom giving her another round of 'when am I getting grandchildren' speech. And Dean would laugh and ignore the weird twinge in his gut when he thought about a future just like that. Filled with diner date nights, family dinners, and friggin house chores.

He never managed to picture himself any more domestic than that. He'd done the dishes after they ordered takeout a night or two. Helped her fix the plumbing when it backed up once. She took him apartment hunting when she needed to move closer to campus and her part time journalism job. But he didn't let it go any further than that. Didn't let himself think about anything more. Not getting an apartment together or calling it home. Not hanging up his hunting shoes and picking up honest work. Not those kids Cassie's mom wanted so much, sure he'd

make a crap dad even then. He didn't let himself dream. Not much, anyway.

And, honest, he hadn't wanted any more than that what he had with Cassie. Didn't need that home, the family or the white picket fence. He was good as is. But he didn't want what they had to end, either.

So he'd told her. The first person he'd ever told. The first person he'd ever allowed himself to love. Really love. Love enough to risk that truth.

And she'd broken his heart in return. Maybe not in the weeping romance way, but in the little ray of hope he'd been nurturing deep down inside, hidden away where John Winchester could never find it. A hope he kept so buried he forgot it existed himself most days. But that's what she'd broken. She'd shattered his hope.

Dean had known all along. Hunting and love had no place together. He'd just deluded himself into thinking maybe he'd been wrong. That maybe, if it was the right person, he could make it work. That he could have it all. That he could have someone and be a hunter. Because Dean didn't know how to live without hunting.

So he made the easy choice. And left.

Lisa had known the truth before he'd shown up on her doorstep, desperate and alone and broken. He didn't have to hide who he was, what he'd done, and how messed up he'd become because of it. But he didn't have to hunt anymore either. It had been… almost perfect. *She* had been perfect. And he had loved her. It hadn't been the romantic love he'd always thought it was supposed to be, the kind of love years of TV and movies had painted for him.

But it had been love, in a way. His way, maybe. It had been curling up on the couch and watching old movies after Ben went to bed. It had been taking the kid to the county fair, even when he said he was too 'old' for it, and picking him up from soccer practice when Lisa was working late at the studio. It was taking turns making meals, doing dishes – Lisa had a rule that whoever cooked didn't clean, and Dean wasn't dumb enough to question the lady. It was holding her close every night, breathing in the scent of her hair and knowing, for once, that he wasn't alone. That he was accepted as he was. Even if he didn't deserve it. Even when he told her he didn't deserve it and she kept right on doing it anyway.

But then his past had come calling. Hunting was in his blood, and he'd

been a fool to think it would leave him alone. That he could leave it alone.

It was why he'd asked Cas to do what he'd done. To take away their memories. Even in danger, even with her *son* in danger, Lisa hadn't been able to let him go like she should have. Like he told her to. Told her that he was no good for her, for them. But she wouldn't listen. Insisted that even if they didn't stay together, if he didn't live with them, that she'd still be there for him.

Just like Jess had promised Sam.

And so he'd made the choice for her. Because he wasn't worth that and never would be. And he needed her safe, like Sam needed Jess safe.

What he had with Cas… shit. It wasn't like any of that. It wasn't romance, or housework, date nights or time spent together. I mean, sure, there'd been moments once the angel had gone fully human, and all the bumps along the power road after.

Cas sitting at the kitchen table while Dean cooked breakfast in the bunker. Dean, nursing a beer and keeping the ex-angel company while he did dishes after dinner. Dean never minded Cas's presence, be it in the bunker with them, in the car on the way to a hunt or a night in a hotel on the road. He'd never thought about it in terms of *enjoying* the angels company, per say, but Cas was his friend. So, yeah, of course he enjoyed hanging out with him.

But what they had… it wasn't *love.* Cas didn't stay because he loved Dean. Not like that, at least. Cas stayed because he was a soldier, a hunter, and it was suicide to fight alone. He stayed because they were friends. A team. Those things didn't have anything to do with the kind of love Sam was talking about. The only kind of love Dean had gotten close to having for himself.

"It's not like that with me and Cas," Dean repeated, clearing his throat briefly and, in doing so, clearing his mind of the memories.

Sam tried to catch his brother's gaze, but Dean's eyes were glued to the road. The younger Winchester eventually turned back to the front, watching the road pass by the windshield. "You know… it's not like Jess and I became a thing overnight."

Dean didn't have anything to say to that, because he and Cas *weren't like that.* And they weren't gonna be like that. No matter how his horny-as-hell, twenty-something body thought of Cas's temporary

body. Dean would get over that in time – he was certain – and it wasn't gonna change anything.

Sam didn't push any further. His thoughts were years away, back in Stanford, falling in love with a woman he had never seen coming. Love never ended up being like you thought it would be as a kid. It wasn't a fairytale feeling that came for free, that made the hard work not hard. It was…a connection. One you wanted badly enough to work for. To do the hard work that relationships required. Love didn't make the hard work any less hard, it just made it worth it.

But Sam wasn't sure how to even broach that conversation with his brother. Wasn't sure how to put it into words that Dean would even listen to, let alone put into the context of his and Castiel's relationship.

The miles passed, the tape deck hit the end of the track and spat the tape back out. Dean reached into the box between them without a word and popped a new one in. He cranked the volume – his way of saying this conversation was over – and Sam let it be. He'd said his piece. Whether his older brother chose to hear… well, you could lead a horse to water, and all that.

"Where we going, anyway?" he asked once another ten miles had passed, Omaha well behind them.

"Some college town in Ohio. Bobby said there's been some strange sightings around town." Dean didn't sound all that interested – or invested – but then again, it was only a maybe-case that didn't involve strippers, bars, or girls-gone-wild-style college girls.

"No deaths?" Sam's brow was furled. They didn't usually go off on a hunt unless there was a little more to go on. Maybe Bobby had just been finding them something to keep busy. It wasn't like they could stay at his place indefinitely. Not with the FBI on their tail.

"Not yet."

"Right." Sam shrugged, slouching in the seat and closing his eyes. "Wake me when it's my turn to drive."

Dean sent his brother an unimpressed look. Not that Sam saw it. "It's never your turn to drive, bitch."

The responding, *"Jerk,"* soon enough turned into rhythmic breathing and soft snores. Dean popped a new tape into the tape deck and drove on.

-o-o-o

"Well that was a total bust," Dean muttered as they came out of the last place to have a 'weird sighting'. "A unicorn, Sammy. A friggin' *unicorn.*" The older Winchester stalked around Baby with a growl. He stopped at the driver's side, keys in hand, and leaned his arm against the roof. "There's no such things as *unicorns*!"

Sam looked inches away from rolling his eyes, but stuck to just an eyebrow raise. He opened the passenger door. "Yeah, Dean. I'm aware."

Dean growled again, opening his own door and climbing in. "What is everyone in this town *on*?"

Unicorns showing up at the local coffee shop for a scone (according to the rainbow-haired barista closing up that night). Which it apparently got, *stabbing* the pastrywith its horn before trotting off.

Then there was the giant squid in the library. A local librarian – who was old enough to have crawled out of a crypt herself and wore eye glasses closer to damn *goggles* with how thick they were – swore up and down that one night, just before closing, she heard a book fall from one of the shelves. When she went to check and found a book lying open, alone, in the middle of an aisle, with *water* bubbling up out of it and *tentacles*.

Sam had elbowed his brother for snorting in the middle of the librarian's story.

Turned out, once the old broad had gone screaming out of the building and returned with some disbelieving cops, there was nothing but an old copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea,* abandoned in the middle of an empty aisle.

By the time they got to the seven year old boy who swore he'd seen the actual Easter Bunny – six feet tall, big feet, bigger ears, biggest basket of big, big eggs (kid had all the best adjectives) – hopping through his backyard, after *eating* the family bunny (irony), did Dean call it quits. He was fed up with the whole lot of 'em and whatever this screwy case was.

"It's *February*, Sam. Easter is in, like, *May*."

As his brother started driving away from the their latest witness's house – long past the kid's bedtime – Sam gave his brother a casual

look that was really far more amused than Dean currently was.

"April, usually."

Dean spared him one hell of a glare. "Doesn't matter, because you know what it currently isn't?"

"April?"

"Damn straight." The older Winchester turned his annoyed, irritated, fed up glare back to the road and turned them towards the motel. He shook his head. "I'm telling you. People in this town are on drugs."

"Really?" Sam cast him a look, the amusement growing. "Even the Librarian?"

"Especially the librarian!"

Despite the oddity of the case that even Sam could admit was baffling, the younger Winchester laughed. "Dean… she's like, *eighty*."

His brother didn't even blink, casting him a knowing look. "It's the old ones that are the craziest."

Sam shook his head, still chuckling when the car suddenly lurched to a stop. The younger hunter glanced to Dean, confused, but found his brother's gaze locked over his right shoulder. Frowning, Sam followed his gaze out the passenger window.

There was nothing there, just some buildings and what might be a park, pleasantly lit up with landscaping lights.

"Uh…" Sam looked back at his brother, but Dean's eyes were locked on one of those buildings. "Dean?"

The engine rumbled pleasantly as Dean stepped on the gas, turning the wheel towards those buildings. Sam glanced between them and his brother once more. He knew something was up, he just didn't know *what*. "Dean? Is this, a, uh, timey sense thing?"

"Yeah, think so."

They pulled into a parking lot sparsely scattered with cars. Dean put the Impala into park, climbing out. He was still looking around the place that was so hauntingly familiar, he just couldn't figure out why.

Sam followed, no less confused but along for the Timey Senses ride.

When Dean's déjà vu perked up like this, it was best just to follow along until he figured it out. They walked from the parking lot to a path through what was more of a courtyard than the park Sam had originally thought it was. Dean was on a mission through the courtyard to one of the taller buildings. It was aesthetically quite pleasing, a towering structure of white stone capped in fancy green roofing. A set of steps led up to it, and Sam realized why the whole place – the steps, the buildings, the courtyard – seemed familiar.

This was a college campus.

They were halfway up those steps, Sam following after Dean who had his mind set on something, when the older Winchester suddenly stopped dead. Sam would have crashed into him if he'd been any closer.

"Oh shit."

Sam peered around his brother to see green eyes wide and a stunned look on his face. "Dean?"

"Nope." Dean suddenly spun around, Sam almost losing his balance on the step just behind him. Dean was already trucking it down the steps and Sam hurried to follow as his brother muttered, "Nope, nope, nope."

Sam opened his mouth – because, really, what the hell? – but before he could get anything out something large, dark, and flailing fell from the sky and landed on the steps in front of them with a horrifying crunch and a bodily thud.

That was because, upon closer inspection, it was a *body*.

Sam almost fell over trying to back up mid-stair. "Oh my God!"

Dean, too stunned to move from his stiff, drawn back position, tilted his head back. Far above them on the upper floors of that tower was a broken window. He dropped his gaze back down to the very dead professor on the steps in front of them.

Sam startled as Dean struck at the air repeatedly with clenched fists, all but stomping his feet in what could only be called a silent temper tantrum.

"Son of a bitch!"

-o-o-o-

By the time the cops were done with their questioning – what were you doing on campus at eleven o'clock at night, what are your names, what are you doing in Ohio, blah blah blah – it was well past midnight and Dean was all but dragging Sam back to the car.

"Dean, someone just *died*." Sam was making half-hearted attempts to turn them around. Half-hearted not because he didn't believe in his cause – that they shouldn't be running away from whatever case they'd just stumbled onto – but because he knew there was no reasoning with Dean when he got like this. "You don't think that's something we should, I don't know, maybe look into?"

"Nope."

"Dude, what the hell?" Sam muttered as his brother all but dragged him back off campus towards the Impala. The younger Winchester glanced over his shoulder at the retreating school buildings, one of which was now lit with the blue and red lights of police.

There was a zipped up body bag on the ground and an un-needed ambulance parked in the courtyard.

"Not this one, Sammy," Dean muttered, keeping his voice low as he looked around like someone might be watching them. Sam frowned, looking around as well. They had just witnessed a death – probably a murder – after all. Maybe the perpetrator was still in the area. But the campus was largely deserted given the hour, and anyone who had been out was drawn by the cops and commotion. They weren't paying attention to the two brother's making their way off campus.

The younger Winchester pulled his arm free of his brother, dragging them both to a stop. Dean looked irritated, but Sam didn't let that deter him. "You said no more running."

"No," the man from the future countered immediately, finger already out and pointing. "I said we'd pick our battles. Well, I'm not picking this one."

"There are people dying here, Dean!" Sam tried for the honor-and-duty angle that usually was enough to win his brother over, or at least make him pause. Not this time, apparently.

"One guy. Just one guy, and he's a douchebag who had it comin'," the older Winchester harped back almost immediately. The unicorn, the

tentacles. It was all making sense now. "That's what the trickster does, alright? And trust me, we don't want to get involved."

"A trickster?" Sam's voice rose in surprise. They'd never run into a trickster before. They were old and powerful, usually pagan gods or demi-gods. Through no fault of his own, the younger Winchester was intrigued. Dean could tell, given his deadpan return glare. Sam cleared his throat, trying to look a little less curious. He failed. "What, uh, what happened last time?"

His brother grabbed his arm again, once more hauling ass for the Impala. "Let's just say Taco Tuesday was permanently ruined for you, for like…ever. And I never got to listen to Asia again. So, yeah, we're leaving."

Sam was still trying to argue his case (in and among attempts to get more out of Dean than that jumble which had made absolutely no sense) when the Winchester boys rounded the corner of the building closest to the school parking lot and went out of sight. From a darkened alcove of that building, a short-statured man dressed in a janitor's uniform stepped into the light of the courtyard lamps, eyes narrowed and lollipop clacking against his teeth.

Gabriel pulled the sweet from his mouth with a pop, eyes still locked on where the Winchesters had disappeared. He'd been all prepped to be the one to 'discover' Professor Pervert's body and casually mention all the young ladies he'd taken up to his office to the responding police. Really stir the water cooler talk on campus.

At least until the Winchesters came trotting around the corner like men on a mission. Well, one man on a mission and one following along confused and worried and all frowny-faced.

Professor Pervert's fall had timed perfectly with the hunter's arrival. Gabe was kind of surprised about that, actually. Usually hunters showed up *after* someone died, not before. And they also didn't normally solve the Supernatural Who-Dun-It *before* doing any actual, well… hunting. They were totally throwing off his timing, and Gabriel prided himself on his comedic timing. It was kind of his whole *thing*.

So. That was kinda weird.

Gabriel popped the lollipop back into his mouth with an obscene smack. It was a good thing a trickster such as him liked weird. The archangel-turned-Loki tucked his hands in his pockets and followed after the pair of hunters.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: So, in short, Dean doesn't have a clue what love is, and western media & entertainment's portrayal of romantic love is dumb, and shallow, and 2-Dimensional, and Gabe's on scene! *drops mike and exits stage left*

Cas: Don't worry, Cas will be making appearances far more often now that she's out of Heaven. I'm not trying to get rid of her again (the poor under-utilized logical part of my brain – a part that clearly doesn't get enough use in RL and so HAS to jump in, loudly, while I'm writing FICTION – nicely informed me that gathering weapons is more important than riding around in the Impala with the boys and a strategic angel like Cas would realize it. Thanks, Brain. Watching my back as always -_-)

Unicorns, Tentacles, Easter Bunnies, oh My! Okay, so why didn't all those things happen/appear in the original episode if they happened in this timeline? What changed to make them happen? Er….nothing. My reasoning to get the boys to that campus without alerting Dean as to the familiar case immediately couldn't be the professor, since he hadn't died yet, so I thought… you know what? I bet Gabe messes with people wherever he goes. The boys (in a different place last time and not at Bobby's) wouldn't have heard about Unicorns and Tentacles because crazy stories like that with single witnesses don't make the news. But a professor falling to his death does. That's my reasoning and I'm sticking to it :P Also because I legitimately enjoy the idea of Gabe just roaming from town to town leaving a trail of low-key chaos in his wake before stumbling on a truly deserving douchebag.

Happy Easter, Ramadan, and Passover to all who celebrate or observe!

Cheers,
Silence

UPDATE 7/30/2022 - Great news, everyone!
I am back in the swing of things. My depression/identity crisis (real fun combo, yaaaaay) is lately behind me and I'm clawing my way back to normalcy. Which means I am writing again! I have a chapter for you all, but I'm actually at my favorite, internet-less lake for the weekend. So I won't be able to post it on Sunday. I will get you all a chapter - a doooozy or a chapter :D - next weekend!!! Much love to you all until then, thanks so much for

your patience, your encouragement, and your support, always <3

Chapter 116: Season 2: Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I am so sorry for the long delay! I had a troublesome couple of months filled with depression. I'm on the other side of it now, working my way back up that hill. Thanks everyone for hanging with me, and for those who reached out: **JustinB, faux_strider, P. Por,** and **Masamune X23.** Even if I didn't get back to you, I really, really appreciated the pokes, the support, the patience and encouragement. As well as a big, big thank you to everyone who reviewed or commented, letting me know how much my work is appreciated and loved, and especially missed. And, as always, welcome to our newest readers! I'm so glad y'all are joining us on this little beastie.

Special Thanks to **Vaesse** and **Forestpelt** for their help reading this chapter a little early, beta-ing, helping pick the right spot to end it, and encouragement that the whole thing made sense and I wasn't crazy thinking I was onto something.

Now, onward!

Chapter Warnings: It is a doozy of a chapter this time, in both events and length. I'd like to believe it makes up for the wait, but you'll have to tell me what you think :D

Actual Chapter Warnings: Well, we got some delicious double fudge rocky road ice cream coming up, wacky shop names in a small town, little bit of Foreigner for you rock n' roll fans, some eight year old's craft supplies turned to wall-weeping slime, psychedelic nostalgia from the sixties, and bird feeders!

Yeah, all that!

Oh, and also one hell of a cliffhanger. But really, we ought to expect those from me my now ;) ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 82

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Dean woke with a jolt – the peaceful quiet of a lakeside dock, lapping water, and wind in the trees suddenly replaced with *Foreigner* on max volume. He sat bolt-upright in momentary alarm before realizing it was just the motel radio clock, set to go off at seven thirty. With a groan, he rolled over and hit the thing with a closed fist until it stopped making so much noise at such an early hour.

The hunter flopped onto his back with another moan, arm falling over his eyes to block out the light coming from the already-opened, cheap-ass motel curtains.

His brother was an asshole.

"Morning, Sunshine," Sam joked from what sounded like the next bed over. Dean lolled his head to the side, peaking one eye out from under his forearm. His brother was indeed on the other mattress, fully dressed and pulling on his shoes. He looked far too amused for the early hour.

"Bitch," Deam grumbled almost incoherently before forcing himself upright with another noise of protest, rubbing at the grogginess that was his face. Sam had clearly been up for a while, which meant he could have switched that damn alarm off at any point. The older Winchester had a feeling he'd turned the volume all the way up, instead.

Sam just smirked, standing from the bed and heading into the bathroom.

Yeah, alright, Dean probably deserved that for all the times he'd less-than-pleasantly woken his kid brother up. With as loud and disgruntled a groan as he could make, he hauled his body off the mattress and headed into the bathroom as well, where Sam was already brushing his teeth.

Dean grumbled something that might have been English, possibly, as he shouldered his brother out of the way of the sink so he could splash some water on his face. The Sasquatch, still brushing away, raised an eyebrow.

"Coffee?" Sam asked through a mouth full of bristles and toothpaste, so it really sounded more like *cooffeef?* In response to the peace offering, Dean just moaned – this time as obnoxiously as possible – and, dripping water all over the place, turned to his brother with a

suggestive wink.

"Love it when you talk dirty to me, Sammy."

The younger Winchester rolled his eyes, huffed his huffiest little brother huff (which ended up with him almost choking on minty foam) and spat into the sink. Dean grabbed his own toothbrush with an equally obnoxious smirk.

-o-o-o-

There was a diner around the corner from their motel, and Dean sucked in the smell of grease, butter, and coffee fumes like a drowning man who'd finally found land. He slid into a booth with the relief of salvation and signaled over the harried waitress in her god-awful pink uniform. Without missing a beat she grabbed the coffee pot and headed their way.

Sam eyed him as he settled – at a much more reasonable pace – into the booth across from his brother. Physically, Dean looked fine. And he'd only rubbed at his chest like, twice that morning. Which was pretty good for the man currently housing an angel in his torso.

Still. Sam knew his brother hadn't been sleeping well for a while now. Not since Rivergrove.

"Rough night?"

Dean immediately dropped his hand from his chest, not even realizing he was rubbing at it, it was such a subconscious habit now. Instead, the man from the future scoffed, about to hassle *nosy Samantha* right back about sleep schedules and vitamin intake when he actually paused to think about. Had his night been rough? He couldn't remember any dreams, but he sure felt like crap. The kind of crap that usually came after a bad night. But that could just be chalked up to another crap bed in a crap motel in a crap town they'd pulled into way too late the previous night.

His shoulders were tight, like he'd slept tense. His chest was achy, but not in the demon-just-around-the-corner way. More like the slept-bad, probably-had-nightmares-full-of-anxiety-and-dread kinda achy. Or… maybe something in between the two. Whatever all that was, it sure had him feeling groggy this morning.

Dean glanced to the right where a clock was hanging over the service window of the diner's kitchen. Seven fifty-seven. Sure, Dean wasn't

quite the rise and shine type like Sammy, but he could usually shake the cobwebs after twenty or so minutes. Maybe he'd had a rough night after all.

Nothing a good cup of Joe couldn't fix, though.

Godsend that she absolutely must be, the waitress arrived not a moment later, hand on her hip and coffee pot already pouring. It was enough to distract Dean from thoughts of bad nights on lumpy mattresses. He greedily sucked down the life-giving black sludge as their waitress – her nametag reading Darla – poured Sam a cup as well. They both stared at the older man as he chugged down the entire mug of hot liquid. Good old Darla was staring so much that she went and overflowed Sam's mug, spilling coffee onto the table top.

"Oh shoot!" she swore, pulling back on the pot and grabbing a towel from her apron. Luckily it had only spilled enough to flood the tabletop around the mug, rather than cover Sam's lap in scalding hot coffee. "Sorry 'bout that."

"No problem," the younger Winchester offered with a weak smile, switching between nodding understandingly at the waitress and eyeing his brother with confused concern.

Darla scurried off to get them a couple waters and another towel, promising to be back to take their order shortly. Sam continued eyeing Dean as he finished the last of the coffee with a loud, overly announced, *'Ah!*' and set the mug down with a clink.

The eyebrow raise was approaching *Ultimate*. "You sure you're feeling alright?"

"Yeah." Dean shrugged off the concern with one shoulder, already looking for Darla and a refill. Sam was still giving him the stink eye – something between open concern and abhorrent regret that he was related to the man sitting across from him. Dean cleared his throat. He wasn't *that* bad, was he? "It's like you said. Rough night."

Sam didn't seem fully convinced, but let it go as Darla came back over with a clean cloth, wiping away the last of the spill. She also refilled Dean's coffee while she was at it, though not without a little side eye.

With a hand on her hip and an almost empty coffee pot in the other, she asked, "What'll you boys be having this morning?"

"I'll have the California Omelet with a side salad, please." Sam handed

over his menu while Dean pulled a face at the crisis that was his kid brother.

"It's eight o'clock in the friggin' morning, Sammy," he grumbled, only somewhat slack-jawed and horrified. "Salads are not a *breakfast* food. They're barely a food at all, unless you're a *rabbit*."

Sam just rolled his eyes, like his brother with his one-burger-shy-from-a-heart-attack diet had any room to judge. Dean turned to their waitress with a charming smile that absolutely wasn't returned.

"I'll take the special," he announced proudly, handing over his menu as well. Darla took it, less than impressed, and headed back behind the counter. Dean turned back to Sammy, who looked equally unimpressed. "Two eggs, two sausage links, two pieces of bacon, two pancakes, two slices of toast, and one piece of ham. Now *that's* a real breakfast."

Sam continued to stare, still unimpressed but now with a slightly green tinge around the corners. "Yeah, a real *glutton's* breakfast."

Dean pshaw'd, then stubbornly insisted, "Real *man's* breakfast."

The younger Winchester didn't deign such a comeback with one of his own, instead just rolling his eyes and shaking his head like one might when faced with such infallible logic. Or at least that's what Dean told himself as the bell above the Diner's door rang with new customers. Darla called out a half-hearted greeting as a kid – no more than four or five – came barreling down the aisle between the counter barstools and the booths. Even as the kid's dad called out for him not to run, the little tyke tripped right at Sam and Dean's table, face planting onto the linoleum beside them.

"Great," Dean muttered as he stared at the now screaming child, who looked entirely unharmed to the hunter. "Walk it off, buddy."

Sam grimaced at the volume of the tantrum happening just to his left, but turned it into somewhat of a smile as the father of the child made it to the scene of the wipeout.

"Sorry," the man said – loudly so as to be heard over his screaming child – as he picked the kid up and set him back on his feet.

"It's what kids do," Sam replied with a little more smile than grimace, though it definitely twitched halfway through as the boy let out a truly impressive wail. Dean continued to eye the child with a look far

less understanding.

The family moved past, son still crying and father attempting to calm him down. They settled for the last booth in the back, which was not nearly far enough away to lessen the meltdown still happening.

"Awesome," Dean muttered, already feeling the headache coming on. Sam gave him a knowing-yet-still-somehow-admonishing look. Kids were kids, after all. Screaming was just one of the many things they did.

Darla arrived a few moments later with their breakfast, a kid's coloring menu and set of crayons tucked under Dean's plate just waiting to save the day. As she scurried off to deliver what would hopefully bring them all some peace and quiet, Dean eyed his brother's friggin' breakfast *salad* with as much distaste as he'd spared the wailing kid.

He stabbed his fork into the single slice of ham on his plate and draped it over Sam's salad before the beanstalk could stop him. "There. Now it's breakfast."

Sam's glare received a beaming smile in return even as he less than delicately picked the piece of ham up with his fingers and set it on a side plate.

"So," Dean began with a mouth full of food that earned him a second bitchface for the morning (#6, a general plea to the universe to explain how they could possibly be related), "Tell me about this case."

Sam's *'Really?'* bitchface (more of a seven, which often came after six) remained petulantly in place. "Dude, I told you about it last night. In the car?"

Dean frowned, trying to recall that conversation. Ultimately, he shrugged. "Sue me, Sam, I'd been driving for like, eight hours."

"It was five," Sam countered mockingly, though with little heat. He'd taken over the driving and started telling his brother about the possible case in a small town outside of Urbana, Ohio. Which had pretty much put the older Winchester right to sleep, apparently. "And why am I always the one looking for cases, huh? When did that become my job?"

Dean pulled his head back. "Hey, I look for plenty of cases-"

At Sam's raised eyebrow and clear-as-day *lawyer look* falling into place, Dean changed tactics.

"I do the driving, you do the searching," he offered instead, shrugging like it had always been that way. "Besides, we gotta follow the timeline, right?"

"Yeah, we do. Which would be easier if you're the one looking for cases," his brother argued right back. "You're going to find the ones we did in your timeline a lot faster than me relaying all this to you, waiting for memory to strike. You just want an out for the work."

"Hey, not true!"

It was absolutely true, but Dean wasn't about to admit it. Especially since he did have a valid point too. Well. Sort of. Like half a point.

"If I'm looking, it wouldn't be random. To really follow the timeline, we gotta find our next stop based on what we think is a case, not what we know!"

Sammy lowered his fork, lettuce still on the tip of the utensil, to stare. "Dude. That makes *no* sense."

The man from the future just shrugged and went with his backup argument. "I did all the legwork first time around-" also not true, but *lawyer* Sammy had no way of arguing against it- "so this time it's your turn."

The look his kid brother gave him said, *'yeah right*,' but to his credit Sam just shook his head and let it drop. "There's been sightings of a mysterious goo-"

"Mysterious goo?" Dean echoed with a raised eyebrow. Didn't sound familiar.

"Yeah, that's what the news article said."

Dean's eyes narrowed, because what self-respecting newspaper would print a story about mystery goo? "Which news?"

Sam's unimpressed look was back, and the older Winchester knew he was about two more comments away from being told to find a case himself if he didn't like Sam's. "Weekly World News."

Dean hummed in response, weighing his head back and forth as he

shoved another forkful of breakfast into his mouth. They'd used that trashy tabloid more than a few times to find themselves a case. "So. Mystery goo. Go on."

Sam took a deep, calming breath – much to Dean's delight – before letting it out (no doubt counting to ten as he did so). "There's been sightings of this mystery goo in several buildings in town. All commercial, always when the employee was alone in the building."

"Sounds more like a freaky contamination issue," Dean reasoned. "Has the CDC been called in, or something?"

His brother could only shrug. "Not yet because the goo, or whatever it is, is always gone by the time any sort of authority shows up. Cops think drugs may be playing a role, but the, uh, witnesses come from all different backgrounds, and only one of them has any history of drug use."

Dean pursed his lips. "You thinking something in the water?"

"Sure, could be." Sam pulled some folded up papers out of his back pocket, no doubt the news articles he'd printed in the last town. Dean, meanwhile, was eyeing the glass of water Darla had dropped off on her first greeting more than a little warily now. He pushed it another couple inches further away from him. Sam unfolded the papers, trying to flatten them out. "Or it could be some sort of group prank or something."

"If it's a prank, what's the joke?"

"You got me." Sam shrugged again, head of brown hair shaking back and forth. "I never said it was a good one, if that's what it is."

Dean snorted in response. "So what's the goo do?"

Sam blinked at the question. "Uh…nothing, far as I can tell."

The older Winchester frowned. "Nothing?"

"It just…oozes down the walls. Freaks out the employee, who usually bolts. By the time someone comes back with them, it's gone."

Hence the theory of drugs, Sam thought. He would doubt the mystery goo, or whatever it was, was real too if he was a normal civilian. Probably a hallucination. Not that he or his brother were normal.

Dean, though, was still frowning. "So a bunch of scaredy cats, possibly drugged to their gills, go running from their lives thinking Night of the Living Dead-"

"Or Ghostbusters."

"-Or Ghostbusters," Dean amended without batting an eye because Sam had an excellent point, "and we're… what? Going to somehow… investigate that?"

Sam just shrugged for the fourth, maybe fifth time that conversation. "You can always pick the cases, Dean. I'd be happy to do the driving if you want to-"

"No, no. Mysterious goo. Definitely a case, totally not a waste of time," Dean answered way too quickly with way too wide a smile. Sam stuck with the unimpressed staring. "So, what's our theory? Ectoplasm? One strong-as-hell-but-conveniently-absent ghost?"

"That's the thing, *if* it's real, I don't think it's ectoplasm," Sam responded, spinning one of those papers around and pushing it towards Dean, pointing at a section.

As Dean began to scan, his previous frown returned. And then got deeper. "What the hell?"

"All the witnesses said the same thing." Sam met Dean's eyes as his brother's gaze glanced up from the papers spelling out something neither of them had ever even heard of before. "The goo they saw was yellow."

Dean's frown went near comical levels, and for the first time that morning he actually seemed intrigued by the possible case. "You sure it's not drugs?"

-o-o-o-

First on the list of things to do when investigating mysterious yellow goo? Interview the alleged witnesses. The first person to report it was twenty-six year old Dale Harris, who worked at – and Dean would shit you not, here – *Winners One*, otherwise known as the local liquor store. Cops probably dismissed his goo ramblings as sampling a little too much of the merchandise.

The second, only two days later but on the other side of town, was a middle-aged mother of four who worked at *Three Guys and An*

Ox furniture store. Whoever named things in this town was just *asking* for mystery goo to start showing up on their doorstep. Seriously.

For sighting number three, they visited the home of one Holly Brine, of the Heritage Country Store. '*Just past Little Darby Creek*,' or so the gas station attendant told them. When the yellow ooze started coming out of the birdfeeders, that's when she bolted.

Seriously. This town.

Sam and Dean went in as CDC under the ruse that perhaps the goo was a contaminant of some kind. Hey, if they weren't there already, hunters might as well do the job for 'em, right? Unfortunately for said hunters, they weren't getting a lot of useful information. While each witness had a different enough story to not feel rehearsed or raise any flags – eliminating the possibility of them being in on the prank, if it was one – their tales weren't different enough to provide the brothers anything useful.

Each of them had been alone in their respective stores at the time, heard some sort of strange bubbling, liquid noise, and then noticed a thick ooze seeping out of the walls, refrigerators, sofas, and, in Mrs. Brine's case, *birdfeeders*. And it wasn't just a little bit of ooze, apparently. We're talking entire walls, gallons puddling on the cushions, bye-bye birdie. Which was about when they all took off running.

"And you didn't come in contact with it?" Sam would ask each of them. "Interact with it at all?"

They all shook their heads.

"No way."

"Touch that stuff? Nuh-uh."

"Honesty, I thought I was hallucinating. My first thought was to get home where I could lock the door and ride out the trip."

That was, surprisingly, the sixty-eight year old Holly Brine, sitting on her floral-print sofa in the 'sun room' of her downright quaint little cottage home. Both Winchesters took a moment to stare, blink, clear their throats, and then stare some more.

"So, um, Mrs. Brine…" Dean made a face that said he could not believe

he was asking this (or maybe that was just the multiple cat-themed wall decorations surrounding them). "Are you a, uh, frequent user of… erm…hallucinogens-"

"Oh!" Mrs. Brine laughed. It was something of a nervous-but-hinting-at-a-far-wilder-side chuckle. "No, I don't do drugs. I mean, I lived through the sixties, so I know what a bad trip is like."

She let out another light laugh, this one far more nostalgic. Dean exchanged amused glances with Sam, waggling his eyebrows. Sam gave him the look that wasn't quite a bitchface but definitely said, *'focus, Dean.'*

"But I don't do those sorts of things anymore," Mrs. Brine continued with a wistful sigh. "I just thought…must have gotten slipped into my food or drink at some point. Because it was a badtrip. I mean, it was *yellow*. And…glittery."

Sam snorted into the tea she'd poured them. "G-glittery?"

"Yes. Reminded me of my granddaughter's craft glue. They come in all the rainbow colors, and are quite sparkly. She just loves them." Holly was shaking her head like it was the darndest thing in the world as she picked up her own teacup and saucer. "Like I said. It was a bad trip."

"Uh-huh," Dean responded almost in rote, both fascinated by this insane senior who apparently didn't think much of her granddaughter's glitter glue leaking out of the walls – or someone slipping her some LSD offhand – and yet also horrified by this insane senior who clearly did too many drugs in the sixties and *didn't think much* of glitter glue oozing out of the walls! *Seriously*. "I think we have all we need. Thank you for your time."

As they left Mrs. Brine's house, screen door closing behind them with the woman still waving them off, Sam and Dean exchanged knowing looks.

"Okay, so probably not drugs," Sam began.

"Not any recent ones, anyway." Dean snorted, smile still on his face from one Holly Brine. Man, life goals if he ever lived that long. "But seriously, what the hell?"

"I don't know."

"Glitter goo, Sam? Glitter goo!"

Sam was still shaking his head as they climbed into the Impala. "You got me. But if they're not all mass hallucinating on some…drugs-in-the-water-supply trip, then what?"

"Not a clue," Dean answered immediately, starting up his Baby and pulling back onto the main road. They had one more witness to interview. The most recent goo sighting had been at a mom 'n pop ice cream shop just a couple blocks away from Holly's house. "Guess we gotta check one of these places ourselves."

Might as well start with the last sighting.

The ice cream shop was pretty darn empty, aside from the owner and a moody, pre-tween boy sitting at one of the tables, headphones on and ignoring the two men in suits who just walked in. The Pop part of the mom 'n pop shop looked rather disappointed they weren't customers. Guess having a sighting of yellow goo at any shop where the merch was digestible was bad for business.

When Sam inquired about the kid's presence, the owner shrugged. "My son. Usually I pick him up from school and take him home, but with Sally, uh, *recovering*, I'm pulling multiple shifts," the man explained, looking less than enthused about that fact.

"Should we speak in, uh, private, maybe?" the Samsquatch continued, keeping his tone official-CDC-business. It made the owner nervous, clearly, but the man ultimately cast a half-heated glance his son's way and shook his head.

"He can't hear us. Music on those things is turned up so loud he can't hear himself think. Not that he does much of that these days. He's twelve, you know?"

Dean nodded understandingly – because he did know, actually – and Sam gave him a funny look. He cleared his throat, returning a, *'focus, Sam*' glance of his own. "We're here concerning what your employee-" Dean glanced down at his notebook- "Sally Fairway saw two days ago?"

"Yes," the man – a Doug Evans – nodded, looking more put out than concerned about the CDC present in his ice cream shop. He, apparently, was onboard the prank or drugs theory. "I told the local authorities already, I don't know what she saw but I've cleaned this place top to bottom and haven't found a thing out of place. No 'yellow

goo.' This shop is clean as a whistle, and up to code."

"We believe you, Mr. Evans," Sam jumped in before the increasingly-defensive man could get any more worked up and therefore less cooperative than he already was. "This is just a precautionary evaluation. Standard procedure when we hear multiple reports of an unknown substance."

"Yeah," Dean added on, tapping his notebook on the counter. "We're sure it's nothing, but we need to take a look around. That way we can write up our report, let the town know there's nothing to worry about, and officially declare your ice cream good and safe."

The mention of returning customers, reassured and ready to pay, perked the man right up. He was nodding well before Dean had finished speaking. "Of course, of course. Sally was in the back when she said it happened. Let me show you."

Mr. Evans escorted them to the back, which was really just an empty hallway that led to an employee restroom, a storage room, and a walk-in freezer. The two hunters poked around while Mr. Evans stood in the hallway, arms crossed and keeping half an eye on them, half an eye on his moody tween. There wasn't much the Winchesters could do under the eye of the owner, but they searched what they could for hex bags, symbols, artifacts – pretty much anything that would explain goo appearing and disappearing without reason.

They came up with nothing.

"Alright, so… break in after hours?" Dean muttered under his breath as he and Sam came back together. Mr. Evans' attention was currently on his son. "There's gotta be *something* causing this 'goo' to show up out of the blue."

Maybe if they tore the place apart without Pop watching over them, they'd find *something.* Sam didn't have any better ideas, so he agreed, and, with the shop owner, headed back to the front of the shop. They thanked him for his time, assured him their report would be out soon, and started for the door when Mr. Evans cleared his throat.

The two brothers turned back only to find the man was looking at them expectantly.

"Aren't you going to get some ice cream?"

Dean and Sam exchanged looks, Sam coughing to hide his guilty-slash-

do-we-really-have-to expression while Dean slapped a wide smile on his face.

"Uh… of course!"

They left the shop several minutes later, Dean chowing down on a double scoop while Sam stared between his own single-scoop sugar cone and his brother disbelievingly.

"What?"

"Dude." As they rounded the corner of the building, headed for the car, the younger Winchester tossed his cone in the nearest trash can, untouched. "Yellow goo."

Dean p'shawed, looking at his brother than the ice cream. "What? It's not like it's got goo on it now!"

"You're disgusting," Sam said with a shake of his head, but he was half laughing as he slid into the passenger side of the Impala.

"And this double fudge rocky road is delicious," Dean countered. "You don't waste delicious, Sammy."

Even as he said it, his stomach made quite the noise of disagreement, which kind of gargled out of his gut, then up his throat and out the mouth in, what Dean would call, an eleven on the Burp scale. Given Sam's truly offended face, it might have even been a twelve.

Dean finished off his ice cream, licking the fingers of one hand while rubbing at his chest with the other. It still wasn't a Chest-Cas feeling burning in there. More like acid reflux, really, so he blamed it on that *real man's* breakfast. And maybe a little on the double fudge rocky road, much as it pained him to.

"Alright, let's go waste a couple hours until break-in time." With that, Dean put Baby into drive and started searching for the local dive bar. Every town had one, no matter how small, and every town had drunk locals just lining up to be sharked.

-o-o-o-

They broke into the ice cream shop a hundred and forty dollars richer and one black eye later (but as with any fight – bar scuffle or hunt – Dean gave as good as he got. You should have seen the other guy). As they had earlier that day, the boys found a goo-less, standard hallway,

storage space and walk-in freezer. The two brothers decided to divide and conquer, with Sam taking the storage room and Dean the freezer after he lost at Rock, Paper, Scissors. Dean blamed the loss (and the chilly night he now had to look forward to) on only being able to mostly see out of one eye. Sam reminded him that his eye wasn't even that swollen.

And that sight had nothing to do with winning Rock, Paper, Scissors, unless you were cheating.

Dean turned and walked into the freezer with a grunt, which the younger Winchester (correctly) translated into, *'fuck off, Sammy.'* Sam may not have a list of bitchfaces numbered in his brother's honor (because he wasn't a child), but he was fully versed in the fragile egos of over-compensating Winchester men (a.k.a. sore losers).

Sam had explored about half of the store room – flashlight in hand, opening boxes to search for hex bags or cursed objects – when he first heard it. There was a faint bubbling noise, like the cheesy TV sound effect of a witch's cauldron on Saturday morning cartoons. Sam turned towards where he thought the noise was coming from, flashlight trained on walls and storage shelves, but didn't see anything. No yellow goo.

He strained in the silence of the empty shop, hoping to catch more of the bubbling, but there was nothing. Sam waited another moment before turning back to the box he'd been rummaging through, wondering if he'd imagined the noise.

It was another thirty seconds, maybe even a full minute, before he heard it again. It was coming from the same wall, this time Sam was sure of it. The circle of light from his torch landed on the splotched concrete surface behind an industrial storage shelf. No yellow goo, but the wall did have a slight shimmer to it. Like maybe it was damp. Or glittery.

Sam propped his light between a can of paint and an old, beat up box filled with paintbrushes and rollers, then got to work moving the shelf. The thing was decently heavy, the length of four feet adding to the awkwardness of attempting to move it on his own. He ended up dragging just his end, inch by inch across the floor, the whole thing scraping loudly with each pull. Once he had enough clearance to get a better view of the section he thought he'd seen the shimmer on, Sam turned to grab his flashlight.

"Alright, I got bust," Dean suddenly announced loudly from just a few feet away, having left the freezer and entered the storage room without Sam's notice.

The younger Winchester jumped at the sudden interruption, fumbling with the flashlight and knocking a can of paint off the shelf in his efforts to catch it. The lid popped off as it hit the hard concrete below. Light purple paint – the same color of the walls in the front of the shop – splashed over the washed-out grey of the floor.

"Smooth move, ExLax," Dean snorted, though he was staring at his brother like the beanstalk might have somehow forgotten they were in here *sneaking* around.

"Jeez, Dean," Sam blurted out, flashlight and accompanying hand pressed to his chest as his heart raced. He sent a look Dean's way. "You scared the crap out of me!"

His brother's eyebrows went up unapologetically, and he tossed his arms out. "Dude, I wasn't being quiet."

Sam bit back the obvious response to that and instead focused his torch on the wall, turning to look for any shimmer. But the concrete was clear and dry. No glitter, no goo, no dampness in sight. He pressed his hand to it, hoping for… he didn't even know. Maybe some residual wetness? Something to prove he wasn't just seeing things?

"Uh…you alright there, Sammy?" Dean asked, having moved far enough into the room to look between his brother and the wall he was, er, caressing.

Sam gave him an annoyed look, catching the tone, before pulling his hand off the concrete surface. "Yeah, just… thought I saw something."

"Goo? An eight year old's leftover craft supplies?" Dean shouldered up next to him, as much as he could between the partially shifted storage shelf and the stacked boxes to the other side. He craned his neck past Sammy's shoulder to squint at the wall. "Looks like a normal wall to me."

"Yeah, thanks, Dean. I can see that for myself." Sam turned and pushed past his brother, shaking his head. "Probably just a trick of the light. You done?"

Dean spun on his heel as well, tracing his flashlight from the wall along the floor until it landed on the spilled paint. Sam ignored it and

him. "Yup, nothing 'cept ice cream in there. Tasty, tasty ice cream."

"Dude," the younger Winchester immediately chided, giving his brother a wide-eyed look, stabbing at his face with his light. Dean squinted through the beam. "That's so unsanitary."

"Eh, what they don't know won't hurt them," Dean grumbled back, raising a hand to block the obnoxious light. "Besides, doesn't cold, like, kill bacteria and shit?"

"Some of it, sure," Sam answered reasonably, though the expression on his face as he lowered the beam was anything but reasonable. Really, had his brother listened *at all* in school? "But some bacteria and viruses *live* in sub-zero temperatures, you moron."

Dean pulled his head back. "What viruses?"

"E-coli, for one!" Sam wanted to shake his head and stare at the heavens, but instead he got back to looking through the last of the boxes he'd yet to search.

"Ew, dude, I do not have E-coli."

"Salmonella for another."

"And I'm not raw chicken, either, thank you very much."

Sam did pause to look over his shoulder at his idiotic brother. Dean was just milling about in the center of the room, a half-hearted expression of offense on his face. "Don't you have something better to be doing? Like helping me search?"

"Dude, I searched my room," the older Winchester immediately defended, raising his hands, flashlight loosely gripped in one. "And I got the sucky one."

"Which I'm sure has nothing to do with why you're done faster," Sam muttered, almost-but-not-quite under his breath.

"Not my fault you were communing with a blank wall while I actually did my job," Dean snarked back, smirk on his face.

"I was not commun-" Sam cut himself off with a sigh, realizing exactly what his brother was dragging him headfirst into and refusing to follow. He was the adult in the room, regardless of age, and he would act like it. "Can you go check out back?"

Dean gave off what he probably thought was a stern frown, but all Sam saw was the pout of a put-upon child. "There's nothing back there."

He wasn't wrong. The back of the shop was nothing more than a dumpster and three employee parking spots squeezed into the small space in the alley behind the building. Still, it would get him out of Sam's hair and let him finish his search in peace.

"A dumpster is a great place to hide a hex bag," Sam offered with a far-too-nonchalant shrug as he finished one box and opened another. There'd been nothing in them but marketing materials, some tools and cleaning supplies, and an outdated set of menus (at least according to the selection they'd chosen from earlier that day). Nothing suspicious, but now Sam was determined to finish the job and do it right.

"Yeah, yeah." Grumbling under his breath about how hex bags outside the building wouldn't affect the person *inside*, Dean trudged out of the storage room. Sam heard the emergency exit door open and close a few seconds later.

He didn't even have time to return a good-natured grumble of his own before the bubbling was back. It was louder this time, and accompanied by the drip-plop-drip of something thick but aqueous. Sam spun back to the wall, flashlight trained beyond the shelf. It was shimmering once more with a dampness not unlike a Weeping Wall.

"Right," Sam breathed out as realization came to him. "Every witness was alone when they saw it."

He glanced towards the door where Dean had left not a full minute ago. When he looked back at the wall, it had a viscous shine to it now, like the surface had become slimy. As Sam drew closer, the texture thickened, becoming more of a goo-like substance that started to slide down the wall.

With his flashlight illuminating the slime, Sam could admit the yellowy, transparent stuff did have something of a glittery look.

"Dean!" he hollered, though he didn't take his eyes off the wall. He didn't know if it would disappear once his brother came in, and Sam realized belatedly they should get a sample. The hunter spun in a circle, flashlight landing on the boxes to one side and the cluttered shelves to the other. He'd seen some plastic sample spoons in one of those boxes while searching through them. That would work.

It took him several seconds of rummaging, tossing packages of napkins and some marketing materials aside until he came up with the bag of several hundred colored, plastic spoons. He ripped into it, spilling them all over the place as he grabbed one.

Sam heard the back door open and knew Dean would be back any moment. Just in case the goo magically disappeared with another person present – and in a case this weird, Sam really wouldn't count against it – the younger Winchester turned back to the wall. With flashlight in one hand, spoon in the other, he carefully scraped some of the viscous, goopy substance onto the tip of the blue plastic.

Dean came jogging into the room as Sam stepped away from the wall, flashlight on the blob of what now looked like green goop.

"Huh," Sam said as Dean drew up short, eying the spoon. The older Winchester glanced at the wall behind Sam, expecting to see slime dripping down the walls, but it was barren and dry. Sam leaned his head closer to the gunk, taking a small whiff.

He immediately sneezed so strongly he sent the yellow stuff flinging across the room via his mini-blue-catapult. Dean ducked out of the way.

"Dude," he complained at almost getting a face-full of Nickelodeon-Gone-Wrong.

Sam made a noise of equal complaint (and yet somehow also apologetic in that way only a puppy dog could ever truly manage) as he sneezed again. When he spoke, his voice was wet and gunky. Dean made another face.

"Sulfur," the moose of a Winchester managed to spit out, rubbing at his nose with his free hand, wiggling his facial features as much as possible to cure the awful itch and leftover smell.

Dean looked equally disgusted, but with an extra dose of surprise. "*Demon* goo?"

A wave of white caught Sam's attention and he looked up to see Dean flapping a napkin his way, having snagged one from the discarded package on the floor. Sam took it gratefully and spent the next several seconds trying to clear out what was at least a minor allergic reaction.

Great. The boy with the demon blood, allergic to sulfur goo. You'd think being cursed with such a God-awful destiny would at least come

with *benefits*. Silver linings at a bare minimum.

With another cough and two more napkins, Sam was finally able to breath without sneezing. "Gross. What kind of demon creates, uh… demonic ectoplasm?"

"A…demon ghost?" Dean hazarded. "God I hope not, that sounds like a pain in the ass."

Sam took a closer look at the spoon in his hand. Most of the glob of yellow he'd scraped off the wall was now somewhere on the other side of the room. But the blue plastic was still tipped with wetness. Sam didn't dare breathe in again anywhere near it, and instead started looking for something to put the contaminated spoon in.

Dean held out an ice cream cup he dug out of another box and Sam, grateful once again, dropped the spoon into the small paper container. Then he sneezed, again, letting out an irritated whine. The younger Winchester hated allergies. And head colds.

And the look on his brother's face in that moment.

"You're such a baby," Dean sniggered, wrapping another napkin around the top of the cup. Not exactly a sterile or secure method of transporting evidence but, then again, hunters made do with what they had.

"Shut up," Sam muttered through another round of gunk-face, voice clogged with mucus. So gross. He wanted to remind his brother what a baby *he* was when sick, but was too busy going through another handful of napkins.

The two brothers froze – Sam mid-blow – at the sound of a car driving by, probably through the alley out back. The headlines lit the hallway just outside the door. The Winchesters exchanged cautious glances.

"We should probably get out of here." Dean, still smirking, handed his brother the carefully wrapped cup with their only clue so far. "Hold this. And don't snort it again."

Sam's responding glower was something between a pout and fratricide.

-o-o-o-

Sam kept clearing his throat.

By the third or fourth time in twice as many minutes, Dean glanced over to the passenger side, where his brother's face was screwed up in a way that said he was trying not to clear his throat a fifth time.

"Dude. You swallow a fly or something over there?"

Sam didn't even glare, just cleared his throat again, this time rubbing at his throat as he did. When he spoke, his voice was thick. "I'm fine. Just..."

Dean waited for the rest of that sentence, focus split between the road and his brother. Concern flickered on the backburner, but the man from the future fought it off. Sam was fine, just had something in his system. He'd clear it out in a minute.

Still. Sam hadn't answered, and there he was, trying to clear his throat again.

"Just what?" Dean glanced at Sam again, this time actually slowing the Impala so he could pay more attention to his brother. "Sam?"

The younger Winchester's throat-clearing turned into a cough, which then didn't stop. Dean's eyes widened, concern no longer in the back of his mind.

"Sam!"

Sam was pulling at the collar of his t-shirt now, doubled over as the cough got rougher. "D-Dean."

"Shit, hang on!" Dean pulled the car over as quickly as he could without sending Sam flying into the windshield. The cough abated enough for Sam to take a deep, gasping breath, but it didn't sound right. For such a deep inhalation, it was far too shallow.

"S-something's wrong," Sam managed to get out before he was coughing again, weaker this time.

Dean was out of the car and around to the passenger side in record time, throwing the door open. Sam managed to tilt himself out of the car with his brother's help, legs on the rough asphalt, desperately trying to breathe through a closing throat and crackling lungs. Dean tried to guide him through deep breaths, but nothing was working.

"Damnit, Sammy, *breathe!*"

Sam wanted to snap at him that he was *trying*. But he didn't need to. His fingertips were starting to tinge blue. He could only imagine what his face and lips looked like.

"Shit," Dean swore. "Hospital. I'm taking you to the hospital."

Dean shoved his brother's cricket legs back into the footwell of the passenger seat and closed the door as fast as he could. As soon as he was back in the driver's seat, he gunned it, hoping that whatever the hell Sam had inhaled in that glitter goo, it was curable by normal, modern medicine.

-o-o-o-

The nearest hospital was a fifteen minute drive. Dean made it in nine. He didn't bother parking Baby so much as screeching her tires to an abrupt halt outside the E.R., where he threw the door open and was by Sam's side before the first medical staff came running. His brother was still struggling to breathe, taking shallow, gasping inhales. His lips were a terrifying blue.

An EMT, probably back on his way to an ambulance, was the first to assess the younger Winchester as Dean helped Sam out of the car. He was bent over, hand to his chest, shaking with a desperate need for oxygen as they stumbled step-by-step towards the hospital doors. Dean fumbled through the rapid fire questions directed at him by the EMT – what happened, had he taken anything, anything at all, was he exposed to anything – the best he could.

Can't breathe. No, no drugs. Nothing! There wasn't anything that caused this shit. He just started coughing, then not *breathing! Maybe…there was this yellow goo, and he maybe sniffed it?*

The man started hollering words to the pair of nurses that hurried their way from inside. Words like asphyxiation and hypoxia. Words, for the most part, that meant nothing but *bad* to Dean. It was clear from the calm but urgent way the man spoke to the two others that Sam was in serious trouble. They took him from Dean's arms before the hunter even knew the transfer had happened, but he let it. Despite every bone in his body that said '*back off!',* the hunter knew he was out of his depth.

They hurried Sam inside, meeting a stretcher at the door that was on its way out to them. As Dean tried to follow them into the building, Sam sagging as he was hoisted onto the bed, the EMT grabbed his shoulder.

"You need to move your car, man. They've got your friend." At the dumbfounded-yet-fierce glare Dean sent his way, the EMT returned the look with one that said he understood, but wasn't budging. "There's nothing more you can do for him now, alright? You got him here. Now go park your car and head to the front desk. They'll need you to fill out paperwork, get them information, alright? That's what you can do to help your friend."

"Brother," Dean corrected forcefully, eyes darting between the hospital doors where Sam was now being wheeled in, and the EMT. He was clearly seconds away from bolting after the disappearing younger Winchester. "He's my brother."

The guy's eyes closed for a second before, with a sigh, he held out his empty hand, curling his fingers expectantly. "Give me your keys."

The hunter balked immediately. "Excuse me?"

"Keys," he repeated. "I'll park your car. Go in after your brother and talk to the nurses at the front desk. And be *nice*. They're just doing their jobs, man."

Dean spared him a look – something between angry and grateful, quite the odd combo but hardly the first time the man had seen such an expression aimed his way – before he threw the EMT his keys and headed in after Sam. Choosing between his brother and his Baby – letting someone, some *stranger*, drive her – was easier than he'd ever imagined it would be. But, he supposed, that really shouldn't have been surprising, given Sammy was definitely in trouble and Dean had no idea what was causing it. Which meant he had no idea how to fix it.

He could always bodily murder some random EMT for dinging up his Baby *after* Sammy pulled through.

The E.R. was unfairly calm and quiet. Maybe that was normal on a Sunday night, but Dean thought there should be yelling, running around, you know, *urgency*. Something to match what was going on internally for him, at least.

There were a dozen or so people in the waiting area, coughing, sniffling, or clutching minor injuries as they waited to be seen. Dean marched passed all of them, straight up to the Admissions desk. Familiar with the process, he had the paperwork filled out with nearly entirely fake information in less than ten minutes. Then he started demanding information on his brother, all the while keeping his eyes

locked on the Emergency Room doors.

It wasn't long. Dean's brain said, *'That's a good thing*' while his gut clenched in the complete opposite. A doctor, flanked by a nurse, came through those double days, holding a clipboard and spotting Dean right away. The hunter steeled himself for whatever news they had to deliver and met them half way.

Sam was fine. Whatever had happened was fixable, and they'd fixed him. Easy as that.

Because this wasn't where Sam died and Dean knew that. Knew that with a hundred percent confidence.

"Mr. Winchester," the doctor greeted with a solemn nod and a look on his face that did nothing for Dean's gut. His brain wasn't listening to it, though.

"How's my brother?"

"I'm… I'm sorry, Mr. Winchester. Your brother didn't make it."

"Right." Dean nodded, eyes darting over the man's shoulder to the doors behind him. Where Sam was. "When can I see him?"

The doctor and nurse exchanged a look Dean hardly saw, let alone wasted time interpreting. The doctor cleared his throat. "Um, I don't think you're understanding me, Mr. Winchester."

"What's there to understand?" Dean asked more forcefully this time, locking fierce, demanding eyes on the man for a moment before looking at those doors again. "I want to see him."

"Mr. Winchester…" It was the nurse this time, going for that soft, victim-voice that Dean did not like. He didn't like it when it was aimed at genuine victims – too much pitying, not enough helping in his opinion – let alone aimed at him. "Your brother passed away. We weren't able to save him."

Dean frowned at the words that made absolutely no sense. Why was she saying that? It's clearly not what had happened. Sam was fine. Maybe dinged up, probably doped to the gills to fix whatever had happened, but he was fine. He was in some room just passed those doors.

"Mr. Winchester, your brother is dead."

The hunter turned that bemused stare to the doctor, then started shaking his head. "No, he's not. He had, like, an allergic reaction or something. That's fixable."

"We don't know what happened," the doctor admitted with a frown of his own, though his was far more neutral and restrained than Dean's. "But even an allergic reaction, if severe enough, can be fatal."

"Yeah, but this one wasn't," Dean insisted, still not understanding what they were playing at. Sam wasn't dead, because this *wasn't where he died*. It was as simple as that. The man from the future had no illusions that time was coming (and he'd fight tooth and nail to keep it from happening), but it wasn't *now*. It wasn't here.

Azazel wasn't even back topside, far as they knew. And Dean was sure, once that happened, they'd *know*. That yellow-eyed son of a bitch would make sure they knew.

"I want to see my brother," he insisted, raising his voice now. Dean didn't know what was going on – maybe it was some sort of conspiracy, or trick. Demons, angels, or something else. But Sammy was back there, and he wasn't dead.

So Dean did what he always did when it came to Sammy. He stopped listening and took action.

"Hey, wait!" the nurse yelled as Dean bodily pushed through the two medical professionals and headed for those double doors. He heard them following him, shouting at him to stop, but he wasn't gonna do that until he got to the bottom of whatever sick joke this was.

"Sammy!" He hollered through the hall, checking the first room on the right, which was locked, and the next on the left, which opened to an operating room.

"What the hell?" one of the nurses, dressed head to toe in blue, mask over face, could be heard even as Dean moved on.

He opened the next door and froze. There were three people in there, two cleaning up what had clearly been a surgery and one draping a sheet over the third. Sam. Lying on the table in the middle of the room, unmoving. His eyes were closed, his hair was messy and way too long, just like always. And he wasn't moving.

"Sam…" Dean started forward, faltering when the two others in the room froze, unsure what to do. The doctor and the nurse that had

followed him down the hall stopped in the doorway behind him.

"Let's give him a moment," the doctor murmured softly, and the other staff set down what they were doing. They all headed for the door, giving Dean a wide berth as they moved around that the hunter saw any of them. His eyes were locked on his brother, on a truth he refused to see, lying cold and still in the center of the room.

"I'm so sorry," one of them said as they passed, hand on his shoulder. "We did everything we could."

As Dean reached his brother's bedside, still confused but in a numb sort of way, the doctor saw the last of his staff out of the room. He quietly shut the door, remaining in the room with the distraught hunter.

"Sammy?" Dean spoke, voice cracking as he reached out and grabbed his brother's shoulder, giving it a shake. This didn't make any sense. This *wasn't* where Sam died. Or how or when. It just wasn't.

"They really did do all they could," the doctor spoke from behind, voice taking on a different tone. Less quiet. Less understanding. "They couldn't save him."

This didn't make any sense. It was the only thing going through Dean's brain. The only thought he seemed capable of thinking. Something was wrong. Something was off. He didn't know what, but *this wasn't right.*

"But I can."

Dean picked his head up, away from his brother's lifeless face. Something about that voice. He turned his head towards the doctor. "What did you say?"

"I said I can save him, Dean. For the right price."

The man from the future turned, hunter's gut tightening to the point of pain, to take in the doctor standing by the door. A man he didn't recognize, had never seen before, but somehow still knew.

At least, he knew those pale, yellow eyes.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat? Dun Dun Duuuuuuun! Told ya it

was a heck of a chapter :D Oh, do we have good things in store! Did I say good? I think I meant no good, dirty rotten ;)

"**Smooth move, Exlax**" is a phrase sarcastically referencing a common laxative, ExLax. It was popular in the 80's and 90's, far as I can tell.

Chapter Fun Fact #1: All the store names are real stores in Mechanicsburg, Ohio. I pulled open google maps and got-a searching, then couldn't believe when I just kept finding more and more of the most fabulously named stores. Sometimes, it's the real world shit you can sneak in that's the best XD

Chapter Fun Fact #2: Half of this chapter was edited while in lines for various roller coasters at Six Flags today. I'm a queen of multi-tasking :D

Update: I apologize for such a long delay to get you this chapter. Good news is I have the next two chapters already written, yaaaaay! I'll do my best to post the next chapter in a week, but if I can't then I promise it'll be up in two weeks! (My August is getting very busy between extreme OT at work and social events next weekend, but I'll do my best!)

I have missed you all these last few months, love you very much, and hope you are well. See you in one (or two, at the most) week(s)!

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 117: Season 2: Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Okay, time for the real fun to begin. Y'all ready?

Review Replies: Thank you all so much for the encouragement in your comments! You all are super sweet, and I appreciate each and every one of you. I may be struggling, but I'll make it through!

Chapter Warnings: Tee-hee-hee! [insert no good dirty rotten smile here]

Actual Chapter Warnings: Attempted suicide is mentioned repeatedly in this chapter in graphic detail. Please proceed with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 83

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"You," Dean hissed, immediately putting himself between Azazel and his brother. Didn't matter if the body behind him was breathing or not. This demon wasn't laying another hand on Sammy. Not while Dean still lived.

"Me." The doctor – Azazel – smiled widely, eyes sliding back to their human brown.

"Bring him back!" Dean all but shouted, reaching for the gun tucked against his back. It wouldn't do any good against a demon, but Dean didn't care. He'd empty the entire clip into the bastard anyway.

"Oh, right away, kiddo," the demon agreed, raising his hands in placation as if Dean needn't shout. "Just as soon as you give me the juice."

The blood in his veins froze to ice. It sent a shiver through his whole

body, crawling down his spine and rippling through his skin.
Shit. *Shit!* This wasn't… this wasn't how it was supposed to go down. Not now. Not in some hospital in Podunk Ohio, not during some mundane case with friggin' goo of all things.

Yellow goo. A stupid, pale yellow goo that smelled like sulfur.

Dean sucked in a breath, realization flooring him and taking every single organ with it. His jaw dropped with them, lips parting in stunned, horrified understanding. Azazel never needed a battle royale to kick off the Apocalypse. He just needed Sam dead, and Dean should have been prepared for that.

But he wasn't. He absolutely wasn't, and now he had no time to think.

'Cas.' The hunter slammed his eyes shut, fingers curling into fists as he put his all – every inch of soul – into that desperate prayer. *'Cas, I need you. We need you! Right fucking now!'*

A breeze, barely discernible as wind and more like a presence, passed through the room. No, not the room – his *head*. Like a brush across his senses. A feeling. Dean's ears popped and he opened his eyes, expecting to see the angel in all her trench-coated, butt-kicking, life-saving glory. But Cas wasn't there. The room was empty save for him, Azazel, and the corpse of his brother.

The hunter hissed, hand reaching up to his chest as it ached so sharply he wanted to double over. But he dropped his hand, quick as he caught it rising, and kept his spine straight against the sudden pain. He wanted to rub at his sternum, to tell Chest Cas, '*yeah, no shit there's a demon nearby. Kinda noticed for myself, thanks, buddy.*' But he resisted. The last thing he wanted to do was call attention to the angel in his chest. Not in front of a demon. Not in front of *this* demon.

As the silence stretched, Azazel waiting patiently, a smug little victory smirk all over his stupid Harvard Medical face, and no angel swooped in for a rescue, Dean started to worry.

'Cas? Uh… Castiel? Buddy? You got your ears on, right? Please tell me you have your ears on!'

Cas was awake, now. She should be able to hear him.
She'd *promised,* even before the healing trance, to keep her ears on. To be ready for something just like this.

Azazel took a step forward, body language definitely screaming it

wasn't going to be just one, and Dean staggered back to match it. The hard edge of the O.R. table pressed against him and, on instinct, he reached back to put a hand on Sammy. Yellow Eyes wasn't getting him. Not without going through Dean.

Which, shit, right, that was kind of the whole point, wasn't it? Despite his worry for Cas, who either couldn't hear his prayer for some reason or was being blocked from getting in (and *shit, shit, shit*, why hadn't Dean thought of that? Of course Azazel would take steps to ward this place against angels. He'd planned it all; he knew this was the closest hospital, *knew* Dean would have to take Sammy here. Shit, shit, *shit!*), Dean had to shelve his concern. He had more immediate problems at the moment.

Azazel took another step. "Still waiting, Dean-o. All you've got to say are the magic words, and poof –" he waved his hand, mimicking the motion of a wand – "Sammy's back. Good as new."

God, he was so screwed and he knew it. Because Dean didn't know how to not make this deal. He'd had two years. Two years to come up with an alternative, an out, anything to stop this from happening, and he'd failed.

Cas had been his plan B. He hadn't come up with a plan C.

"You promise me. Right now."

The hunter's gaze drifted from Azazel to the not-so distant past of Bobby's salvage yard. To a dented and beat up Impala and a crowbar in his brother's hands.

"If I die, at any time, you let me stay dead."

He'd promised him. He'd *promised* Sammy that he'd do nothing, and now there was nothing he could do. Because he'd *promised* he wouldn't do it. Only…. Even now, with Sam behind him, beneath his hand, still and unmoving (and *god damnit,* how many times was he going to have to go through this in one life?), Dean wasn't sure how to keep that promise. He didn't know how to live without his brother. Ten extra years. Months, days, and minutes of borrowed time. A dead man's time. And he still hadn't learned.

"*If eating a bullet…"*

His gaze shifted to the gun in his hand. The weight was so familiar, like an extension of his arm itself. The metal was comfortably warm

from the heat of his palm, a little slick with sweat but ever sure in his grip. It was his favorite. The twin to Sammy's. One of the very few gestures his dad had ever made that *meant* something to him, even now.

Slowly, like a man lost to time, unaware as it moved around him, Dean clicked off the safety and raised the firearm.

"*…keeps you from bringing me back…"*

He lifted that gun and fired every round but one into Azazel. The demon took each bullet with hardly the blink of an eye. As silence settled heavy in the room once the deafening bursts of gunfire finished echoing off metal tables and paneled walls, Azazel dusted off the hole-spattered, white coat. He spared the hunter a truly pitying glance.

Dean gritted his teeth. He wanted to kill this son of a bitch so, so badly.

"You can take your anger out on me all you want, kiddo," Azazel said calmly, as if he'd expected the futile rage. Dean's blood boiled beneath his skin. "It's not going to bring him back. Only one thing can."

The hunter's hand shook around the hilt of his gun, shook against his brother's arm. He'd *promised*. That day they fixed up the Impala, that day he spilled his guts – spilled five years of the worst memories of his life – he had promised his brother that no matter what, he'd let Sammy stay dead.

"I'd rather you be in Heaven with me, than both of us here, starting the end of the world."

"Yeah," Dean finally spoke, head bowed and voice full of grit. The words tasted like sulfur on his tongue and burned like hellfire. "I remember."

The man from the future lifted his gaze, eyes blazing with the kind of ferocity demons in Hell had learned to fear. He stared Azazel down, that bastard who had killed his mother. His father. And now his brother.

Dean lifted his favorite gun, barrel digging into his chin. He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

-o-o-o-

He came to with a gasp, sitting upright in a bed he didn't remember going to sleep in, in a motel room he didn't remember paying for. The radio beside him was blaring music – *Foreigner* – at a truly annoying volume, and Dean kind of wanted to throw it across the room.

"*It feels like the first time*."

What the hell.

"Feels like the very first time."

What the *hell*.

"Morning, Sunshine," Sam's voice came from what sounded like the next bed over and something caught in Dean's throat. Lodged there with the kind of intensity that almost made him throw up.

The older Winchester's gaze snapped to his brother so fast his neck popped. There was Sam, on the other mattress, fully dressed and pulling on his shoes. He looked too amused to be a corpse.

"Sammy?" Dean muttered almost hollowly. No, it… it couldn't be. Sam was….

"It feels like the first time. Feels like the very first time."

The hunter glanced at his surroundings. Ugly wallpaper, flimsy furniture, god-awful sense of interior decorating. Yup, standard motel room. He glanced down at the bed he was sitting in, covers still draped over him.

Huh. That… that had been one hell of a dream, Dean thought, still a little shaken.

"And it must be the woman in you, that brings out the man in me-"

He turned and jammed his finger against every button on the alarm clock until it stopped crooning Lou Gramm at obnoxious levels.

"You alright?" Sam asked, this time the amusement in his voice replaced with the stirrings of concern. He dropped his foot, laces fully done up, and watched his brother with a wary eye.

"Y-Yeah," Dean managed to spit out, kind of stumbling over it on the first attempt. He cleared his throat then shook his head to clear it, too. "Yeah, fine. Weird dream."

Sam let out a huff of a laugh and, with amusement full back in control, asked, "Clowns or midgets?"

Dean glared at him. "Har har. Bitch."

"Hey, it's your material. Jerk." Sam stood from the bed, still smirking as he walked into the bathroom.

And yeah, alright, Dean probably deserved that. Not that he'd ever admit it. The older Winchester was slow to climb out of bed and paused once he had. He stared at the mattress: the ugly brown comforter that had been more itchy than warm, the tussled sheets that suggested a night of rough dreams, and the pillow, still indented from the weight of his head.

Man. What a *weird* dream.

-o-o-o-

As they entered the diner around the corner, Dean started to wonder if he'd lost it. Just flat out gone crazy. Or maybe had one of those Bermuda Triangle moments. You know, the ones where people swore they dreamed about a conversation that happened the exact same way the next day, but didn't have a psychic bone in their body? Creepy, one-off shit like that. Maybe he'd wandered through a hotspot or something.

Darla was wearing the exact same pink uniform (not that surprising, really. She probably had to wear it every day), and greeted them in the exact same manner, coffee pot in hand and already pouring. Dean's chest ached at the sight and he rubbed his sternum with a grimace that definitely caught Sam's attention. The waitress left and Dean nudged his full-to-the-brim cup a little further away from him, stomach churning.

"You feeling alright?" Sammy asked, and both Dean's head and gut did an unpleasant spin of déjà vu. He dropped his hand from his chest, despite the fierce ache.

"Yeah. Rough night." The older Winchester glanced around the diner, checking every pair of eyes he could see. All human. No yellow in sight. He rubbed at his chest again, internally muttering to Cas to knock it the hell off already. It was just a dream.

A fucked up dream, maybe, but just a dream.

"What'll you boys be having?" Darla asked as she swung back by, coffee pot no longer in hand, but hand on her hip. Dean frowned at the disconcerting weirdness that was this morning. Definitely a psychic hotspot or something.

"I'll have the California Omelet with a side salad, please."

Sam handed over his menu with a warm smile. The waitress turned to Dean to take his order, but he was staring at Sam, wide-eyed and in a way that left the younger Winchester suspecting he'd miraculously grown a second head.

(Because, Sam was sure, he'd ordered a salad for breakfast and his brother was a *child*.)

He pulled a face. "Dude, what?"

Dean blinked at the accusation (not even a question, really) and just shook his head. Psychic hotspot. Had to be, he thought, as he muttered that salad was not a breakfast food (because he couldn't *help* himself), before turning to Darla. "I'm, uh, I'm good. Nothing for me."

It was Sam's turn to frown, but Dean ignored it. The way his stomach was flip-flopping in confusion, trepidation, and general what-the-fuckery, meant breakfast – no matter how greasy, fluffy, or caffeinated it might be – was right out for him.

"You sure you're alright?"

This time, Dean shook his head. Because no, he *wasn't*. "Something's weird."

Sam straightened. "Weird how?"

'Like, *weird*, Sam!"

That earned him Bitchface #6 (*'Why me?'*)

"You're going to have to give me more to go on than that, Dean. Weird is kind of our Tuesday."

Dean pulled his head back, caught off guard. "Wait, it's Tuesday?"

"What?" Sam was definitely staring at him now, confusion overcoming any earlier concern. "No, it's Sunday. Dude, are you sure you're alright?"

The bell above the diner's door rang with new customers. Darla called out a half-hearted greeting, and Dean got a weird feeling in his gut. Well, a weird*er* feeling, anyway.

A kid – no more than four or five – came barreling down the aisle between the counter barstools and the booths. Even as the child's dad called out for him not to run (Dean's stomach now curling inward from the déjà vu), the little tyke tripped.

Dean shot out an arm, more on instinct than anything actually thought through, and managed to snag the back of the kid's shirt just as he went down right next to their table. The boy made a little 'grk' of a sound as Dean kept him from falling by clothing alone. The hunter stared at both the kid and his grip on him, eyes wide, just as surprised as anyone.

"Whoa, uh… nice catch!" the father of the boy said as he caught up. The kid got his feet back under him and Dean, still somewhat stunned and also confused as hell, released the boy's shirt. The dad put a hand on his son's back, both comforting the child and smoothing out his scrunched up clothing. "What do you say?"

"Thank you," the boy mumbled, pulling at his tee which had, admittedly, rucked up around his neck on the grab. He cast a quick, fleeting glance Dean's way, cheeks already red from the exertion, excitement, and nearly-averted tantrum. "Sorry."

"It's, uh, it's alright, kid," Dean found himself saying, voice a little hollow. He cleared his throat, trying to shake that dream (which was now starting to feel less like a dream) and the fog it brought into his head. "Just, uh, slow down next time, yeah? Wouldn't want you to get hurt."

The father gave a grateful smile and nod to the Winchesters as he nudged his son forward. The family went on their way to the last booth in the row and tucked into the table fairly quietly. Dean stared at them way longer than was probably appropriate. He only snapped out of it when Sam gave a little cough to clear the awkward silence.

"Nice reflexes," the younger Winchester offered with a half-smile, but he couldn't quite mask the concern. He knew something was off with his brother, he just didn't know what.

'That makes two of us,' Dean thought as he stared at Sammy, going too long without blinking and knowing it.

Because it hadn't been reflexes. It had been…. He'd…. The hunter shook his head, because knowing it was going to happen due to a psychic dream was *impossible*. At least for him. He didn't have premonitions – awake or asleep – no matter the lies he'd told so he could hide out in this timeline. But it clearly hadn't been a normal dream, either.

Which meant it was something else.

Panic flooded Dean, his heart picking up a notch or two after skipping a nice, long beat. If it wasn't a dream, then what happened next…. The man from the future swallowed what felt like a throat full of glass. He glanced around the diner once again, meeting every pair of eyes he could and checking for yellow. Expecting yellow.

If that dream hadn't been a dream, then Azazel was here, in this town, watching them. He'd laid a trap, Sam died, and Dean killed himself to avoid making a deal. So Yellow Eyes must have brought him back, to make Dean live it all again and this time make that deal. The demonic bastard was just *fucking* with him.

Yeah, well, two could play at that game and Dean Winchester was nobody's bitch.

He stood from the table abruptly. Sam leaned back, surprised by the sudden movement, and raised a questioning eyebrow as Dean dug out his wallet.

"Let's get out of here."

"Uh…" Sam glanced around the restaurant, looking for whatever had spooked his brother.

Dean, misreading that look as a *'but we just ordered…?'* form of concern, threw some bills down on the table. He wouldn't be dissuaded, already heading for the door. "Come on, I'll buy you breakfast on the road. It can even be healthy, you freak."

The younger Winchester scrambled to follow. "On the road?"

"Yeah. Goo's not all that important." That little bell above the door rang again as Dean stepped outside. "There are better cases out there. Let's find one of those."

Sam missed a step as he followed, but caught himself pretty quickly. The look on his face was a mixture of surprise and absolute

bafflement. Tone matching the expression, he admitted, "I didn't think you were awake last night when I told you about this case."

"What? No, this morning–" Dean cut himself off, realizing that they *hadn't* discussed the case this morning. At least, not *this* morning. "Uh… no, right, last night. Sure. In the car."

The older Winchester gave a cursory glance to the left and right – not even looking or really seeing the road he was about to cross – before stepping into the street. Behind him, Sam was actually struggling to keep up. Not because of his long legs, but more his sheer confusion as to why Dean was booking it, double time.

But what Sam didn't know was that they were getting out of this town and they were doing it immediately. Dean could and would explain the whole mess to his brother once they were safely a mile or two (or a hundred) away from that hospital, that ice cream shop, and any sulfuric yellow goo that might be hiding in this fucked up town.

"Dean, what the hell!" Sam's complaint came from behind him as he stepped into the road. "Will you slow down and talk to me?"

The sound of tires screeching caused Dean to flinch and spin all at once, heart squeezing in panic. But no amount of speed, reflex, or terror could save Sam from the car that barreled into him, speeding through the stop sign it should have obeyed.

"Sammy!"

The younger Winchester hit the ground hard and Dean flinched a second time at the sound of a head cracking against pavement. Sam rolled several times before coming to limp stop of dead weight and broken bones. The car lurched to a halt just feet in front of the downed Winchester.

Dean's knees hit the asphalt next to Sam with punishing desperation. His hands shook over the bleeding body below him, hesitating for fear of causing more damage. The worry only lasted a moment before he was scooping his baby brother into his arms, best he could.

"Sam! Sammy, open your eyes. Come on, don't do this, damnit. You're fine. You're gonna be just fine." Dean's voice cracked, frantic brain and clenched gut refusing to believe the words coming out of his own mouth. He knew they were lies. He shook Sam regardless, wary of the broken bones and bleeding cuts, but trying to get his brother to wake back up. "You can't die on me, you bastard. You *can't*."

The creak of a car door and footsteps – too slow and too calm for the situation – drew Dean's attention. His gaze locked on the approaching man. A man he didn't recognize, had never seen before, but instantly hated. A man with eyes that shifted yellow as he lowered a pair of sunglasses from his face.

Dean's chest lit with an inner fire that ached and burned and begged to be rubbed at.

"Well, well, well," Azazel tsked, looking down at the bleeding, broken Winchester and the brother holding him close. He gave a little shake of his head, tucking those obnoxious sunglasses into the breast pocket of his polo. "What a shame."

Dean pulled out his gun in the span of a blink and managed to get one round off before the demon was on him. Azazel grabbed his wrist with one hand, splintering the bones with a simple twist. The hunter cried out in pain even as his weapon was plucked from his lax grip and tossed to the side, where it clattered against the curb.

"I don't think so, Tiger." The demon gave Dean an admonishing look, like a parent scolding a mildly misbehaving child. He even waggled a finger in the hunter's face before releasing his wrist. "Not this time."

"Go to hell," Dean spat out through a clenched, shaking jaw. He curled his shattered forearm to his chest, the other hand still clutching his brother to him.

"Would love to! Why don't you come with?" Azazel grinned, showing off yellowing teeth. He held one hand out, as if the hunter might actually take it. "You could follow in, say, a year or so?"

Dean's jaw clenched even tighter, teeth squeaking in protest. "Go. To. Hell."

Yellow Eyes sighed dramatically, putting that hand on his hip like a disappointed soccer mom. "Ah, well, I'm sure you'll change your mind eventually. It's a lonely world out there, Dean. How long do you think you'll make it without your brother?"

Trembling limb still clutched to his chest, Dean folded over Sam, as if to somehow put himself between the younger Winchester and this demonic bastard. Azazel didn't seem phased. Instead, he fished what looked like a business card out of his other breast pocket, dusted it off – the damn thing had a bullet hole in it from Dean's one, errant shot – and leaned over the two men. Dean tried to draw back, to take Sam

with him, but he had little leverage to do so.

Azazel tucked the card into the front pocket of Sam's bloody flannel. He patted it twice and Dean wanted to strangle him until those yellow eyes turned red with petechial hemorrhaging.

His chest was *burning*, like he was having a god damn heart attack. And *yeah*, Cas, he got it. He knew there was a fucking demon nearby. *No effing shit, man.*

Sam was bleeding out in his arms, *again*. Azazel was just waiting for him to make that deal – condemn his soul and the whole damn planet – *again*. And he still had no recourse. No plan. No options. And so very little control.

'If eating a bullet…'

Dean wanted to kill this son of a bitch, this murdering demon who dared touch his brother. Who dared kill him, *again*. Who dared try to dictate Dean's future. His fate. He knew he couldn't kill him, though. Not with what he had on hand. He could punch him, of course. Wanted to, so bad he was shaking with it. But he knew all that would do was break his other hand, and he couldn't afford that. He needed that hand.

'…keeps you from bringing me back…'

The man from the future used his one good arm to reach under Sammy's body, wrapping fingers around the gun tucked in the waistline of his jeans. Before Azazel could react – those pale eyes already tracking the movement and the shift in Sam's limp body – Dean drew the firearm and tucked it right under his chin.

"I'd rather you be in Heaven with me, than both of us here, starting the end of the world."

This time he didn't look away. Didn't close his eyes. He watched those yellow pupils dilate. Watched those eyes widen in surprise.

And then, with a trademark Winchester grin and a wink, pulled the trigger.

-o-o-o-

He was dreaming.

The lake was calm, the breeze gentle and refreshingly cool, leaves drifted across the surface, and rippling reflections of fall colors created a scene of pure serenity. His line was cast, bobber bobbing, fish just waiting to be caught and reeled in.

Dean turned to the space next to him, expecting his angel to appear, but Cas was already there and too close. A hand landed on his arm, the grip urgent. The hunter's eyes fell to it in surprise.

"Dean."

Green met blue. Cas was staring at him, eyes wide, face close. Dean couldn't look away.

"It's not–"

The fish tugged on the line.

-o-o-o-

He came to with a gasp, sitting upright in a bed he didn't remember going to sleep in. Dean rubbed at his chest, a residual burn there from a dream he couldn't remember having. The radio beside him was blaring Foreigner, just as loudly as the morning before, and this time Dean did throw it across the room.

"It feels like the first time. Feels like the very first time."

The cord snapped free from the outlet, the device shattering against the opposite wall. Lou Gramm's voice cut out with a burst of static and the clatter of broken plastic.

"Uh… okay." Sam's voice drew Dean's attention to him, dragging out the word with confusion and hesitation. "Rough night?"

Dean just stared. Stared at his brother who was alive once more. His bones weren't shattered, his skin wasn't broken. His eyes were full of life, concerned and off-kilter as they currently were.

"Um… Dean?" Sam stood from the bed, one shoe only half-tied. "You alright?"

The older Winchester clambered off the mattress and pulled his brother into a too-tight hug, gripping his back with alarming desperation.

"Dean?" Sam's voice was more than just a little disturbed now, but he

raised his arms in return, awkwardly comforting his brother back. "Uh… you're starting to scare me, here."

Dean pulled away, but kept one hand on Sam's bicep, the other curled into a single raised finger, which he pointed at his brother. His eyes were too wide and his smile too tight. "You are not leaving this room. We are staying right here until it's tomorrow."

Azazel might think he was fucking with him, but Dean wasn't wasting this. Whatever *this* was. That yellow-eyed bastard probably thought he was forcing the older Winchester into making a deal or reliving Sam's death over and over again. But what he didn't realize was that every time he brought Sam back, he was giving Dean another chance. Another chance to save his brother, to keep him alive.

At least until he came up with Plan C or Cas finally found them.

"Um… okay." Sam's eyes darted between Dean's finger, waggling inches away from his eyes, and the slightly-unstable expression beyond it. "But, uh, what's so special about tomorrow?"

Dean finally pulled back. "What day is it today?"

"Sunday…."

"Then tomorrow is Monday, and Monday isn't Sunday. That makes it special."

Sam was staring at him like he was crazy and, well, he wasn't wrong to. Dean probably had lost it, considering he'd watched his brother die twice now and yet the sasquatch was currently upright and breathing. And also staring.

"Right… so… uh, coffee, then?" The younger Winchester stepped back, still eyeing Dean warily. He glanced at the door, like the answer to why they couldn't go outside might lay just beyond it. His gaze returned to his brother, eyebrow rising in question. "If we're not getting breakfast?"

"Coffee sounds great," Dean agreed with a relieved smile, still a little too crazed. He glanced around the hotel room, already mapping out the extreme warding they'd need to make sure Azazel couldn't reach them inside.

Sam, meanwhile, was already headed for the little kitchenette that came with the room. There was a small coffee pot and brewer they

hadn't bothered using before, in part because it was practically a guarantee the grounds would be awful, but mostly because they always grabbed breakfast at the nearest diner or cafe anyway.

The younger Winchester grabbed the machine's plug and reached for the outlet.

Dean spun around – hand reaching for a gun that wasn't on his boxer-clad hip – as the lights above flickered, the air sizzled with electricity, and his brother made a noise no healthy, not-dying human being should ever make.

Sam hit the ground seconds later, body still twitching from the electrocution that had stopped his heart.

A knock – cheerful and playfully patterned – sounded on the motel room door and Dean didn't even bother opening it. He just retreated the three steps he'd made it away from the bed, reached under his pillow, and pulled out his gun.

-o-o-o-

The lake breeze was cool against his face. The water was calm beneath the dock. Cas's grip was tight around his arm.

Those blue eyes were so close, voice deep and panicked.

"Dean–!"

-o-o-o-

He came to with a gasp, sitting upright.

"*It feels like the first time."*

Dean ripped the cord of the alarm clock clean out of the wall from his spot on the mattress, covers still wrapped over his legs. Then he got up and stomped over to the kitchenette. Grabbing the coffee maker, Dean raised it over his head and slammed it into the ground, smashing it into a dozen pieces. Just for good measure, he gave the thing several hard stomps.

"Um…"

The older Winchester turned around to face his not-dead brother, alive and well, one foot still propped up on his own mattress, shoelaces in hand.

"So… we're going out for coffee, I take it?"

-o-o-o-

Darla was still in her pink uniform, coffee pot in hand. The bell above the diner door still chimed and the kid still came running. Dean caught him, the father chided him, and Sam just stared.

"Nice reflexes-"

"It wasn't reflex," Dean bit out, anger levels leaving him practically vibrating in the booth across from Sam. "I knew it was going to happen."

The younger Winchester frowned, giving his brother a once over. "What do you mean? Like, your timey senses?" His eyes lit up in contemplation and he shifted in the booth, leaning forward a little. "Have we done this before?"

"No," Dean shook his head, then hesitated, "I mean, not no. Yes, but not– it's not a future thing– we didn't do *this*, but we've *done this* before."

Sam just stared.

"Look, we've *done* this before, right?" Dean practically growled, his frustration and inability to communicate going hand-in-hand. He gestured agitatedly around them. "Like, all of this. Foreigner, the diner, the kid. We've done it all before."

Sam's voice was slow and measured, his tone uncomprehending. "Like… you've lived through it already."

"Yes!" Dean let out a too-relieved noise that registered more on the hysterical side of the scale, glad his brother was finally getting it.

"Okay…. How is that not your timey senses?"

The older Winchester growled, low and irritated, in the back of his throat as he threw his hands up. "I didn't live through this in the future, okay! But *we* lived through it *yesterday*."

Several other patrons of the diner glanced their way awkwardly, the restaurant now significantly quieter at Dean's unusual – and *loud* – outburst. Sam cleared his throat, ducking his head and shoulders slightly in an effort to draw less attention as he avoided catching any

of those stares.

"Alright, so, uh…" The younger hunter gestured with his hands just barely raised off the table, hoping to calm his brother down even if he had no idea what Dean was currently talking about. Or upset by. "You're… re-living the same day?"

"Yes!" Dean hissed, both relieved Sam was finally on the same page yet annoyed with how long it had taken. "Three times now I've woken up and it's Sunday. Three times now we've gone through the day, looking for fucking yellow goo-"

Sam opened his mouth.

"And no, I wasn't awake last night when you told me about the case." Dean didn't miss a beat, and Sam's mouth snapped shut. "But you've told me about it *today*. Three damn times. And three damn times you've-"

He abruptly cut himself off, looking away from his brother as all three deaths flashed before his eyes. It wasn't something he ever wanted to see again. And yet, Dean was starting to worry there'd be more of it to come.

"I've what?" Sam asked, straightening. It wasn't hard to pick up on the sudden tension in his brother's frame.

"Died, okay?" Dean looked back up, gaze sharp and angry but also haunted. "Three times, you've died. And then Azazel shows up."

The blood drained from Sam's face in the span of about two heartbeats. He didn't move for several long seconds, frozen to the spot. "What?"

The man from the future couldn't hold his brother's gaze, eyes darting away again.

"Did you…?"

"No," Dean bit out harshly, head snapping back. "Jesus, *no*. I shot myself. Every damn time, Sam. I *shot* myself, like I *promised*."

"But then how-" It was Sam's turn to cut himself off, relief at Dean keeping his promise somewhat short-lived as realization straightened his spine and widened his eyes. "Azazel's been bringing you back."

The younger hunter quickly hunched back down, gaze darting from diner patron to staff, looking for yellow eyes. Dean didn't bother telling him not to. He already knew Azazel wasn't in this building, but that wasn't going to be any consolation to Sam. It hadn't been any consolation to Dean.

"What do we do?" Sam whispered, dragging his gaze back to his brother.

"I don't have a clue," Dean muttered, shoulders sagging. The muscles under his skin were all buzzing with angry, volatile energy, but his bones felt heavy with something too close to defeat. The hunter rubbed at his chest, the skin there tight with residual ache. "I've tried keeping you alive, but we don't even have to leave the motel for…"

He trailed off and this time Sam didn't push. He could guess the outcome well enough.

"What about Cas?" The desperation with which Sam asked it – the fear and worry not for himself, but for his brother – made Dean want to have better news on that front. Cas hadn't just been his backup plan. She'd been Sam's too.

"I've tried." Dean shook his head. "Either she doesn't have her ears on or Azazel's keeping her away somehow."

The hunter didn't want to consider a third option, that Azazel had captured or even killed the angel. Dean was sure he'd know if that had happened. The Cas sitting behind his sternum might be aching pretty much non-stop at this point, but it was the familiar ache of something wrong, not something dead. Not something missing because it was gone. Cas might be in trouble, wherever she was, but she was alive. Dean was sure of it.

She just… couldn't get to them right now. Which meant they were on their own.

"So, you wake up after I die?" Sam asked, bringing Dean's thoughts back to their current problem. The question was asked tentatively enough to be sensitive of the situation, but the curiosity in his tone meant that big brain of his was already at work on the problem.

"After I shoot myself," Dean corrected, just a little bitterly.

His brother gave him a look that was part sympathy, part apology, and part *'man up*'. Dean wanted to glare, but honestly didn't have the

energy.

"So, try not shooting yourself this time."

The older Winchester blinked. Then baulked. Then got a little pissy that Sam was just *accepting* that he was going to die by the end of the day. And then, after all that, Dean actually thought about what Sam was asking him to do, and started looking a little green around the gills.

His brother was asking him to let him die and just… live with it.

Dean's stomach churned at the thought, because that was everything he'd been trying so desperately to avoid. For two years now.

(More like two decades.)

"I mean, obviously don't bring me back," Sam was quick to say, probably misreading the wide range of facial expressions Dean was currently going through like a playlist set to shuffle. "But if the day resets when you kill yourself, then… don't do that."

"But you'll be dead." He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. A big part of the very simple equation that Sam and his big ole brain were somehow missing.

The look his brother gave him in return made it perfectly clear he hadn't missed anything.

"Yeah, Dean, I know."

"But, Sam–"

"What other choice do you have?" the younger Winchester countered immediately, still pinning him with that look.

Dean just shook his head, because no. *No*. That wasn't a plan, it was… it was…. Okay, Dean didn't have a word for what it was, other than *impossible*.

Which wasn't quite right, now was it? He'd managed it once, for a year. A hellish year, for the most part, but Dean had sort of made it through. He could maybe do it again. And just viciously push down any and all thoughts about how fucking miserable he had been for that year and how he never, ever, wanted to live through that pain and grief and self-loathing again.

"It won't work," Dean said instead, still adamant that letting his brother just… rot wasn't a viable choice. "They'll just pile on. Hell will keep coming and they'll start adding bodies, Sam. I can't… you can't ask me to make it through that."

For his part, Sam did look damn apologetic about having to ask for just that. "If you have another idea, I'm all ears, Dean. It's not like I *want* to die. But you can't keep repeating the same day over and over again. Something has to change."

The older Winchester didn't have an answer to that, much as it killed him. Angered him. Made his blood fucking boil and his gut sink like lead and his chest burn. Because the only other option was to end the world, and Dean couldn't bear that responsibility twice.
Not *knowing* he was doing it this time.

But he also had no idea how to willingly do what Sam was asking, either. How to just… keep going.

"Okay," he muttered. Dean shrugged his shoulders helplessly, hating every part of this so-called 'plan', but Sammy was right. What choice was there?

"Dean, I'm not…" Sam sighed, shoulders hunched around his ears in his own brand of defeat. "I'm not asking you to give up, okay? Find Cas, figure out a plan and… I don't know, bring me back later if you can. But if you can't…. It's okay, Dean. Really. It's okay."

The man from the future hated that voice. That sympathetic, understanding, *knowing* tone that Sam took with anyone in pain. In mourning. He hated it. He hated everything about it, about this, but he didn't have any better ideas.

So he grumpily agreed to at least give it a shot.

-o-o-o-

Sam died six hours later in a hospital OR from an allergic reaction to mystery goo. The doctor's eyes slid yellow and Dean didn't shoot himself.

-o-o-o-

He made it four weeks.

They had a hunter's funeral, attended by Bobby and Andy, Ellen and

Jo. Cas never showed back up and Dean couldn't find her, no matter all the tricks and knowledge he'd dragged with him from the future. Even Crowley didn't have a lead. The angel was just gone, and Dean started to worry that maybe Azazel had gotten to her somehow.

The small wake they held at Bobby's after the funeral was fitting. What Sam would have wanted, the old hunter said. There was booze aplenty and memories shared, some somber and others filled with the life Sam no longer had. Dean hated every second of it.

He didn't call Jess. He couldn't be the one to tell her that Sam– That he had failed. Failed his brother and failed her. So he just didn't call. He also figured if she ever found out, she'd probably hunt him down and skin him alive for leaving her in the dark but… maybe it was better that way. That *was* what Sam would have wanted: Jess, away and safe and out.

Dean spent the first few days after at the Salvage Yard, but it didn't last. Everyone was too quiet. Too cautious around him. Too… pitying. He couldn't handle Andy's sad looks or Bobby's lack of gruff. And he didn't even like the dog, who also seemed intent to console him.

So he left.

Azazel showed up at least once a day – on hunts, in diners, one time as a fucking cop who pulled him over – and every day, Dean said no. And every day, Dean didn't shoot himself. He found hunts and he killed with excess and he drank and he didn't sleep.

And then he'd rinse and repeat.

About the time Dean realized he was still killing himself, just slowly, he got it into his head that he might as well speed up the process if that's where it was headed. It had taken four weeks to get drunk enough to think about it and four weeks to be wretched enough to follow through with it. To reason out that putting a bullet in his brain meant getting a second chance at saving Sam.

A fifth chance. Whatever.

And if it didn't work – if he didn't wake back up on that Sunday morning four weeks ago – well, then it would be over either way and no real loss there, right?

Dean didn't even have to get up from the kitchenette table. He'd kept a gun on him twenty-four seven since Sam's death. Probably not a

healthy idea, but it wasn't like a hunter was ever all that far from one, anyway.

He tucked it under his chin, the spot familiar even weeks later, and pulled the trigger.

-o-o-o-

"*It feels like the first time*."

Dean now hated Foreigner, which was a real damn shame. Another notch in Azazel's belt, he supposed. But Sam was alive and tying his shoes on the other bed and Dean thought, *'maybe this time*.'

-o-o-o-

"So… you're re-living the same day?"

"Yes," Dean answered without even looking at his brother, instead watching Darla serve a customer at the counter. His name was Andre, he owned the mechanic's shop just down the street. It was a death trap. Literally.

"And… it's not a timey sense thing?"

At this point, Dean didn't even know why he was explaining it.

"No."

So long as they went to the diner, Sam didn't die in the morning. So long as they interviewed witnesses about yellow goo, Sam didn't die in the afternoon. But it didn't matter what they did in the evening. If they warded a motel room top to bottom with every inch of supernatural knowledge Dean had, or cleared outta dodge in the Impala at ninety miles an hour (or at a very safe twenty, or really at any speed in between), or investigated the damn glitter goo without getting close enough to inhale. It didn't matter. Sam died before it ever became Monday. Dean could never save him.

And he never made it long without him, either. Not when a second chance – an opportunity to make it right, to save his brother – rested in a single bullet.

Or whatever weapon was on hand, really. Azazel started getting creative after the first few attempts, taking any and all weapons out of the equation at every opportunity. But Dean had enough experience

with Djinns to know the drill. There were a *lot* of readily available things you could use to off yourself.

Explaining it all just made everything harder, really. If Dean didn't say anything, Sam let the day carry on and he lived longer. Which gave Dean more time to come up with another plan that would inevitably fail. Explaining it took time, energy, meant Sam generally fought him at every turn (well-meaningly, of course, but Dean knew all the possible outcomes here, so what was the *point*?), and all-in-all got him nowhere.

Yet there he was. Explaining it to his brother once more.

"Yesterday was Sunday, today is Sunday, and, most likely, tomorrow will be Sunday too."

Dean didn't bother mentioning Azazel. He knew where that conversation went – every time – and this time he'd rather skip to the end. Skip seeing the fear in his brother's eyes as he said Azazel's name. To be asked, *again*, if he'd sold his soul. And (to his ever increasing annoyance) see the pure relief in Sammy's eyes when he told him no, he'd put a *bullet in his brain* instead.

The kid could at least show a little horror at the number of times Dean had committed suicide for him. They were broaching real Romeo and Juliet levels of commitment here, and Dean didn't *do* chick flick moments, damnit..

But instead of the reaction Dean was expecting – a hushed and worried discussion about what they could do next, because that's what had happened *every single time* – Sam surprised him.

"Like *Groundhog Day*," the younger Winchester supplied, almost offhandedly. A frown formed between his big brows. "Or, well, a dark, twisted version of it."

Sam was still trying to wrap his head around what Dean was explaining to him. Because it sounded… well, not unbelievable, because he was sitting across from his *time traveling* brother, but still pretty unbelievable. Except Dean was also clearly freaked out. And pissed. And also trying to hide how freaked out he was.

So, this – whatever *this* was – was really happening. Sam had an easier time accepting that than he might have two years ago, even if wrapping his head around it wasn't the easiest. The question now was, who (or what) had the power to stick his brother in some sort of

demented time loop.

"What?"

It was Dean's turn to stare at Sam for the first time in… well, a long time.

The beanstalk of a man shrugged self-consciously, unsettled by the intensity of that stare. He raised an eyebrow, perhaps a little defensive considering the movie they were talking about and the fact that Dean could quote it beginning to end, and had. All the time. For years.

"You know, *Groundhog Day*, where Bill Murray has to repeat the same day over and over again because he's stuck in a-"

"Time loop."

Dean's breath left his lungs like someone had just sucker punched him.

"Yeah, I know the movie, Sam. But living the same day over and over again…."

His tone was definitely dismissive (fed by several weeks of Sundays at this point), which furthered Sam's frown. But Dean had trailed off, leaving the younger Winchester to just stare, both expectant and completely confused.

"Yeah…?"

Dean's gaze snapped up, locking on his with an urgency that left Sam's heart pounding and body flooded with adrenaline. That was the look his brother got before they usually had to run – or fight – for their lives.

"What day is it?"

The adrenaline came crashing down in a wave of pure bafflement. Sam frowned at the question, asked with the kind of seriousness one didn't usually use with the days of the week. Not to mention, Dean had *just* gotten done telling him exactly what day it had been yesterday, was today, and would apparently be tomorrow.

"Sunday."

"Not Tuesday." It wasn't a question. It wasn't really a statement either. It wasn't even aimed at him, Sam realized, as Dean's gaze drifted back off to the distance. When he continued on, there was a disbelieving

scoff to his words. "A hundred Tuesdays. And I never got to listen to Asia again."

Well, now Dean could add Foreigner to that list.

"Son of a bitch!"

Sam just stared, but Dean was elated. Pissed the hell off, but *elated.* He had finally found his plan C.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I am so ready for the barrage of yelled "I KNEW IT. I TOLD YOU I KNEW IT, SILENCE!" Bring it on ;)

I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I did writing it. I seriously think it's been my favorite one to tackle so far. At first I was a little worried about having to re-write the same thing over and over again (how do you keep that from getting repetitive?) but it ended up a really fun challenge!

Fun Fact #101: Dean was only going to spend, like, five Sundays in the loop before he caught on because that Future knowledge should really come in handy SOMETIMES. But as I wrote it and he got so desperately ingrained in the Azazel red herring, it just went off on it's own. Suddenly it was many, many Sundays and also several weeks of not Sundays (which might line up with the original timeline but definitely wasn't in my blueprints!) But that boy is dense when revenge gets involved. And, also, five Sundays would have been entirely not-verbose, so really, who here is surprised? *eyes the Muse* I blame her.

Gabriel: I know some of you will have questions (like, why? And how? And also WTF, Silence!) and we'll get to all those thoughts in the coming chapters. Where this story is going for Gabriel's character arc meant that Mystery Spot couldn't happen in Season 3 or in the way that it went down in the original timeline, but I couldn't just let it go either. It **had** to make an appearance in this story, there was no question about that. So I took Mystery Spot Gabriel's mindset and threw him into this timeline's moment, then asked "whatcha gonna do, hmm?"

Then let him and the muse have at. Which... saying it out loud now, was probably a terrible idea XD

Reviews: I am so, so, so, so excited to share this chapter with you

and it will kinda break my heart not to hear from you all about what you thought (does not have to be positive, btw!) Please take a moment to drop a comment!

Up Next: The next chapter is written, though I have some friends coming to town next weekend so it'll be posted in two weeks!

Cheers,

Silence

Update - 09/14/22: My undying, unending, depthless apologies for the unexpected delay in getting you all your next chapter!!! I ended up with some serious OT time to finish the latest movie, which left me exhausted and stressed. Then I jetted off to the east coast literally the same day I ended on the show, to spend time with my neices! Who are both sick. So now I'm sick too 🤒🤒. I haven't been doing much but sleeping and entertaining toddlers. It's been a lot, and there has been noooo writing in the middle of all that.

Once I've recovered, I will try to get back on track! Thanks for hanging with me everyone, and continued apologies for this COVID/post-COVID lack of routine updating. I miss the days of routine writing and posting sooo much 🤒

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 118: Season 2: Chapter 84

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: I am so sorry for the delay! I thought I'd have plenty of time to write while I'm vacation after my show ended and the OT was finally done, but boy was I wrong! I got sick immediately TT.TT I'm pretty much recovered now, finally home, edited the chapter in an airport (like the good old days!) but didn't have time to post before my flight. My new goal is to try and figure out (and stick to) a writing schedule again (like the good old days!) I am really tired of this sporadic writing and posting. I miss regular updates, and this story was never intended to be read with such big gaps between chapters. It's really bothering me!

Chapter Warnings: Well, we're mostly done killing ourselves at this point, and instead we're confronting tricksters (almost as suicidal, but not quite as suicidal as confronting archangels). Oh boy, things are really picking up now! Dean is pissed, Sam is confused (and suffering all the consequences), Gabe's not so amused (which is a big buzz kill, cuz amused is kinda his thing), and our favorite angel finally finds the boys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 84

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

“Alright, you bastard! We give up!”

Dean stood from the table and stepped into the aisle between booth and counter. He had his arms thrown up and out, and he was staring at the ceiling as he shouted, accusing it of, erm, something.

Sam just stared.

“You hear me? I said we give up!”

“Um… Dean?” Sam started to rise up from his seat as well, hand half raised towards his brother who was calling rather a lot of attention to

himself. Other patrons and staff alike were now all staring their way, tasks paused. Behind the counter, Darla was glancing between them and the register, where a phone sat on the counter, clearly in sight.

The older Winchester, however, didn't seem to care.

"Quit hiding, you son of a bitch, and get your ass down here!" Dean spun in a circle, arms still out, but nothing happened in response. Well, except for Sam awkwardly grabbing at his arm to try and get him to sit back down. He shook that off easily, though.

"Dean!" Sam was practically hissing at him now. He was eying the diner entrance, contemplating next steps if Dean didn't calm down soon. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Screw this," his brother growled, dropping his arms to pull out his phone. Gabriel might have blocked angel radio in this pocket dimension, but he doubted the douchebag had considered an angel with a cell phone. He hit speed dial three and put the phone to his ear, waiting impatiently for it to pick up.

When it did, he wasted no time, even if his lungs all but deflated from the relief of it.

"Mixin' and Fixin's Country Diner, Mechanicsburg, Ohio. We need you-"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the pulse of wingbeats broke the stillness of the restaurant. Dean was spinning around, heart skipping a beat with both hope that it would be Cas standing right behind him – that it hadn't been Yellow Eyes warding the hospital, keeping Cas locked out or even a prisoner (or worse) – and fear that it would be Gabriel instead. But the body that had materialized in the country diner had slim hips, an athletic build, the most fuckable hair Dean had still ever laid eyes on, and familiar, brilliant blue irises.

Castiel stumbled at the abrupt arrival, cute frown in place on her serious face as she lost her balance.

"Cas!" The hunter reached out instinctively, clasping the angel on either bicep to steady her. His grip may have been a little desperate around that beautiful damn trenchcoat.

"That was much harder than it should have been," she said, eyes struggling to focus. Dean's grip tightened around her arms.

"Cas, listen–"

“What are you doing here?” the angel interrupted as those blue eyes cleared, glancing between the two Winchesters with unnaturally wide eyes. “You’ve been missing for days.”

Days? Dean floundered, mind racing with what he could say in just the few seconds he had. He had to assume Gabriel was listening, even if he hadn’t responded to Dean calling him out. How the hell did he warn Cas what could be coming without letting the friggin’ archangel know Dean knew more than he should?

“You gotta get us outta here. It’s a pocket-”

The bell over the diner door chimed with the entrance of a new customer, cutting Dean’s desperate explanation off before he could get started. In hindsight, he might have spent too long thinking. The three Winchesters turned as one to the door, an eerie stillness taking over the restaurant. Dean already knew who they would see walking towards them with calm, measured steps.

At the appearance of yellow eyes – locked on them and only them – Sam took a step back, breath as staggered as his feet. Castiel immediately placed herself between her charges and the approaching demon. Dean’s hand, which had been curled around her bicep, slid to her wrist. Fingers dug in and tugged on the fabric there, trying to tell her something.

“Cas, it’s not-”

“Hello, kiddos!” Azazel wore the face of the doctor from the hospital, some middle-aged white dude with a balding head and way-too-white teeth. Probably had a wife and five kids with a mistress on the side. It wasn’t just those sickly yellow eyes that stank of privilege and entitlement; a perfect fit for the scumbag wearing him.

Dean’s chest burned for the nth Sunday in a row, but now he finally knew why. It had nothing to do with any demon, a fact he cursed himself for not realizing sooner. Cas had been trying to warn him, but Dean had been so convinced – so distracted – by the damn ‘destined’ timeline that he hadn’t understood. Hadn’t even thought to listen.

In front of him, Castiel’s blade dropped into her hand.

"Now, now,” Azazel tsked. Or, at least, what Dean assumed was a

certain 'trickster' in an Azazel disguise. And god he hoped he was right about that. "There's no need for violence."

"Like hell there isn't," Sam breathed out from behind, probably going for defensive anger but fear kept his voice quieter than he'd intended.

Dean wished he had more time. More time to prep the kid for what was coming. Assure him that the construct in front of them wasn't actually Yellow Eyes. That, for all intent and purposes, Sam was safe. This, after all, wasn't where he died.

Not for real, at least.

But not telling Sam about Azazel's role in the restarts had been what finally got Dean past Yellow Eyes. To the realization that it wasn't a demon fucking with them.

The exact opposite, actually.

There was no time now, though. Dean had to figure out how the hell to tell his brother and their angel the truth without Gabriel overhearing it, and he had to do it on the fly. The older Winchester didn't want to know what the angel-turned-trickster might think up next if he learned Dean was from the future – that they'd thrown Destiny out the window – and had no intention of starting the Apocalypse. If that happened, Dean knew it would get ugly fast. This wasn't the Gabriel that was willing to listen to them. To consider picking a side. Not yet, at least.

Until it was, Dean needed some precautions in place. A backup plan at the very least. He probably should have thought one up *before* calling in an angelic assist. Granted, he'd been a little too pissed to think clearly.

'Nothing knew there,' Dean thought with no shortness of self-deprecation. To be a little fair, though, he had kinda been hoping Cas would flap them outta there before Gabe had time to react.

But when had his unplanned hopes ever panned out?

"You will not touch them," Cas was threatening before Dean could get much further in his planning than *'Shit, shit, shit, what do I do, I need a plan!*'

In response to the angel's threat, Azazel let out the disappointed kind of sigh Dean had spent most of his adolescence hearing from teachers

asking simple questions and getting nothing but difficulty and sass in return.

"Oh, sweetheart–" and Dean's blood boiled at the look Azazel (Castiel's friggin' *brother*, pretending to be that son of a bitch, and how messed up was that?) sent the angel's way– "I don't have to touch them."

He raised his fingers and Dean braced. Castiel mirrored the movement with her blade, prepared to defend, but there was little defense against an archangel's tricks.

Sam doubled over with a grunt of pain before a mouthful of blood came pouring from his lips. His arms curled tight around his stomach, his legs wobbled like jello, and he stumbled into the side of the booth they'd been sitting in mere moments ago.

Gabriel was a friggin' dick.

"Sam!" Dean's reaction was instinctual. Even knowing it wasn't 'real' (and fuck that, because it was real. It was completely real, it just wasn't *permanent*), he couldn't help but grab onto his brother's shoulders, holding him upright until he could maneuver his larger frame into the seat beside him. "Shit, just hold on, Sammy. It's going to be okay."

"It's really not."

At the demon's falsely sympathetic moue, Castiel charged. Azazel raised his other hand, fingers spread wide, and the angel went flying back with more momentum that she'd moved forward with. Cas flew down the aisle, blade slicing through the tops of booths until she crashed, hard, into the back wall of the diner and stayed there, pinned to the aluminum paneling.

The family that had taken that last booth in the diner – the one with the future track star for a son – were cowering in the booth. The kids had been ushered under the table while the adults stayed as low as they could, heads popping above the seats in trepidation while they kept their children safe below. Other patrons had gone running as soon as the archangel had cleared the door. Darla was hiding in the kitchen, watching from the service window.

Dean didn't care about any of them. They weren't real, and he should have realized what this was so much sooner.

“Let her go!” he yelled, turning from the pinned angel back to the ‘demon’. He was all anger and no fear. Yeah, Gabriel might be able to fuck them up good – really put them through hell – but he was too much of a coward to ever do anything truly dangerous. And Dean had never been afraid of cowards, no matter their strength or power.

“Alright,” the yellow-eyed lie agreed readily, though Castiel remained pinned to the wall, struggling against her invisible binds. “I can add that as a condition of the deal easily enough. Just say the magic words.”

“Dean, no–”

Sam threw up another mouthful of blood that splattered across the table. His skin was getting dangerously pale, and Dean knew he didn’t have much time to end this if he wanted to spare his brother yet another gruesome death.

“Oh, I’m not making any deals with you,” the older Winchester replied, voice deadly calm.

Those yellow eyes rolled in such a classic Gabriel move that Dean really didn’t know how he hadn’t spotted it before. “Let me guess. You’re just gonna kill yourself to get out of it?”

Dean’s hands curled into fists, but he didn’t go for his gun. Not this time.

“Then I’ll just bring you back, and we’ll do this dance all over again.” Azazel waved his hand around the diner like a composer leading a Waltz. “Until eventually you take my deal because you realize there *isn’t* another option. I mean, aren’t you getting a little tired of this, kiddo?”

“Beats ending the world.”

That comment, thrown so casually and carelessly from the stony hunter, threw the archangel for a loop. Gabriel blinked yellow eyes in a moment of surprise before remembering to pull the mask back on.

Dean Winchester from 2007 shouldn’t know what selling his soul would result in, after all.

Falsely yellow eyes slid, both cautious and curious, to the pinned angel behind the hunter, wondering if someone had gone blabbing her big mouth. Still in the role of a Prince of Hell, however, the demon

scoffed, trying to cover the fact that Dean wasn't following the right script but Gabriel didn't have any additional pages to source.

Luckily, an angel-turned-trickster such as him was an expert at winging it.

"That's a mighty big ego you've got," he said with another derisive look. "Thinking the world literally revolves around you."

"Oh, I don't think. I know. And it's not happening. Not in your little craptastic classroom, and not out in the real world, either."

"Real world?" Dean could see Gabe behind that borrowed face perfectly clearly now, and the archangel was as irritated as he was confused. Not fun when the tricks got turned on you, was it? "This is as real as it gets, Dean."

"Why don't you cut the act?" The hunter spread his arms out, gesturing to the diner and its terrified patrons, fake as the day was long. "You're not fooling anyone. Not anymore. We've dealt with your kind before."

"And what kind is that?"

Those pale, dead eyes regarded the hunter with a glint of danger in them that hadn't been there before. Dean knew he was treading a thin line, approaching a dangerous edge where the archangel got good and angry, for real. If Dean called him out now, it wasn't going to end in anything but pain for them, and the man from the future couldn't afford to have a pissed off archangel on his back. Especially not one who wanted the Apocalypse to start just as badly as the rest of his dick brothers.

A pissed off *trickster*, though? That Dean could handle, pain in the ass though it may be. At least until he came up with that backup plan for getting Gabe on their side a hell of a lot earlier this time around.

"You sure as shit ain't Azazel," Dean responded with the kind of derision he knew would raise Gabe's hackles. But he needed to. He needed to cross that line, to tip that scale. Get the trickster in him pissed off enough that he didn't *want* to keep up the charade. Annoyed enough that he felt the need to defend his title as a proper little demi-god. Dean had spent enough time dealing with Gabriel's games to know the archangel's buttons well enough to push them now. "You think a Prince of Hell would waste his time – or ours – with childish tricks?"

"*Childish*?" That middle-aged face pulled into something frustrated, but more than that, downright *insulted.* Dean decided to add insult to injury and scoffed.

"What else would you call dropping a piano on Sam?" He waved an arm at his brother, who was still spitting up mouthfuls of blood and weakly calling Dean's name. But the older Winchester valiantly – if not very, very painstakingly – ignored him. Sam might not know what antagonizing a demon could do other than end in more pain for him, but Dean didn't have time to explain it. His brother was just going to have to hold on and trust him. In that order. "Running him over with a car? Killing him with *glitter goo*."

"I call it hilarious."

Gabriel. Was. Such. A. Dick.

"Yeah," Dean growled, trying his best to resist strangling the archangel. Not like he'd be particularly successful if he tried. "A trickster would."

The being in front of him just loved his dumb tricks and stupid games. Loved getting to play a role in them. Well, two could play at that one and, thanks to this particular trickster, Dean had plenty of practice. So he didn't give much time for those false yellow eyes to narrow or the angel to contemplate his next move in this sudden turn-of-the-tables.

"So which one are you?"

The parody of last time's events, of Dean asking this same angel that same question in a not-that-different context, wasn't lost on the man from the future.

Some things, Dean figured with no shortage of sarcasm and bitterness, just had to stay the same.

The diner fell unnaturally silent. Sam stopped choking. Dean resisted glancing his way – to see his brother wipe the remaining red dribble off his chin with the back of his sleeve or heave a relieved, clear breath. The first in many minutes. He resisted looking around at the patrons of the diner as they went back to their lives, like a showdown wasn't happening in front of them. Like it was just another day. Customers stood from various hiring places and retook their seats. Resumed their meals. Darla came out of the kitchen with a plate of waffles and a coffee pot, as if she hadn't been cowering moments

before. She had not a hair out of place. The family beside the still-pinned Castiel climbed back into their booth, chattering away like a happy family.

The trapped angel and youngest Winchester watched them all with wariness and confusion. Dean's fierce eyes never left the 'demon' in front of him.

“Loki,” Gabriel admitted after a long, long pause. Slowly, Azazel’s balding doctor visage and yellow eyes bled away to reveal the shorter, curly-haired vessel Dean knew too well. He looked extremely put out. A very Gabriel-esque expression Dean also knew well. “They call me Loki.”

Behind the Winchesters, Castiel watched the gradual transformation of demon into… something else. Something that was, she was very quick to realize, capable of overwhelming her. Tricksters were not to be taken lightly, but an angel of her class and caliber should have been fairly evenly matched to one. Yet, this ‘Loki’ had overpowered her *easily*.

He was far more powerful than any trickster should be. If he even was a trickster.

Castiel’s eyes went wide at the thought. A dangerous, errant thought that she prayed wasn’t correct. But the similarities were simply too great, and the timing….

“Dean!” she called out, turning her gaze to her charge. “That’s not-!”

The rest of her words were muffled by the abrupt appearance of tape across her mouth, sealing her voice inside. She tossed her head angrily, but had little ability to remove the limitation.

“Hey!” Dean shouted angrily, head whipping around to the captured angel then back to the Trickster. “Let her go!”

“Yeah,” Loki drawled with a scathing eyebrow raise, “I don’t think so, bucko. She’s staying right where she is until she learns some manners. The adults are talking.”

Next to the glaring older Winchester, Sam climbed shakily to his feet. He left behind a table smeared and splattered in terrifying red, but he had recovered almost instantly back to full health. His skin was flushed pink and, except for a few traces of dried blood in the corners of his mouth, he looked surprisingly alright. His legs, on the other

hand, remained shaky. Not that anyone could blame him for that.

Sam stared at the newly revealed trickster with wide eyes. He glanced between his brother and the demi-god with a mix of stunned disbelief and wariness. The quiet chatter of patrons going about their meals, the ding of the service bell at the kitchen window, and the occasional clatter of silverware all weighed heavily in the back of Sam's awareness. Everything around them – every *one* around them – was being controlled, or possibly even created, by this unassuming man standing scant feet in front of him. The sheer power he yielded was… intimidating, if Sam was being honest.

He remembered Dean mentioning a trickster mere days ago, but he hadn't gone into details beyond the fact that the guy was bad news, liked to play games that were closer to nightmares for his victims, and was all for the Apocalypse steamrolling right on ahead. Which was why they were avoiding him at all costs. Sam had gotten the feeling there was a lot more to it than that, given just how short Dean had been on the details, but he hadn't pushed at the time. He'd thought he would have plenty of time to get to it in the future. Sam regretted his shortsightedness immensely.

"So," Loki drawled, hands on his hips and a little smirk seemingly at home in the corner of his mouth. Sam wondered how this creature, clearly so smug and playful, had ever played Azazel convincingly. But he had, and that was all the more terrifying. "What gave me away, boys?"

"I told you, we've dealt with your kind before."

Gabe raised a single, scathing eyebrow. "You sure about that, Dean-O? Sammy doesn't exactly look onboard the trickster parade, there."

Whatever level of caution this creature was instilling in the younger Winchester, a significant portion of it disappeared at the nickname. Only his brother got to call him that, and even then reluctantly so. Sam's forehead smoothed out into a glare of his own.

"You got a better explanation?" Dean challenged back, but immediately stiffened when Gabe's eyes slid over the hunter's shoulder. Castiel was still pinned to the wall behind them, fighting her invisible restraints and grunting into the tape secure across her mouth.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe a mouthy baby bird spewing her guts? Metaphorically, of course."

The way in which the older Winchester's glare went from annoyed to deadly at one measly little threat to the angel gave Gabe another pause. He hadn't spent *that* much time following the Winchesters the past few years. Sure, he'd heard their names start to pop up on angel radio the last three decades or so. Had even done some poking around now and then throughout the years. But everything he'd picked up from his divine frequency or light spying had indicated Dean Winchester wasn't exactly one to pal around with anything not human, let alone get *protective* over one.

The amount of ferocity he was leveling Gabe's way suggested a lot more than obligation to an ally. It suggested loyalty. And, Gabe thought as he glanced between the two again, possibly something a lot more confusing and a lot less likely. Something that looked a hell of a lot like possessiveness.

Huh. Imagine that. Well, Dean Winchester was known as quite the ladies man, so….

Sam, meanwhile, spared a quick glance back at Castiel, who was leveling nothing short of a fuming glare at the trickster. Again, the younger Winchester felt a flicker of apprehension at a deity that could contain an angel with so little exertion. Nothing got the drop on Cas like that. Except maybe Azazel. And that was *not* a comforting comparison. Not even remotely.

Those ethereal blue eyes slid to Sam's for only a moment, and the hunter could easily read the '*Run*' that was there. Not that they had much option to, but Sam both appreciated and regretted the angel's readiness to be abandoned for the sake of their escape.

"So. Boys." Loki spread out his arms as if in invitation. "Since we're all on the same page now, let's talk End Times."

Dean was quick with his retort of, "Let's not."

"Why…" Sam cleared his throat, which was still gunky with the last vestiges of his stomach trying to eat itself inside out. Not to mention he was still catching up on a situation Dean and Cas seemed far more familiar with, which worried him. "Why would you want it to happen?"

Loki spared him a glance that wasn't so much scathing as it was pitying. "I don't *want* anything, boys. I don't have a stake in this."

Bullshit, Dean thought, but didn't dare voice it aloud at that moment.

“But it’s happening, whether you want it to or not,” Gabe continued, dropping his arms with a shrug that was probably meant to be nonchalant but Dean could read the defeat in it. It was easier to spot this time around, knowing who he was and what his deal was. Gabe had given up centuries ago, and now he just wanted it to end. The Winchester that came from ten years in the future could almost relate. But it didn’t make Gabriel any less of a coward in his book. At least Dean had always kept fighting, no matter how tired or fucking miserable he got. That's just what you were supposed to do.

“Says who?” the hunter snapped back, angrier now at the reminder of everything he and his family had gone through. Would to through again, now. Things Gabriel could have helped them prevent if he'd just grown a pair so much sooner.

Dean could still recall that nightmare of a night spent among other Pagans. Gods who were furious that the Christian-Judo God thought he had the right to end it all. If nothing else, Gabe was buddy-buddy with those guys. With *Kali*, who had laid pretty damn clear claim to those end times that night. Gabe was tripping up pretty big if *Loki* was suddenly siding with the Christians, and Dean could use that.

“You gonna tell me you, the *pagan god*, subscribes to Christianity being the one who got it right?”

Gabe leveled a glare his way that was far harsher than the look he’d spared Sam. Granted, the older Winchester knew which buttons to push. Poor Sam was just stumbling around in the dark because Dean had, once again, been stupid enough to think he’d have *time* to tell his brother everything.

If it wasn’t so damn painful to drudge up, Dean might commit himself to telling Sammy all of it – everything that could possibly pertain to the Apocalypse – when they got out of this mess. Just to keep this shit from happening again.

(Yeah, he already knew that was never happening. Dean might be willing to face the damn Apocalypse without so much as a blink, but he was a coward in his own right when it came to owning up to his kid brother.)

“You think they– *we* can stop it?” Gabe asked, barely catching his slip up in time as he looked between the brothers. His eyes hesitated on Castiel for only a nanosecond, but it was a nanosecond too long. His sister may not know *who* he was, but Gabriel knew she was starting to

suspect he wasn't a Trickster. He needed to stop giving her more fuel for that doubt, hard as it was to ignore her.

It had been a very long time since he'd been in the presence of any of his family. It was more difficult than he was ready to admit.

So he focused his attention back on Dean, an easy target for his frustrations. "You think the Pagans can stand against Heaven? Or Hell? This is a knock-down, drag-out brawl, boys. The prize fight between this world's heavyweights. The rest of us don't stand a chance."

"So you just give up?" The words left Sam with a breathlessness that drew Loki's attention, but the younger Winchester was well on his way to anger too. "Instead of even trying to fight, you lay down and die? All of you?"

Dean almost took a step towards his brother, almost put himself between Sam and the darkening glower of the archangel. But he knew, even with all the crap Gabriel might throw their way, Sam wasn't in any real danger and the younger Winchester wouldn't appreciate his big brother stepping in like he needed the protection. Neither of them were at any real risk here. Gabe was too busy blindly toeing the family line to ever do anything to jeopardize the two True Vessels.

Didn't make him any less of a dick, of course.

"You're a coward," Sam blurted out, part surprised by the revelation, part disgusted. A being with that much power, that much sway, too scared of losing to bother fighting?

Dean did move when Gabriel leapt forward to grab Sam, almost too fast to track the movement, and slam him into the side of the booth he'd been spewing blood in not so long ago. The older Winchester drew his gun, wishing he had the Colt – or Uriel's damn angel blade – while knowing there wasn't much he could do against the angel without them.

Pinned to the wall, Cas started throwing a fit. Small, blue sparks fired along her wrists, drawing Dean's attention. But those blue eyes were locked on the trickster and the younger Winchester. A flicker of worry warred with pride as Dean watched his angel fight an archangel's power hard enough to manifest grace.

"Don't you ever, *ever* presume to know what I am," Gabriel hissed in

Sam's face, and the younger Winchester had the intelligence – or at least the primal instinct – to look afraid. Angry, of course (because he was a Winchester), but also afraid.

"Let him go," Dean demanded in his scary voice, barrel of his gun pressing right up against Gabriel's skull. He knew, if Gabe didn't listen, he could always pull out his trump card. But Dean honestly hoped it wouldn't come to that. Threatening to pray to some angels who might be interested in a certain Trickster's whereabouts might *sound* incredibly tempting – like righteous retribution – but Dean also didn't need Michael joining this little party of theirs. Ever. "Right now, Loki."

The trickster turned his head enough to eye the hunter over his shoulder, eyes darting to the gun that couldn't hurt him, but the expression on Dean's face that swore he'd find a way, regardless. Gabe didn't know why, but something about that look told him to approach with perhaps a smidge more caution than he was known for. Just a smidge, though.

With a dramatic sigh and a matching eye roll, Gabe released the beanstalk of a Winchester, raising his arms in mock truce as he backed off. Sam let out a shaky breath. He righted himself quickly and stepped to the side, putting a little more space between himself and the Trickster. Despite that, he donned his own scary look, even if it lacked some of the confidence of his brother's.

"Come on, you guys," Loki said suddenly, bright and cheerful like he hadn't just been bodily threatening one of them. He dragged out the first word with a whine, like this was just a minor inconvenience, really, and turned to face the other Winchester. "This was supposed to be *fun*, and it stopped being fun months ago."

"Months?" Sam asked in shock, the horror evident on his face as he glanced between his brother and the Trickster. Dean didn't return the look, his gun still trained on Loki.

"Cry me a river," was the older Winchester's snappy reply.

"Don't you get it, Dean?" Gabe let out another dramatized sigh, dropping his arms from an over dramatic gesture at the diner around them. His little make-believe set. "There's a *lesson* in all this."

"Let me guess," Dean sneered. "Make a deal."

"Well," Gabe drawled, clucking his tongue. He held up a finger,

waggling it. The hunters didn't seem particularly amused. The trickster leveled that finger at the older Winchester. "That, and your brother is gonna be the death of you."

Dean lowered the gun, releasing the hammer. "Except none of this is real."

"Oh, but it could be." Gabe raised his hand and snapped his fingers. Dean didn't even have time to tense before the cable holding the light fixture above the booth lengthened, looping itself around Sam's neck several times. It pulled taught, hauling Sam onto his tiptoes. The younger Winchester grabbed at the wire with a cut-off gasp, struggling to breathe. "It *will* be, Dean. That's kinda the whole point!"

Against the wall, Castiel made enough commotion fighting Gabriel's binds to draw the attention of both human and archangel. Sparks were flying, sizzling against the skin of her wrists, burning the flesh there. She was grunting against the strain and injury, voice blocked by the tape still securely in place.

Dean's worry started outpacing his pride. Gabriel stared in stunned surprise at the struggle.

The archangel frowned at the ferocity of his sister's escape attempts. She was risking real damage to her grace if she continued, but he could sense no decline in intention. With a glare her way – part wary, part warning to knock it off – the angel-turned-trickster turned back to the very stubborn human in front of him.

"What are you gonna do then, huh? When it is real, Dean-O."

Sam was still struggling to breathe, clawing at his throat. He couldn't get his fingers under the cord and his vision was starting to darken around the edges.

"Fucking kill you," Dean snarled, but his gun remained at his side.

Loki sighed. "You've got a thick skull, so I'll help with this." He waved his hand and a construct manifested between them. It was woman in a slim, form-fitting black dress with bright, unnaturally red eyes. Against the wall, Castiel yelled into her gag. "You find yourself a crossroads and you *make. A. Deal.*"

Dean stepped right into the trickster's personal space, tearing a page out of his angel's book on this one. He towered over the significantly shorter man. "Not. Going. To happen."

Over his shoulder, Sam's face was turning blue and his eyes were starting to roll back in his head.

"You're going to let your brother rot?" Gabe let out a laugh, side stepping away from the human to give the mule of a man a better view of Sam, who was on the verge of passing out.

Dean's eyes flickered that way and there might have been just a moment of doubt there, but it was quickly replaced with deadly rage. Gabe tried to ignore how the older Winchester wouldn't stick to a script written a millenium ago in dad-damn stone (all of which *made no sense*), and instead decided a little more pushing was in order.

Sam's feet left the ground as the cable tugged him a few more inches up. The back of his knees bumped the edge of the table limply. Those lanky arms fell to his side as he lost consciousness.

"Remind me how well that went the last, oh, dozen times you tried it?" Gabe let out a falsely thoughtful hum. "I believe eight weeks was your record, no? And that was a long eight weeks, Dean-O."

The Winchester's hands curled into fists, gun shaking in the right one. His eyes stubbornly stayed *away* from his brother's lax face and the crossroads bitch standing beside him, running her fake, red nails up his arm in a tantilizing way. Dean wanted to shove her away, but resisted the urge to interact in any way. She *wasn't* real.

"You think Hell isn't patient? You think Hell won't be as persistent as I was?" Gabe tilted his head back with an exaggerated laugh. "Ha! They'll come down a hundred times harder than I did. You don't stand a chance. *That's* the lesson, bucko."

"Then we fight," Dean replied through clenched teeth. He was counting backwards in his head. Each second that passed was one less to revive his brother. If he hit zero, he was putting another bullet in his brain. Gabriel's so-called lesson could go screw itself. "We find another way. Even if it sucks. Even if it means Sam and I stay dead and rotting in the ground for the rest of eternity."

"Oh my gawd," Loki complained, tilting his head back like he was praying to dad for the patience he'd never possessed. Not that he'd ever do that. "It's like talking to a brick wall!"

A dozen feet away, Cas made another noise of angry protest. Her wrists were red and raw from pulling against Gabriel's grace and her eyes were practically glowing blue with the fight. The trickster spared

her a look, frown falling back in place.

"You know what?" Loki broke into a rough smile, too tightly controlled to be anything good for the Winchesters or their angel. He backed off, throwing his shoulders up in a loose, carefree shrug. "Maybe I bit off more than you Winchesters can chew, here. Maybe we need to start smaller."

He raised a hand before Dean could stop him – not that the hunter didn't try, surging forward to grab at that wrist – and snapped his fingers. The sparks and struggles and muffled cries of Castiel fell abruptly silent as the angel disappeared.

Dean whirled to the now empty wall, mouth dropping open in protest but no sound came out. He spun back to Gabriel with a look that, were the archangel lesser than such, might have actually been intimidating. Dean's hand tightened on the trickster's still-raised arm, fingernails digging into borrowed flesh. "Bring. Her. Back!"

"Uh, *no*." Gabe all but chuckled at the absurd request. "She's not even supposed to be here, bucko, and she sure as hell can't save you from what's coming. That would be cheating."

There was something in the Trickster's tone – the gleam in his eyes, the way he waggled his eyebrows, the very same smirk he'd had every time they'd cornered him in TV Land only to get thrown into another handful of Hollywood horrors – that made Dean's gut clench with dread.

Without hesitating, the man from the future lifted his gun and tucked it under his chin. A last ditch attempt to end this his way, to take the choice out of Gabe's nightmarish hands.

Bright red, manicured fingers ripped the gun away from him even as he squeezed the trigger. The bullet missed, tearing into the ceiling above him as Dean tried to pull his arm free of the conjured crossroad demon. The hunter had all but forgotten she was there, his mantra that she wasn't real actually working pretty well. But her grip sure was real. Real friggin' strong. She pulled the gun out of his hand with a punishing strength that damn near ripped his fingers off with it, before handing the firearm to Loki like the obedient little construct she was.

"I think it's time for a different lesson," the trickster said with a smile that sent Dean's nervous system into a near panic. Gabe lifted the ivory-inlaid gun between his two hands, the hunter's eyes tracking the

movement, before snapping the weapon in two. Dean watched in horror – and no small amount of pain that he pushed deep, deep down inside – as the gun his father had bought him on his eighteenth birthday hit the ground in multiple pieces.

“Time for you to learn that there are *rules*, Dean.”

Gabe lifted his free hand and, before the hunter could make even an aborted grab for that one too (not that it would do him any good) the trickster snapped his fingers.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Gabes a dick, but he’s our favorite dick XD

Did I forget to mention that there's simply no way I could write Gabe into this story without including Changing Channels as well? Oops, silly me! ;P

Up Next: I know that is an absolutely unfair tease of a thing to say when it isn't the direct next chapter, but next up is actually Bobby, Andy, one Jody Mills, and one determined FBI agent. We can't forget about the rest of the Winchester Family after all!

Thanks everyone for hanging with me through these uncertain updating schedule! I really appreciate your patience, support, and hearing from you.

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 119: Season 2: Chapter 85

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Aaaaaalright, so it's been a while. [Insert sheepish back-of-head-rubbing here] I'm so sorry guys! It's really bugging me, these huge gaps in time without writing or updates. I've actually been thinking on that, why I'm struggling to write so much, and realized I've locked myself in a vicious cycle. For the years I kep this story updating regularly (or mostly regularly), your flood of reviews, feedback, and encouragement is what kept me writing it. It's my motivation, pure and simple. I love planning the story, that never goes far from my mind, but the actual writing of it is woooork. And the charge I get from you guys loving my ideas is what keeps me writing them, so I can share them with you.

Which is pretty fanastic, in my opinion, buuuut it does leave one small problem. In my current life, which has changed drastically since Covid (for better and worse in many ways!), I don't have the dedicated, carved out writing time like I used to. While I'm working to reclaim that time with structure and routine (oof, two words I may desperately need but also completey suck at self-enforcing XD), I haven't been writing regularly, which means updates can go months in between. After the high of that first week of comments, I...totally lose focus and my brain and hobbies drift elsewhere. And then it takes me time to realize I've drifted, and time to get back into the story. And then the cycle repeats

Ugh, it sucks, because I LOVE this story. I have so, so, so many amazing things planned that I can't wait to share with you all! Like Gabriel, and Adam. Guys, I haven't forgotten ADAM. And I have such great things planned for that poor, underused boy. You're gonna love his story as much as you've all loved Andy's! So I gotta get us there! But, to do that, I've realized I need to peace out for a couple more months. I have GOT to get a stockpile of chapters going so that we can return to weekly or biweekly updates. That was the key to me writing and being able to update this beastie of a story so regularly for so long. It's you guys; you're my special ingredient (quoting Kung Fu Panda here for anyone who just tilted their head like Cas and thought, 'I don't understand that referece')

So, this is the last chapter I'm going to post for a while. I have

NOT given up this story and have no plans to, but I won't be posting until I have a stockpile of work. I'm hoping to get myself to the season finale before I start up again. Though knowing me, that'll be a good 30 chapters away (not the, like, 10 I have planned) so I'll give up after I manage to write, hmmmm, let's say 8 of them or so, and start posting again.

What can I say. I'm Verbose and Impatient as F***

But, also, here's a chapter becaue I couldn't just post a note. That would be awful, and even I'm not *that* evil.

Chapter Warnings: We're back to Andy and Bobby, which means somewhat of a filler chapter, but also with a pretty important plot piece? Like, two important plot pieces, that is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 85

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Jody Mills – Sioux Falls Sheriff for four years running, loving wife, mother of the world's best toddler, and drip coffee aficionado – was attempting to finish up some pesky paperwork on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. A gorgeous, sunny day so picturesque they'd be writing poems about it, no doubt. A day she *could* have spent at the park with her husband and son. Sadly, for one, Sheriff Mills, her Sunday would be spent indoors, on duty, for several hours yet, whether or not she finished her paperwork.

Such was the life of a small-town sheriff.

As much as she wanted to be pushing Owen on the swings or laughing at his antics as he climbed up the slide rather than down, her family daydreams weren't what kept her from the relatively easy work of custody forms, incident reports, and Digger's latest release papers after a night in the drunk tank. No, that would be her cell, buzzing away with the fifth incoming text in as many minutes.

Jody attempted to ignore it, as she'd (sort of) managed for the last four of those minutes. But, as a sixth and seventh message came in

with its loud, accompanying buzzing, she gave up the good fight. Paperwork was boring anyway. Besides, she was the Sheriff, it was her job to help people. And if the amount of texts coming in rapid fire order was suggesting anything, it was that someone clearly needed help.

Even if that help was just a lecture about how real adults had jobs and lives, and shouldn't be *bothered incessantly*.

A lecture that went over about as well as Jody had been expecting, given just who her latest pen pal was (if it could be called that in this day and age – and she just knew said 'pen pal' would make fun of her for such an old fashioned term. Squirrelly little kid). The latest round of Andy's antics included a photo of Sarge covered head to tail in mud, tongue lolling in a huge grin, paired with a question of how, exactly, to make a muddy dog stay in a tub. That one had been followed about three minutes later by another picture, this one of an absolutely wrecked bathroom, muddy paw prints disappearing out the door, no dog in sight. Jody wished the kid the best of luck for when his grumpy landlord came back home to that (which got her several dozen crying emojis in response, much to her amusement).

She was still chuckling to herself, phone in hand, when the door to the small Sheriff's office opened and a stranger strolled in.

"Howdy," Jody greeted with a share of Midwestern friendliness at the unfamiliar face. The suit, sans a blazer, rolled up sleeves of a pristine dress shirt, and solid, neutral colored tie all said important. The multiple files tucked under his arm, a photograph paper-clipped to the outside of one of them, said Fed. Not something they saw a lot of in Souix Falls, South Dakota.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" the man asked congenially enough, though there was something dark in his eyes that immediately set Jody on edge. Nothing aimed at her, per say, but it was obvious this man was here on a mission.

"Nah, 'course not," she replied in an equally light tone, tucking her phone back into her hip holster. "Just helping a wayward kid handle his first dog. What can I do for you, Mr...?"

"Henriksen." The man offered his hand, which the Sheriff shook. "Agent Victor Henriksen, FBI. I'm looking for a couple of fugitives, and word is there's a man in your town who knows 'em."

The agent set his files – three of them, it turned out – onto the

counter, and the smile slid right off Jody's face at the picture attached to the top one. The spitting image of Bobby Singer's 'nephew,' new to town as of two months ago. The young man who'd bumped into her outside the grocery store weeks back with a favor to ask. The goofy, tragically mute kid who was, in fact, the very same 'pen pal' she'd been texting thirty seconds before regarding taking proper care of that damn favor.

"Don't suppose you know a resident by the name of Robert Singer, Sheriff?"

Jody raised her eyes back up to the federal agent. She let out a huff of air and forced the corner of her mouth into a smile. She doubted it was convincing. "You mean the town drunk?"

-o-o-o-

It was not a closely guarded secret that Victor Henrisken didn't think much of local law enforcement. Don't get him wrong, it wasn't that he found them incompetent; most of them did their jobs just fine. It was that their job wasn't *his* job, and they were grossly incompetent when it came to doing *his* job. Which, for the most part, made them largely useless to him and more often an obstacle than an assist.

Henriksen could be a real asshole sometimes, and he knew it. It wasn't his default state all of the time, but then he didn't have the time or luxury of playing nice on the job, either. Law enforcement officers were grown-ass professionals who could – or at least should be able to – handle having their feelings hurt and toes stepped on. If they couldn't, well that wasn't really Victor's concern either, was it?

Which was why he didn't bother explaining himself to the local Sheriff of this backwater town he'd found himself in outside of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Sheriff Mills seemed competent enough for a small town sheriff, but Henriksen didn't really care beyond that. He didn't need her to do his job here, so he didn't need to involve her beyond the common courtesy of alerting her to his presence.

His job – thisparticular job – wasn't a collaborative one.

Sheriff Mills didn't seem too pleased with that. Nor particularly impressed by him, either. Not that it mattered to Victor.

"He in some sort of trouble?" she asked, referring to Robert Singer, the man he was in town to see. A man he was sure was, or at least had been at some point, harboring and providing aid to the Winchesters.

Perhaps he didn't know they were criminals and wanted men. Either way, Victor planned on making the situation – and Mr. Singer's position in any future, illegal involvement – crystal clear.

"No."

Sheriff Mill's raised a further unimpressed eyebrow, hand going to her hip. "The FBI going door to door for the next census, then? Seems a waste of man power, you ask me."

"I didn't." He drummed his fingers atop the files he'd brought with him. "What can you tell me about him?"

The sheriff's eyes dropped to that stack of papers, Andy Gallagher's face staring up from the photograph paper clipped to the outside. Her gaze transferred back to the FBI agent. "About Bobby Singer?"

Victor just stared, starting to question her competency after all. It had been a simple question.

When no confirmation or response at all came from Henriksen, the small town Sheriff visibly bristled, her annoyance with him clearly growing. Her expression leveled out some, however, remaining professional as she straightened up. "He's gotten into trouble a couple of times, mostly public drunkenness. Doesn't know when to go home from the bar, and then insists on driving himself because he's a stubborn old fool. Nothing too serious, though. He's pretty harmless, especially since all the local dive bars know to take his keys off him on a bad night."

"Any idea what he's drinking himself into an early grave for?"

Sheriff Mills eyed him before answering. Maybe just sizing him up. Or sizing up his right to know. "He lost his wife. Badly. Home invasion gone wrong, longer back then I've been on the job. She didn't make it, he did. They never caught the guy."

Victor hummed non-committedly. He knew some people got that tangled up in others, fell that hard in love that they never got over the loss. But it wasn't his speed. Victor had never known an emotion like that, capable of overwhelming all else. Probably why he had multiple ex-wives.

The sheriff didn't seem all that pleased by his lack of empathy, but Victor disregarded it. He hadn't been harsh, merely neutral. Besides, Robert Singer didn't need his sympathy. He'd sure need a hell of a lot

more if it turned out he was knowingly harboring the Winchesters.

Victor tapped his finger on the counter with a tight smile. "Thanks for the info, Sheriff."

Before he could turn to leave, Sheriff Mills was already rounding the office counter she'd been standing behind. "I'll join you on your interview," she said with a tone that left no room for disagreement. "Since he's not in any trouble, the least I can do is show you the way to the property."

Henriksen held back his grimace. Held back the groan too, as he shared an even tighter smile with the woman who seemed to know exactly what he was doing. Maybe she was more than competent for a small town sheriff. He stood by his behavior, but it was possible he could have caught more flies with honey than vinegar this go around. Oh well, you couldn't win them all.

"Not necessary, Ma'am. That's what GPS is for."

Her return smile mirrored his own almost down to a tee; Sheriff Mills knew exactly how unwanted she was on this trip, and now Agent Henriksen knew exactly how swayed she was by that information. Which was to say, not at all.

"My town, my town drunk. After you, Agent."

Victor ground his teeth, but didn't fight. She did, technically, have jurisdiction and he couldn't fault her nerve, cheeky though it may be. For now, at least. They headed out of the station together, Victor climbing into his rental and Sheriff Mills into her jeep. She pulled out of the parking lot first, the FBI agent following begrudgingly behind.

-o-o-o-

Andy came barreling down the stairs, two at a time with Sarge hot on his heels, when Bobby trudged through the front door. The old hunter was tired and in need of a shower and his own damn bed after two days on a hunt in North Dakota that had gotten him home way too damn early in the morning. He shoulda just forked over the cash to spend another night at that crap motel.

Damn Wendigoes. He was getting too old for flamethrowers, super speed, and ancient mattresses that more closely resembled stone than anything soft.

"Alright, alright, I see you," Bobby grumbled and grumped to both kid and dog, each vying for his attention. Andy was waving something in his face, hands moving a mile a minute with the old hunter only catching half of what he was saying. Sarge was sniffing up and down his pant leg for all the post-hunt smells he was sure to be carrying. Bobby jostled his leg when that long snout went a little too high and a lot too inward for the comfort of any man. "Let me set my damn bag down first."

Both strays followed him into the den, where he dumped his duffles, one full dirt-smeared, sweat-soaked clothes, the other clanking with empty gas canisters from his now-spent, homemade flamethrowers. Finally, with the deep breath of a parent who knows better than to expect a quiet house or restful afternoon, the old man turned to kid and dog.

Bobby sank onto the couch, arms already open to receive the long snout and wiggly body that filled his hands. At the same time, he met Andy's barely-patient gaze and nodded for the kid – vibrating with energy trying to keep in whatever it was he had to say – to begin.

'Okay, so get this…' is how it started, before Andy dug a hand into his hoodie's pocket, fisting whatever was in there and then holding it out towards Bobby. At the same time, the kid switched from ASL to speaking straight into the man's head, pictogram edition.

The old hunter, who had no clue where this was going as the images frankly made as much sense as some of the kid's pre-mute ramblings, held out his hand. The ancient coin, hand-pressed metal warmed from Andy's palm, fell heavy into Bobby's own. The images assaulting his brain finally stopped.

It took him a moment, transferring raised brows from the coin to the kid, before he realized Andy was grinning. He gestured at the coin, like Bobby was supposed to be understanding something he clearly wasn't. When the old hunter kept on staring, Andy sighed dramatically and darted forward to scoop the Persian sleep coin out of Bobby's hand.

The kid's brain images immediately started up again, so suddenly that Bobby actually winced, something he hadn't done since the early days of Andy's gift.

"What the-"

The assault ended as abruptly as it began once the weight of old coin

fell into his palm again.

Bobby stared down at the charmed chunk of metal, realization settling in his abused brain. He looked back up at Andy, who was grinning widely now, nodding along with Bobby's assumption. He held two thumbs up, his equivalent of *'Cool, right?'*

"Huh. I'll be damned." The hunter looked down at the coin again, flipping it in his palm to briefly inspect it. "How'd you figure that one out?"

The silence – in hand language, mind language, and even friggin' body language – tipped Bobby off to the answer of that question long before Andy came up with a good lie.

"You didn't," Bobby growled, eyes narrowing on the already guilty looking kid, who most definitely *had*. The only way to find out you had a magical telepathy-blocking coin – and Andy sure as shit had been more than confident in that theory, enough so that it wasn't a *theory* anymore – was to *test it* on someone.

The brat had gone to town while Bobby was off on a hunt and *tested* his theory. Which was- it was-

"Of all the hair-brained, idiotic, stupid things you could risk!" Bobby hollered, chasing the kid out of the den as Andy took off running like a friggin cartoon. Sarge went barking after them, agreeing that yes, it *was* a good time for a game of chase. "Of all the idjits I deal with on a daily basis, you have got to be the biggest, most-"

A knock on the front door – firm and demanding enough to break through the chaos – halted all two legged participants. Sarge crashed into Bobby, who 'oof!'ed into Andy, before the German Shepherd was bounding over to the door instead with insistent, alerting barks. To let the humans know someone was there. Obviously.

"Alright, alright, enough," Bobby grumbled towards the dog, who immediately silenced. Sarge obediently settled on his haunches, staring intently up at the doorknob with just enough head tilt to be unfairly adorable (in the opinion of all two legged participants). He sat, steadily awaiting the moment his human would open the door and reveal their newest (soon-to-be-licked-and-smelled-*intently*) house guest. "Move, you dingus."

Sarge shuffled a foot and a half to the side, never completely leaving his sat position, so Bobby could open the door. Andy was walking up

on his right, running-for-his-life temporarily forgotten, when the old hunter turned the knob. Lucky for both of them – or perhaps it was some sort of exceedingly helpful divine intervention – Andy was blocked from sight by the width of the wood swinging back as Bobby Singer opened his front door to reveal one Agent Victor Henriksen, standing on his front step, Sheriff Mills just behind him.

Bobby kept the door tucked tight to his frame, hand gesturing frantically at Andy to get the hell back, further out of sight, while his face betrayed nothing. "Sheriff. Mr…?"

"Agent," Victor corrected with a bland smile that was anything but friendly. He flashed his badge. "Henriksen, with the FBI."

Behind the door, Andy backed himself right up to the wall, eyes impossibly wide. He hadn't really been with-it enough to see or hear the FBI agent that had chased them out of that Sturgis hospital three months ago, but he sure as shit recognized that name.

They were so, *so* screwed.

"Can I help you with something, Agent?" Bobby asked, tone not particularly welcoming but not outright defensive either. Just a grumpy man annoyed to be bothered at his home.

"I think you probably can," Henriksen answered, and though the words themselves might have been innocuous enough, Bobby could hear the threat behind them. "I'm looking for the Winchesters, Mr. Singer."

"John Winchester?" the old hunter replied, raising his eyebrows. "Haven't heard from him in years."

"And his sons?"

Bobby stared at the agent, letting the silence stretch between them. Let the FBI agent draw his own conclusions about what that silence meant. Andy, on the other hand, was pretty sure he was going to have a heart attack tucked behind the door. There was no way Agent Henriksen would miss the sound of his heart beating itself straight through his ribs like a battering ram.

"What's this about, Agent?" Bobby finally asked, words drawn with caution. Henrisken just smiled. It was not a comforting gesture. Not that it was intended to be.

"I'm sure you're aware that Dean and Sam Winchester are wanted

fugitives."

It wasn't a question. Bobby raised his eyebrows.

"Hadn't heard."

"No?" The FBI agent was absolutely faking surprise. Even Andy, tucked behind a door and struggling to hear the conversation over his own panic, could tell.

The old home owner harrumphed. "We ain't exactly pen pals, Agent."

"What are you, then?" Henriksen countered without missing a beat. "What exactly is your relationship with the Winchesters, Mr. Singer?"

Behind the FBI agent, Sheriff Mills was watching Bobby with a neutral expression. He resisted glancing her way. The two were hardly on good terms. Jody put up with a lot of the crap that came with having a hunter in her town and not knowing it. For the most part, she assumed Bobby Singer was a harmless low-grade pain in her ass that could be largely left to his own devices. An assumption which had been working just fine for the old hunter over the last half decade Jody had been in charge. He was not looking forward to a shift in that arrangement, damnit.

"They're clients," he answered with a one-shoulder shrug, his other side pressed against the door. He'd kept his hand on the inside knob, in case he needed to signal Andy, and was using his body to more or less block Agent Henriksen's view into his house. Not that there was anything to see but Sarge sitting to his left. At this point, though, Bobby wasn't taking any chances.

"Of your automotive business?" The skepticism in Henriksen's tone was so thick it was insulting. Bobby didn't hide what he thought about *that*.

"Yeah, when they're passing through and need it. But I got a side business, selling occult shit," he growled. Sheriff Mill's eyebrows rose, but she otherwise stayed a quiet bystander. "Their daddy used to come to me for books and the occasional trinket. Guess he passed the word onto his boys."

"Hm," the agent hummed and there wasn't a single person witness to that conversation that thought he believed the old man. "And I'm sure these *trinkets* are all legal?"

Bobby rolled his eyes for show, but he didn't have to summon up much acting for the performance. "It's antiques and herbs, *Agent*. You can get half of it on the internet these days. Hell, most of the plants you can get at a damn nursery, so long as you're willing to dry 'em yourself. Not that I tell any of my clients that."

Behind the door, Andy spared a moment – in between bouts of pure panic, mind you – to applaud Bobby for how damn good an actor he was. Though, really, he hadn't done much lying at all. Easiest lie to sell was one closest to the truth, he supposed.

"Mind showing us some of this 'occult' side business of yours?"

Andy stiffened. Henriksen was vying to get into the house. Shit! He glanced around, trying to figure out if he could bolt for the panic room without being seen. His eyes caught on Sarge, sitting just to Bobby's left, waiting patiently to greet the visitors. Son of a bitch, even if Andy could get away, Sarge would just follow him, probably alerting their *guests* to his presence in the house.

Shit, shit, shit!

"Sure do," Bobby countered immediately, gruff turned up to eleven. He kept his body language surprisingly at ease, however, careful not to pull the door any tighter to his side. They'd be royally screwed if he gave Henriksen even a hint that there was something in that house worth hiding. Let alone that it was hiding less than a foot from the door. "Unless you got a warrant."

Agent Henriksen chuckled. "You have something to hide, Mr. Singer?"

"Sure do," he repeated with no less gruff this time, but a heck of a lot more sarcasm. "And I'm going to keep hiding it right behind this door and my civil rights. You want the tour, show me a warrant. Now, you want something else or can I get back to watching Oprah?"

Andy actually had to slap a hand over his mouth to avoid the burst of laughter that unexpectedly bubbled up. Not that any noise would have come out (surprise silver lining to being mute? Makes you great at hiding. Andy was a true ninja these days. At least in his mind), but it was more of a gut reaction to Bobby sassing the FBI.

The huff of a not-laugh that Henriksen let out was somehow still terrifying. "Nah, that'll be all for today. I'm sure now that you've been informed the Winchesters are fugitives, you won't be entertaining them as *'clients'* again?"

"Taking a phone callain't harboring or abetting, Agent Henriksen," Bobby responded with narrowed eyes. "Unless the laws changed lately?"

The smile the FBI agent returned was all teeth. "Just be sure to call when they plan their next shopping trip." He handed over a crisp, white business card that Bobby snatched with little patience. "Not reporting the location of a known fugitive *is* accessory after the fact and I will haul your ass to jail. Have a good day, Mr. Singer."

Bobby shut the door on the FBI agent's retreating figure and an unhappy looking Jody Mills. He didn't move from the doorway, just looked to his right to share a wide-eyed, relieved breath with Andy, who'd been trapped behind the door for the entire length of conversation. Every awkward, hair-raising minute of it.

'Holy shit,' Andy signed immediately. *'Holy shit!'*

"Well, balls," the old hunter muttered alongside one hell of a sigh. "We better let the boys know."

The words were not five seconds past his lips – Andy already pulling his cell out of his hoodie pocket – when Sarge started barking. Both hunters jumped at the loud, unexpected noise, before another knock, sharper and more demanding, sounded on the front door once more.

-o-o-o-

Jody had turned away from Robert Singer's closed door and followed after the FBI agent. Henriksen was already to his car, pulling open the driver's side door. The sheriff realized his business here was concluded and he didn't plan on sticking around past that. On to the next town's residents to harass, she supposed. But what did she know, she was just a small town sheriff, not someone the FBI had time for.

With a hand on her hip and Henriksen just about to climb into his car, Jody asked, "You got enough for a warrant?"

Translation: *Should I expect my town to be graced by your sunny disposition anytime soon?*

The Agent paused, putting his hand on top of the door and regarding her across from it. Jody wondered if he'd forgotten she was even there. After a moment, Henriksen shook his head. "Nah, nothing a judge would buy off on. This was more about shaking branches and hoping something worthwhile fell out."

Jody was surprised by the honesty. She debated for half a second before opting to push her luck. "You think Bobby Singer could be harboring a fugitive?"

The sheriff couldn't help the glance over her shoulder back at Singer's house. Harmless, that's what she'd called him. Not because he was incapable of violence – no, she knew he had at least two firearms on property (legally registered, of course) and a mean right hook according to several bar fights over the years. But he'd never been disrespectful toward her or her people in any of their interactions, never violent or volatile when brought in, even after a nasty altercation with another drunk or loud mouth. Bobby Singer was harmless in her book because every time she talked to him, gruff as he might be, Jody only saw a broken, hurting man who was *lonely*.

Having the kid around had been good for him, she'd thought. Hoped. No, she'd *known* having Andy around would be good for the old man.

Except for the part where said kid was apparently a wanted man running around with a pair that was even worse. Jody bit back the sigh at how complicated things had just gotten in her town.

"Don't know," Henriksen answered her question with a shrug, as if it didn't really matter one way or another. It probably didn't, Jody suspected. This FBI Agent didn't seem the type to be discouraged by a lead not panning out. He'd catch the Winchesters one way or another, whether Bobby Singer was involved or not.

"It's possible he doesn't know who they really are. The Winchesters charm a lot of people, Sheriff. Hell, half their victims claim they're good people. Heroes, even." Henriksen snorted, shaking his head at the gall of some criminals. "I don't think it's a crime to fall for that. Doesn't make Singer a bad man. But it does make him a thorn in my side."

With that, the FBI agent sank into the front seat. Knowing their conversation was over, Jody didn't bother with any more questions about his case. Instead, she came to stand by the still open door. "You need a guide back into town?"

Henriksen declined, as she figured he would, and shut his door. He reversed away from the main house before turning his rental car around and heading for the gate of Singer Salvage. Jody watched him leave, brow slowly furling as she thought about everything she'd learned in the last hour about her supposed town drunk.

With a frown, she turned to Bobby Singer's house and stalked back up those steps.

-o-o-o-

Bobby shoved the kid away from the front door at the same time Andy scrambled back into his protective corner, making for somewhat of a scramble between the two. As he silenced Sarge's barking with a single hand motion, the old hunter leveled one hell of a warning look Andy's way before wrapping his hand around the doorknob.

Like Andy needed the reminder to stay hidden. Him, the wanted felon.

"Alright, Bobby," Sheriff Mills said loudly as he swung the door open. She had one hand on hip and a tone that sounded about ten seconds away from murdering them both. "Where's the kid and what the hell is going on?"

Bobby settled on the most neutral expression he could muster as his brain raced through possible answers. He could tell her the kid had moved on, or wasn't here at the moment, or play especially dumb and ask what kid (that was, admittedly, more of a Dean move and not one Bobby thought he could pull off, let alone get away with). He'd just settled on stalling – the kid's not here at the moment – when Andy friggin' *stepped out* from behind the door.

So much for staying hidden.

To add insult to injury, the kid gave Sheriff Mills a sheepish wave. Bobby very seriously considered shoving him back behind the door. It wouldn't get them out of the monumental shitstorm he'd just stepped them into, but it would be cathartic. Bobby settled for a glare that could make even monsters turn tail and run instead.

The damn Jedi was, of course, immune to such a stare.

"Get in here, Sheriff, before Henriksen decides to come back for round two," Bobby practically growled, for lack of anything better to say.

It wasn't like he could defend himself or Andy in this situation. Jody surely knew the kid wasn't just an urchin in need of a place to stay anymore. No doubt by her tone, she now knew he was a wanted fugitive – despite Henriksen conveniently leaving him out of their friendly little chat – and she would now be obligated to report his location. They were already screwed, might as well be inside and warm while they were at it.

The raised eyebrows were not particularly amused, but Sheriff Mills did step inside the house and allow Bobby to close the door behind her. The hands remained on her hips, though, and even Andy winced at the clear tension in the small foyer.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?" she asked, gaze aimed at Bobby first before turning to Andy. "And you, you're wanted by the FBI? *Why*?"

The kid exchanged a hesitant glance with Bobby before the hands started up in a flurry of motion. In her spare time – mostly at the office between paperwork and field calls – Jody had been trying her hand (no pun intended) at a little ASL. But she wasn't all that far along yet and Andy was moving much too quickly for her to keep track of any of it.

"Andy, slow down-" She was already shaking her head when he dropped his hands, looking particularly despondent. It didn't matter how angry she was, the kid just tugged at that certain, mom-based heartstring within her. Jody sighed, reaching for the pad and pen at her hip, when Andy raised a hand, curled in a fist with his pointer finger straight out, and dragged it across his neck.

Jody stared. She blinked. She stared some more. "You… you *killed* someone?"

That couldn't be right. Not this kid. This kid who had first held open a store door for her with a flourish of a bow. Who was a total goofball and texted with the cheesiest code words he could come up with. Who'd gotten a lonely old man a dog because his last had passed away.

This kid was a sweetheart. And Jody prided herself on being a pretty darn good judge of character. No way he was a murderer.

"Does Andy look like a killer to you, Sheriff?" Bobby interrupted, his voice low with something Jody might have called a warning, except she wasn't getting any threatening vibe off him. Just a protective one, she realized.

The kid, however, looked away and Jody knew guilt when she saw it. Jody sighed, having more questions now than when she'd first stepped into the house. She pulled the pad and pen off her hip fully this time. "Andy, what happened? The truth."

Bobby went to answer the question, but she immediately held up a

hand. "In his words, Singer."

"The boy can't talk, Sheriff-"

Andy accepted the pad and pen readily. Bobby watched the item exchange hands like it was a ticking time bomb. And it very well could be. He couldn't tell Andy what to write – not to incriminate himself – and he was worried the kid didn't understand how much trouble they were in. The Sheriff *had* to report them. She didn't have any other choice, and there was nothing they could do or say to talk her out of that responsibility. The more Andy confessed, the deeper the hole he dug, no matter his good intention.

But keeping Andy from being honest and open was like asking water not to be wet.

He ripped off the top three pages and handed them to the Sheriff. Bobby stretched his neck trying to read it in transit, not that it got him much, before Jody started going through them, line after line of brutal honesty. Andy hadn't held back anything. He'd explained the situation in Guthry, how his long lost twin brother had shown up, integrated himself into Andy's life, killed their birth mother, father, and the delivery doctor. Then he'd set his sights on Tracy. Andy had tried to stop him, and when he'd failed, he'd killed Weber in a blind rage. Then he'd ran, knowing how it would look to the cops. The Winchesters and Bobby had taken him in, knowing he wasn't the murderer the police said he was. At least…not the cold-blooded one.

Jody looked up, staring into those wide, honest eyes and trying to ignore the light sheen across them. Andy wasn't playing her, she knew just from his open expression. He was upset, and who could blame him. What the sheriff held in her hands was a horror story.

"Was it self-defense?" she finally asked, voice quiet. She was giving Andy a chance, an out. The kid, God love him, hesitated and then shrugged. This boy was physically incapable of not being honest.

He put the pen back to the pad in his hand, then held up the page when he was done.

'He needed to be stopped.'

Bobby closed his eyes briefly, knowing what the kid was trying to say, even if he knew Andy shouldn't say it aloud. Not to a cop. Weber hadn't been attacking him at the time, so Andy couldn't say the kill hadn't been about revenge. About anger and hurt. But it had also been

fear, certainly. Fear of what Webber would do next.

Jody let out a breath of air, but just nodded. It was unclear what her own take away was. Not that Bobby could do anything about it either way. No, he could only hope and pray that Andy wasn't confessing away every last ounce of freedom he had left.

"And the Winchesters?"

The kid went back to writing furiously, and Bobby frowned. He already knew Andy would defend those boys so much more than he'd ever defend himself. Andy's last name might not legally be Winchester, but damn if he didn't fit right in with those brothers.

He handed a single page over, flapping it impatiently as if every second delayed was a second Jody thought the Winchesters murderous monsters, and Andy couldn't stand for that.

"'They're good,'" Jody read aloud, eyebrows betraying the skepticism she mostly kept out of her tone. "'I know what the FBI says about them, but it's not true.'"

The sheriff shifted her doubting gaze over to Bobby, and the old hunter just harrumphed.

"What did you come back here for, Sheriff?" he growled, gesturing to Andy. "Why ask the boy if you're not gonna give what he's got to say a chance?"

Jody didn't have an answer for that, the disbelief in her expression replaced by a frown. What had she come into the house for, if not answers?

Andy was gesturing for their attention, and he scribbled something down quickly before holding it up.

'I can prove it.'

It was Bobby's brows that climbed this time. What the hell did that mean? The kid couldn't possibly mean-

Images assaulted his brain before he could finish thinking the unthinkable, let alone tell the idiot behind that unthinkable thought not to even *think* about doing what he was thinking about doing. Beside him, Jody gasped in surprise and probably pain, hand shooting to her head as a headache blossomed among images of vampires,

ghosts, and a crossroad demon in a devil's trap.

That *stupid, suicidal, psychic idjit!*

Bobby slapped the Persian Sleep Coin that he hadn't given back to the kid yet right into Jody Mills' hand and, before she could fully register what was going on (or why her head was suddenly perfectly clear when she'd *sworn* there'd been pain and weird, misplaced thoughts a second ago), hauled Andy several feet away.

"Are you insane?" Bobby hissed, though he might as well be hollering given his tone. Andy actually tried to take a step back from the vitriol, but the old hunter kept a tight grip on his arm. "We don't tell civilians the truth!"

Images crossed through his mind, the equivalent of which was, *'She deserves to know.'*

"No, kid, she don't. No one *deserves* that burden!" Bobby shook his head at the same time he shook Andy by the bicep. "Don't you get it? It ain't a truth, it's *hell,* and knowing about it just ruins people's lives."

The hurt in Andy's eyes was the first clue that Bobby had said too much. He released the kid, looking away and awkwardly clearing his throat – and the emotion there – away. Problem was, he wasn't wrong. Nothing good ever came from learning about the things that went bump in the night. Not for him, not for the Winchesters, not for Andy. Their lives were hell, and they spent every day just muddling through.

Bobby wouldn't wish that on anyone. Not Jody Mills, not Victor Henriksen. Not anybody. Let them be ignorant, but that much happier. That much less afraid.

"You fix it," the old hunter growled, aware that Sheriff Mills was trying to interject – it's not like she couldn't hear them, after all, they were only half a dozen feet away from her – but he ignored her attempts. "You make her forget all this. Forget that she was ever here, that you're wanted by the FBI. Make her forget it, kid."

If he'd hurt Andy before, Bobby knew what he'd just told the kid to do would hurt a hell of a lot worse. The pain, betrayal, and *anger* that flitted through Andy's eyes sure hurt like hell for Bobby, but he wouldn't take the request back.

'You mean control her,' Andy signed, the rage making his hands shake and the signs sloppy.

Bobby winced. He'd known the request wasn't a kind one, wasn't one Andy would view favorably, but he hadn't meant for it to be… to be like what the kid's brother had done. This wasn't the same…right?

"Kid, she *has* to report you to the authorities. It's her job!"

"Hey, *'she'* is right here, gentlemen!"

Both men ignored the Sheriff, Bobby hoping he could get through to the kid and Andy almost shaking with rage. It was a mistake, it turned out, as neither man saw her angrily place the coin (which had, for some reason she wasn't particularly aware of, appeared in her hand at some point) onto the entryway table and storm towards them. Which was right when Andy all but exploded.

"You mean control her!" he signed again but, more than that, he *yelled*. Bobby winced, shutting one eye as he pressed a hand to his temple. The words – spoken clear as day, no picture edition this time – echoed through his skull painfully.

Jody drew up short, holding onto her head, sure, but more than anything *stunned*. The kid was supposed to be mute, but he'd definitely just opened his mouth and sound had come out. Loudly. Only, that wasn't quite right, and something in Jody instinctively knew it. For starters, the kid *hadn't* opened his mouth. And Jody knew the difference between hearing something and…whatever it was that had just happened.

"What…" she stood there, still stunned, and stared at the two men. But neither one was paying any attention to her. Andy was still shaking, furious. And then he didn't open his mouth, didn't move his lips, but his voice – or someone's voice – kept right on going.

"That isn't my choice to make!" he shouted, gesturing with hands that were still signing, though just barely, in his anger and distraction. There was a sheen to his eyes that threatened tears, and that damn near broke Bobby's heart. *"I'm not Weber! Don't ever ask me to do something he'd do!"*

"Kid-" The old hunter's voice was resigned, hand still pressed against his pounding head, but Andy wasn't hearing him.

"She deserves to know the truth. The truth about me,' Andy pressed a hand to his chest, *'and the truth about Sam and Dean!"*

"What the hell is going on?" Jody finally snapped, yelling loudly to

interrupt the- the- whatever the hell was happening in front of her. And in her head. Or. Something. She really wasn't ready to think about that part yet. "What truth?"

Both men froze at her loud, demanding interruption. Slowly, they turned towards her, Andy blinking in surprise before his expression became nothing short of stricken. As if he'd only just realized what he'd been doing. What he'd been…shouting. Bobby, on the other hand, zeroed in on the coin, sitting useless on the table several feet behind the Sheriff.

"Damnit," he muttered, that same defeat in his tone, only this time tilting towards anger. So much for keeping her out of it, he supposed. Andy had forced their hand with that fit, and there was no backing out now.

Not unless he wanted to bully the poor kid into breaking his moral code. Something Andy clearly felt a lot stronger about than even Bobby had known. It had been stupid of him to ask the kid to do it. No, not stupid. Desperate.

Bobby dropped his arms. Well, shit.

Andy sniffed, raising a hand to wipe his sleeve under his nose and dab at his eyes as fast as he could. Then he started scribbling in the Sheriff's pad again. When he held it up, there were just two words written there.

'I'm psychic.'

Sheriff Mills just stared at it. Bobby sighed, pulled his cap off his head to run a hand through his thinning hair, then resettled the cap.

"Balls," he muttered under his breath before taking a deeper one and launching into the explanation that would take Andy far too long to write down. And Lord knew they did not need a repeat performance of whatever had allowed the boy to speak directly in their minds, sans surrogate images. "The kid used to be able to control people with just his voice. Until someone took that away."

Andy cupped a self-conscious hand over his ever-bandaged throat. The doctors had done a fairly good job patching up his neck, but the damage Scott Carey had done while trying to save his life was not easily hidden. It wasn't like he had the money or luxury of going back for skin grafts to cover up the mangled, burned flesh he'd walked away with. So Andy kept the area covered with a couple layers of

gauze at all times. If nothing else, to avoid having to answer questions about the horrific injury. And maybe to make it a little easier to see himself in a mirror in the morning.

Jody was watching him carefully, that caring mother currently at war with the competent law enforcement officer. "Is…. Does that have to do with why you're wanted by the FBI?"

Andy just shrugged and the weight that had been not-so-slowly forming in Jody's gut over the last ten minutes got a lot heavier. He sent Bobby a quick side glance. Permission to take over any time, the hunter figured with a huff.

"Got nothing to do with the warrant. Though his asshat of a brother could do what Andy can. And it's how he got the kid's girl to kill herself." Andy's head dropped at that, avoiding everyone's eyes. "What got him on the FBI's radar was his association with the boys."

"The Winchesters," Jody clarified almost immediately, and Bobby nodded.

Andy was shaking his head and waving his hands immediately, though, and started writing again. He held the pad up.

'They're not the bad guys.'

Bobby let out a huff of air, having no real idea how to explain this situation to the Sheriff. He knew how he'd explain it to a civilian, but they had a whole lot less responsibility when it came to the law than Jody Mills did.

"Sam and Dean ain't what the FBI says they are," he started, rubbing at the back of his neck and looking for the world like he wished he had a time machine to get him out of this conversation.

'*You can come help anytime now, Feathers'* he thought, mostly sarcastically. It wasn't like they could ask their resident angel to just hop back a couple minutes in time to avoid a bad conversation. That would probably be a major waste of resources. And he'd have to deal with Dean's pissy face and lecture afterward.

Bobby didn't do lectures unless he was the one giving them.

"There's a lot of shit out there that goes bump in the night. With psychics falling at about a one on the scary and dangerous scale, Sheriff."

Jody Mills just stared. Bobby wasn't sure if she was believing any of it. Though Andy had given her quite the demonstration of proof, whether he'd meant to or not.

"Those boys, they help people. They save 'em." At an enthusiastic gesture of agreement from Andy, Bobby added, "They saved Andy. We can explain it all, if you want-"

The sheriff stopped him before he could get started with one raised hand. "I, uh, think psychics and telepathy is about as much as I can handle for one day."

Another huff of air passed Bobby's lips, but at least she wasn't outright arresting them both. That had to be something. Andy, on the other hand, immediately donned a pout and Bobby wanted to grab him by the arms again to give him another good shake. Jody, however, just sighed when she caught sight of it. The mom was winning out over the officer of the law, and she just knew it was going to mean a mountain of paperwork for her.

Jody gestured to the pad still gripped in his hand with a resigned sort of look that guaranteed she'd regret this. Andy wasted no time.

'Monsters are real. We hunt them.'

At least until someone took him out of the game, which Andy added on with a shrug and a gesture at his neck. Had taken away his psychic powers, Jody realized, putting two and two together in a way that she hadn't previously in this conversation. Someone had tried to take away his…telepathy. Or whatever it was.

'Not very successfully,' she thought to herself, still remembering that spike of pain through her head as she heard Andy's…well, not his voice but, er, him. Caught up in the weirdness that was finding a noun for a telepathic voice, Jody flinched when her brain caught up to the critical thought she'd just had, realizing how cruel it had actually been.

She remembered when Andy first arrived in town. She'd seen the faded bruises, the cuts and stitches and bandages. He had been a wreck, and she remembered thinking that someone put that kid through Hell. They'd been plenty successful at hurting him, regardless of how he – or his, um, powers – had adapted.

'Jesus,' Jody thought, glancing down at the pages she still held in her hands. He hadn't just been through hell with one person, this kid had

been attacked by someone who was supposed to be a brother, who'd killed his girlfriend in front of him, all but framed him for the murder and ruined his life. That was well before anyone had taken his voice away.

This was all too much. It was too much to take in, too much to process in such a short amount of time. Psychics and monsters and murderers who were actually heroes? And she hadn't even approached the part where she was a damn Sheriff of the law standing in front of a known fugitive. This was too much all at once.

"We can probably prove it if you need us to," Bobby was saying, and Jody looked over at him with wide eyes. She wasn't sure how long he'd been talking, but he was serious. About proving to her that… monsters existed.

The images that had popped into her brain earlier – strange memories, almost, that definitely weren't hers and nothing she could recall seeing before from a movie or anything – came back now. Monsters. A thing with inhuman, pointed teeth, a woman with blood red eyes who'd thrown up black smoke.

They were talking about *monsters*. Vampires and ghosts and demons.

'Jesus', Jody repeated to herself, eyes only getting wider. She could feel her heart rate picking up, the blood in her veins starting to pulse with an edge of panic. Jody tried to shove it down, the freak-out building along the peripheral.

"I…this is too much," she admitted, raising her hands as if to stop them from adding any more onto it. "I-I need…"

She didn't even know what she needed.

Jody sucked in a deep breath, commanding herself to get a grip. Calm down. Process. After several deep breaths, she managed to look at both men once more. They were staring back with a mix of trepidation and anticipation. She put a hand on her belt, the other asking for her pad and pen back. Andy dutifully tucked the pen back into the little holder attached to the pad and handed it to her.

"I am going to leave," she announced firmly, and Bobby gave her an unimpressed look. Like they might have dared keep her there. "And I am going to…think over everything that…happened here."

"And Andy?" Bobby pressed, earning himself an admonishing glare for

his lack of patience. Or tact.

"I don't know, Bobby," Jody snapped back, losing a bit of that calm she'd managed to pull over her internal freak out. "I'm obligated to take him in if he's standing right in front of me. Which is why I'm *leaving* and I will figure this all out…somewhere else."

Because it was all too much, and she needed space to think. The way Andy's shoulders sagged but he immediately nodded with understanding, sympathetic eyes was *not* helping.

"I will be back," she promised, though it was more of a threat. Whether she meant it to be or not…even she didn't know. "Tomorrow. Until then, you better both stay right here, in this house, and not even think about leaving town."

The '*or so help me*' might not have been put into words, but it was heard loud and clear by both men. And probably even the dog, still sitting patiently to Bobby's left, ears perked up and listening. Andy nodded and actually drew a cross over his heart, dear lord. Bobby just rolled his eyes, which Jody decided she didn't see because she didn't have the bandwidth to smack that man upside the head at the moment.

Or deal with the paperwork that would come from unnecessary rough handling of a citizen. Even if that citizen was a suspect. Instigator. Associate. Whatever.

And then Jody Mills turned and walked out the door, down the steps, and climbed back into her jeep without a backwards glance. As if she hadn't just had her brain attacked by a psychic, learned that monsters were apparently real, or that two certifiably insane people lived in her town and they were both wanted by the FBI for one reason or another.

Jody put the car into drive and pulled out of Singer Salvage.

-o-o-o-

Bobby closed the door, caught between a thoughtful frown and an angry frown. Or so Andy thought of the old man's grumpy facial expression (also known as a frown) when he turned to him.

"That was a reckless move," Bobby immediately chastised, grump getting grumpier.

Andy didn't let it get to him. He could be angry at himself plenty for

what had happened with Jody. He'd never meant to…. He'd told himself when he started playing with his new mental ability that he'd never let the telepathy form into words. Words could control people, images left room for interpretation.

And yet.

'What's done is done,' he signed to Bobby, feeling a lot less confident and calm than his hands portrayed.

"Ya damn idjit," Bobby muttered as he pulled out his phone and hit Dean's speed dial. He walked away from Andy, headed for the den as the phone rang and rang. Sarge, who'd left the foyer shortly after the last of their visitors had left without showering him in pets or treats, picked his head up from his spot on the couch. Bobby gave the dog a passing pet, frowning at his phone as it went to voicemail. He hung up and called Sam, only to get the same result. "When you'd last hear from them, kid?"

Andy, who'd followed after him at a slower pace, shrugged from the open doorway. He leaned against the frame, pulling his phone out as well. With one hand, he signed that the last text was from two days ago.

"Well shit," Bobby mumbled, trying Dean again. They hadn't been on anything noteworthy that the old hunter could recall. Nothing those boys couldn't handle alone.

The ringing switched to voicemail once more. That wasn't good.

'Time to call Cas?' Andy's signing caught Bobby's attention, and the old hunter's frown deepened. Even the kid looked worried now, and he'd just faced down both an FBI Agent and the implosion of his current life situation.

Still, their angelic trump card felt drastic. The boys could be interviewing a witness or actively on the hunt. They might not be able to answer their phones at all. Hell, this could all be a carefully constructed trap by Henriksen to get them to call the Winchesters. Not that Bobby was really buying any of that. Those brothers were a magnet for trouble. And pretty good about answering their phones, especially after repeat calls that usually suggested urgency.

Balls.

Bobby turned back to his phone, holding down his third speed dial.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Alrighty! Two important plot pieces indeed (well, one is what Henriksen will do from here on out, but I couldn't actually fit his post Harrassing-Bobby actions into this chapter. Just know, it's an important plot piece :D) But more 8importantly! Jody is IN THE KNOW. Red alert, Jody Mills just got THE TALK and it is not gonna go well, because when does the talk ever go well? At least her son isn't a zombie yet...right? Right? Anybody? Are those silver-lined crickets I hear in the background?

Update Warning: For anyone who skipped the opening notes, I am going to take a break from posting for a couple months. I know, I know, what on earth has the past couple months been, Silence? The important difference here is that while the last months have been me wallowing away in a writing rut (hey, it's **my** writing rut and I **can** cry if I want to), this break is going to have purpose! Or...so I'm planning, at least. I'm going to start stockpiling chapters again, rather than post as I write them. The encouragement and feedback I get from you all enjoying a chapter is what spurs me on to write the next one with some scary relentlessness, actually. Without me posting regularly, I'm not getting that encouragement high regularly, and it's taken me this long to realize omg, guys, without it I just don't write. [insert facepalm here] I mean, I know I've said it a dozen times before, but I also...I dunno, kind of hoped it was just the covid and the quarantine and the change in the world and my different/new routine causing it? SIGH.

Anyway, I'm gonna take that break so that when I do start posting again it **will** be with regularity. Which I'm super excited about, no matter how long it takes me to get there. As mentioned in the starting A/Ns, my goal is to get all of season 2 finished up before you hear from me again. In my head, that's only 10 chapters from now!

UPDATE 09/01/23 - Hi everybody! I'm alive!! (And also haven't given up on this story!). I owe you guys a heck of a story considering I fell off the face of the earth for six months. Two weeks after I posted the last chapter and said I needed to take a break to write, my landlord served me an eviction notice 😑. He wanted to move his daughter into my unit. He did have to pay me a very nice relocation fee to do that, but ugh. Renter shopping

always sucks, but add to it LA and a 60 day deadline? FML, April and May sucked.

Aaanyhoo, I did find myself a new place, but moving was hell! Fun fact: all of my moves leading up to this one have been from a college mindset (I am broke and own nothing) to a expat mindset (I will eventually leave this country and return home, so only buy what you're willing to move). When I moved to LA, both of those mindsets ended. And it was COVID, and retail therapy is a thing for me . Which means, between those two realizations, I became a friggin hoarder, y'all! This move was SO PAINFUL. I was used to not-really-an-adult-yet moving. I LIED to myself and thought, "how much more stuff can it possibly be?"

Anyway! I finally, in the last month, got my house feeling livable. In the meantime, work imploded, I lost all my routines (which kept the depression at bay) aaaaand I fell into a depression without actually realizing that was what was happening.

Good news? I am starting to pull out of it! Guys, guys, guys, I'm WRITING. LIKE, A LOT. I'm only three chapters in, but they're friggin long ass chapters (because of course they are -_-) and all I wanna do is write right now. I make no promises of 'being back' but it's totally what it feels like!!

No formal commitment to when I will start posting. I would like to get a couple more chapters written. I am on a road trip with my mother for the next two weeks (which will either go fabulously or we'll murder each other) in which I'm hoping to get some writing done...but it's a bit hard to say

Hopefully I'll get some progress over the next month and feel good enough to start posting come fall. Either way, thought, please be reassured that despite the lengthy wait, I do have new chapters in the works and this story will resume!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 120: Season 2: Chapter 86

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Welcome back everyone!! WE'RE BACK!!! Okay, well, I'm hoping we're back. I've got some serious fingers crossed that we're back. Am I still exceedingly nervous that the Muse is gonna wander off again for months at a time? Omg, hell yes, I am. But I am doing my best to keep that from happening. And, I hope, a return to regular posting will assist! Regular posting means regular feedback from readers, and she does so love to hear from readers. Needy little thing, my Muse.

Story Overview: Since it has been suuuuuuch a long time since we posted (and longer yet since we posted consistently) I highly encourage everyone to go back and read at least the last several chapters. I recommend starting at Chapter 115: Season 2 Chapter 81.

If you need a full refresher of the entire story, but do not have time to reread 800,000 words please read through **A Shortcut to the Road So Far** which can be found on my profile or linked to this story.

For those of you that have no time for either, here is a quick summary!

Last Time on The Road so Far (This Time Around): Dean and Sam went to check out a college town in Ohio where some weird things were happening. They ended up on the college campus, where Dean realized just who it was waiting for them there. They left, but not before Gabriel overheard their conversation, and decided to follow after. He stuck Dean in a timeloop, reliving the same day over and over again where Sam was killed and Yellow Eyes showed up to offer a deal. Remembering his promise to Sam, Dean killed himself rather than make the deal, and woke up at the start of the timeloop. He eventually figured out it was Gabriel, calling the Trickster out and finally getting a message to Cas, who showed up. When Dean still refused to learn the Trickster's lesson, Gabriel decided, perhaps they needed a different one. He zapped Cas out of the picture, and sent Dean and Sam somewhere new…

Meanwhile, Victor Henriksen paid Bobby a visit, with Jody Mills

tagging along. Victor left after dispatching a warning, and Jody returned to the Salvage yard to ask why, exactly, Andy was wanted by the FBI. Andy revealed that he is a psychic, that the Winchesters are the good guys, and that monsters exist. Jody decided to take some time to process. Bobby tries to call the boys to warn them about Henriksen, but they don't pick up. He and Andy decide it's time for angelic reinforcements.

Chapter Warnings: Jody's got some serious thinking to do, but luckily she's got the support of her family around her. Andy and Bobby dodge a bullet, Cas is on the case until she's very much not, and her and a long lost sibling have a little chat.

Now, without further ado… Let's get this party started!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 86

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

-Three Days Earlier-

Jody Mills stared down at her three-year-old son, who'd finally fallen asleep after three bedtime stories, two lullabies, and the insistence from the only adult in the room that no, he really did not need another glass of water.

It was somewhat of a special night for them both; Jody was rarely the one to tuck Owen in, being the parent that worked later and longer hours. But for once she'd been home, having called it quits very shortly after having her entire world view turned upside down, and asked – well, more like demanded – that she be the one to put him to bed. She'd all but kicked Sean out with a strongly-implied hint that she'd like to do it alone. The toddler had taken full advantage of the situation: wrapping Jody around his little pinky with request after request that she didn't have the heart to turn down.

When she finally returned to the dining room, Jody found her husband sitting in the dining room, a can of beer growing warm in front of him. When he spotted her coming down the hall, he took a drink just for appearances, giving her a tired smile as she slid into the

seat next to him.

“Sorry,” she offered with an apologetic look, swiping the can for a sip.

“He helps,” Sean answered easily. “On bad days. I get it.”

Jody reached across the table, folding her hand over his. Their marriage hadn’t been without its hardships (what marriage wasn’t?), but he’d been her rock through them all. A decent man, a loving husband, and a damn good father. She didn’t know what she’d do without his support. She certainly couldn’t have the job she did without him there, taking on the primary role of parenting Owen. And he was so very good at it.

“What’s bothering you, hon?”

She squeezed his hand, giving him another smile that felt more forced. Jody was sure it looked it, too. “Am I that obvious?”

“No. I’m just that clever.” At her snort, Sean gave her a raised eyebrow. “I married you, didn’t I?”

“Ha!” Jody tilted her head back with an exaggerated laugh, but she couldn’t deny that he had her there. “Can’t argue against that logic. It’s nothing. Just some work stuff.”

Which was the understatement of the century, but Jody wasn’t sure she wanted to get into it. Wasn’t sure her husband would appreciate sharing this burden. Of course, Sean would tell her that was part of the whole husband role.

“Stuff you want to talk about?”

Jody couldn’t help the smile that crept over her face. He was so predictable (that, or she knew him too well, too).

“I probably should,” she admitted, even though it was the last thing she actually felt like doing. And she definitely couldn’t tell him everything she’d seen today. Good Lord, no. She’d spare him the 180-degree world view flip if she could. *She* hadn’t even wanted to know that monsters existed. She’d just spent the last ten minutes convincing her three-year-old son there wasn’t something in his closet. And Jody had checked – for real – three times to prove it to herself as much as him.

Jesus, her world had just gotten so much more terrifying. And she

was a cop, to start with! The world had always been that much scarier when you faced the bad in it every day.

Still, she could share some of the burden with him. Sean had always been her counsel. He had always been able to see through the things that weighed her down and provide the clarity she needed. There he was, waiting patiently for her to begin, nursing a beer he clearly wasn't that interested in, not rushing her once. He did get up to fetch a second beer, though. A bottle this time. They shared many things, but a taste in beer wasn't one of them.

Once he'd settled it in front of her and she'd taken a swig or two, Jody finally found a good place to start. "Have you ever had your sense of right and wrong tested?"

Sean gave her a curious look. "What do you mean?"

Jody sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. On bad days, her body liked to store all its tension in those two muscles at the base of her skull, stretching down into her back with a tightness that always threatened a headache. And today had been a doozy.

How to explain without explaining.

"There's a… situation at work," she began, rolling the beer bottle between her palms. "I got into law enforcement because I believe in right and wrong. But sometimes… the gray area is hard to see through."

Sean reached out and placed his hand over hers, stilling her stressed energy and replacing it with encouragement to keep going. She smiled at him and took another sip with her free hand.

"There's a kid. He's gotten himself into a world of trouble." Another understatement of the century, but she was rather playing a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey trying to tell this story without really telling it. "By all rights, I should bring him in. I *have* to bring him in."

Sean raised his eyebrows a touch – nothing judgmental, but perhaps surprised that she hadn't followed through with her legal obligations. There wasn't much that could cause Jody Mills to turn her back on the law. No wonder she'd gone for a solo tuck-in tonight. "So why haven't you?"

Jody groaned, hanging her head for a moment. "I don't know. It just

doesn't feel right."

Sean let the moment of silence after her statement grow as he thought over what she'd offered up. It hadn't been much, but this didn't seem to be a matter of legality so much as, well, morality. He presented her with a serious look. "Do you know why I married you?"

Jody lifted her head, eyebrows raised in amusement at the sudden non-sequitor.

"Well… one of the reasons," he amended, and she chuckled.

"Is it…" Jody rested her cheek on her hand, elbow braced on the table as she smiled idly at her husband. "…because I'm armed and own a pair of handcuffs?"

Sean choked on his beer, which she'd conveniently waited for him to lift to his lips before speaking. He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve, laughing. "Alright, that might be *one* of those reasons, but it's not the one I'm thinking of now."

Her grin, which was near ear-to-ear, faded to something softer. "Alright, why'd you marry me?"

"I married you – I *love* you –" He squeezed her hand in his, "because you're more than your job, Jo."

Jody couldn't help the smile, sweet and sappy and just as in love as the day he'd asked her to marry him.

"What feels right?" he continued, withdrawing his hand to grab a sip from his beer – which was at an unappetizing room temperature – and leaned back in his chair. "What's your gut telling you?"

His wife sighed, pulling her hands off the table to curl them in her lap, tucking one leg up onto the chair. Jody tilted her head back, staring at the dining room ceiling. They'd need to re-paint soon. Maybe she'd convince Sean to go for another color. Light blue, perhaps. She'd always loved that color with white trim. There was a cobweb in one corner, too. It was obviously time for a deep clean. The type where you dug out the extendable duster.

"He's a good kid," she finally said, still staring at the ceiling. "What he's gotten himself wrapped up in… I don't think it's his fault. And I don't see how throwing him in jail is going to fix anything."

“Then do what you think is right,” Sean said immediately, probably having already known where her gut was leading her. Maybe she’d just needed to hear him say it was okay. “Not what your job demands.”

Jody sighed, knowing he was right, even if what she was about to do went against the very law she swore to uphold. The law she usually believed in. But that was more the problem she had with all of this than Andy Gallagher ever had been. This was something of an identity crisis: realizing something you wanted to believe in whole-heartedly wasn’t always right. Now she just had to figure out where she stood on her own.

Ugh, what a mess.

Jody smiled at her husband, leaning over to kiss him chastely before settling her head on his shoulder. “When did you get so smart?”

His shoulder lifted and fell beneath her cheek with his soft chuckle. “Sometime after I married you, I reckon.”

She laughed softly – lovingly – into his neck, her decision made.

-o-o-o-

The next day found Sheriff Mills knocking on Bobby Singer’s front door once more. When it swung open, the kid was nowhere to be found. Jody immediately wondered if he’d taken off, then dismissed it. She might not have spent a huge amount of time with Andy Gallagher over the last couple months he’d been in town, but she was a good judge of character. He was too damn good a kid – far too honest – to run. So he was probably hiding two feet away, behind the front door like she was fairly certain he’d been when the FBI agent came calling.

“Where is he?” she asked, tone brisk. Bobby eyed her from beneath his ballcap, clearly sizing her up. She didn’t have much of a relationship with the man outside of the several small-time arrests she’d made and the visits to his property regarding rumors and anonymous calls to the department. Nothing that had really panned out, but just enough to be a thorn in her side.

“You arresting him, Sheriff?”

Jody let her glare fall into the Officer-Of-The-Law range of serious. “Don’t make me ask again, Bobby.”

Andy stepped out from behind the door before she had to, offering a small wave and a nervous smile. Jody looked him up and down for a moment before nodding in return.

"Alright. Here's the deal." She dropped her hands from her hips, but kept her expression grim and deathly serious. "You're lucky Agent Henriksen didn't ask after you specifically. Because he didn't, I'm going to overlook what I know."

As the kid's expression lightened to the point of practically glowing, she leveled a warning finger his way. "I won't lie for you. If he comes back and asks, I'm obligated to answer."

Andy nodded excessively, and Jody's eyes dropped to the bandages still wrapped around his neck. She'd never asked him what had happened (and now she *really* didn't want to know. Didn't even want to imagine.) Jody had spent a fair amount of energy and guilt wondering if her hesitancy about turning him in had been pity. She was confident now it wasn't – Andy Gallagher was a good kid, and she believed him when he said he hadn't killed his girlfriend – but it didn't make staring at the evidence of his suffering any easier. It might make it worse, actually.

Some days being a mother and a sheriff was a burden she didn't entirely know how to juggle.

"The first thing you do to bring the law down on your head," Jody continued, reminding herself she was here to deliver a stern warning as that Sheriff, "and I will be the one putting you in handcuffs. Understand?"

The kid all but launched himself at her, barreling into her torso with a tight, all-encompassing hug. He was nodding against her shoulder again, and all Jody could think was, *'Oh good Lord, what have I just gotten myself into? '*

When Andy pulled away, Signing several things at rapid speeds – the ' *thank you'* being the only one she really caught – Jody leveled a less severe, but no-less serious glare that quieted him quickly.

"Don't thank me," she emphasized with a stern shake of her head. "This isn't a favor. It's a judgment call. Don't prove me wrong."

When the kid beamed at her, despite how much Jody still dreaded this decision as one that would come back to bite her in the ass, she knew it hadn't been the wrong choice.

She turned to Bobby, bringing back the more dangerous warning glare. "Do not think this extends to the Winchesters, Bobby Singer. If I see those boys in my town, I *will* arrest them and contact Agent Henriksen immediately."

Andy Gallagher she'd met. Gotten to know. Exchanged frantic texts about what kind of dog food a German Shepherd needed, how to keep one in a bath long enough to actually get him clean, and the best dog toys to get him. Andy Gallagher was a good kid, and Jody Mills knew it. But the Winchesters? She didn't know them from Jack, and she wasn't about to put her career on the line for a couple of strangers the town-drunk and his fugitive 'nephew' vouched for. Especially not strangers wanted by the FBI.

Bobby Singer nodded, his expression grim enough that Sheriff Mills was inclined to believe he'd taken her threat seriously. The man, for all his faults and tendency to go looking for the bottom of a bottle, was smart enough to know the bullet they'd just dodged.

As for the rest of it….

"I don't need to know more," Jody laid down the statement like a fact. "I don't *want* to know more. So we leave it at that. Agreed?"

The two men in front of her exchanged quick glances before both nodded in absolute agreement. So Jody left it at that.

-o-o-o-

Bobby closed the door on Sheriff Mills retreating back, sharing an equally disbelieving, relieved look with Andy. The kid looked like he could hardly believe their luck. Bobby wasn't entirely sure they should. But at the moment, it wasn't like they had much choice. He could get Andy out of town, set him up somewhere else – maybe one of those safehouses Castiel mentioned setting up – but he wasn't sure it was the right move. For starters, he doubted Sheriff Mills would appreciate the disappearing act. Not that she could do much about it. But there was also the matter of the Yellow Eyed demon. Dean was adamant that he would return for Andy at some point. The kid was safest right where he was. At least from the supernatural.

"Better see if Feathers has found the boys," the old hunter told Andy. The Winchesters hadn't been picking up for two days now. Neither Bobby nor Andy had waited much longer than a handful of hours to call in the reinforcements. Castiel had left shortly after their explanation, intent on searching for them.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than wingbeats sounded from the den, announcing the arrival of the angel in question. Andy took off immediately, the older hunter following behind. By the time he entered the room, the kid was already rapid-fire Signing. Castiel's fiercely blue eyes were locked on his hands and body language. They shifted to Bobby as he stepped into the den.

"No, I have not found them," she answered what presumably was Andy's question, her gaze shifting back to the younger of the two humans. "If they are on Earth, their presence is being hidden."

Well, balls.

"That can't be good."

"No, it cannot be," Cas answered unnecessarily, eyes still on Bobby. "Were they investigating a case when they went missing?"

Andy and Bobby exchanged looks. The kid shrugged. Andy didn't generally ask for specifics when contacting the Winchesters. It was more banter than anything else. Bobby reached up, tugging at his cap.

"Can't say for sure. I sent 'em to a college town in Ohio – Springfield, think it was – for some minor stuff. Last text either of us got from the boys said it was a bust. Bunch of nonsense." Bobby shrugged his shoulders, though the tension in his shoulders betrayed his attempt at nonchalance. "They could have moved on, but if they did, we don't know where."

"Then I will start in Springfield." Castiel gave a sharp nod, and the decision was made. She was gone before either man could comment, let alone provide any additional information.

Bobby looked at Andy. Andy shrugged and Bobby sighed.

"Balls."

What neither hunter knew – and maybe if they had, they would have gone about things differently – was that would be the last time they would see the angel for months.

-o-o-o-

-Present-

“Honey, I’m home!”

Gabriel kicked the apartment door closed behind him as he strolled into his current residence. Well, one of them. Jack was barking up a storm, tail wagging so hard his butt was leading the charge more than the rest of him as the little terrier came waddling up to the archangel. Gabe scooped him up with one arm, nestling him in the crook of his elbow.

“Who’s a good boy, huh? Who’s a good boy?” the archangel cooed as he gave the dog a big smooch, frantic licks raining down on his chin and cheek. “Did you miss your daddy? Yes, you did. Was our house guest not very good company?”

Gabriel raised his brows questioningly towards Castiel, the angel currently duct-taped to a chair in the middle of his living room. She leveled a glare their way like an angry statue, blue eyes fierce and defiant, but the tape across her mouth hindered any response. Gabe went back to giving Jack little smooches before setting him down. The small dog immediately bounded over to the captive angel, yapping at her shins as if they had personally offended him.

“You know, he’d warm up to you if you scratched his belly,” Gabe offered offhand, wandering over to the kitchen to grab a soda from the fridge. The unamused look Castiel offered was priceless, as was the very pointed look that followed, aimed at her bound hands, each wrist taped to an arm of the chair. Gabriel just shrugged. He very much doubted Castiel would have paid any attention to Jackie even if her arms had been free.

Angels. They just didn’t get it. And wasn’t that the point of the millennia?

He plopped himself down on the Lazy Boy set up next to her chair, both seats facing the ridiculously large TV, and popped his soda. “So how was your day, honey?”

Whatever Castiel’s response, it wasn’t comprehensible through the tape. Though Gabe could make some rough guesses based on tone.

“That good, huh?” The archangel stuck a loopty-loop straw into the can and took a long draw. “Mine was excellent. Want some?”

When Gabe tilted the soda Castiel’s way, straw bobbing and swinging in a lazy circle, the other angel just glared. Seemed to be a thing with her.

“Oh, right. Here ya go.” With no ceremony, Gabriel reached over and ripped the duct tape from Cassie’s mouth. To her credit, she didn’t so much as wince. Spoil sport.

He gestured with the soda again, straw dangerously close to poking the angel in the face.

“Where are the Winchesters?” Castiel’s stare could have cowered lesser beings. Gabriel just snorted and took his soda back. “What have you done with them?”

“Relax, they’re fine,” Gabriel dragged out the last word, accompanied by an equally drawn out eye roll. He went back to sipping his soda, enjoying the liquid running through the loop of the straw. “Mostly.”

Castiel actually struggled against her bindings, tipping her chair back and forth in her effort. Which was just adorable. And ridiculous. What was it with this angel and the Winchesters? She wasn’t even supposed to be on earth, let alone mucking around with the True Vessels. And by the look of things, the mucking might have gotten literal.

“If you’ve hurt them, Gabriel-”

“Oh, so you did figure it out. I wondered.” Gabe dug into the cushions on either side of him, switching his soda from hand to hand as he searched for the remote. Silly thing always ended up in the cushions. When he found it, he pulled it out with a flourish and exclamation of triumph. “I figured you knew I was an angel. Kinda hard to hide the existence of grace when you’re wrapped in it.”

Gabriel gestured with a head tilt and eyebrows alone to the tape thoroughly binding Castiel to the chair.

“But jumping to dead archangel is a hell of a leap, even for you.” The archangel’s brow furled as he took his sibling. A Power at most, given her level of grace. Warrior class, clearly. Gabriel wasn’t personally familiar with Castiel, but he knew the type. Dedicated to the cause, sword of God, yada yada yada. Not usually the ones to make creative leaps and big assumptions. “Especially for you.”

Gabriel took another long drag from the straw, turning it into a slurping, noisy affair as the soda ran low in the can.

Castiel’s lips pursed tight as she considered her response. The truth was, she may not have immediately jumped to the dead archangel, as

Gabriel said. He had been clever: careful to limit the amount of grace and the level of power contained in it. She might have assumed him a Seraph of Zachariah's rank and level, perhaps, had she not had other suspicions.

There had been something about his actions, his choices when confronting the Winchesters…. Castiel had only ever known of one angel that liked to play *tricks* . One angel that had gone missing, presumed dead but never confirmed. The coincidence had been too great to ignore.

It was something she did not feel safe admitting to the archangel, however. Castiel was unsure why, but the thought of continuing the current conversation caused her heart to beat in an irregular manner. Which drew her attention to the perfect change of topic: her vessel.

"What have you done with Angela Garrett?" Castiel asked instead. The human was not an active presence in her mind, as Castiel had grown used to. The angel could still feel the soul safe within the vessel, which brought great relief. But bound as she was, Castiel could not determine Angela's current state.

Her brother blinked, brow furling almost comically. "Who?"

"This vessel. What have you done with her? I cannot sense her."

Gabriel stared at her with a look that questioned her sanity. At the very least, it said *'uh… wut?'*

"I put her to sleep, like you *should have* ."

The scolding tone coming from an archangel was difficult to ignore, but Castiel managed not to straighten up or fall in line at the reprimand. It was equally difficult to continue speaking against what felt very much like orders. Still, she'd made a promise to her charge, and she intended to keep it.

"Angela Garrett expressed discomfort in the isolation her subconscious presents to her. She requested to remain awake, whenever possible. However, during times of… difficulty, I have locked her consciousness in a loop of favored memories."

The archangel's brows rose up close to his hairline. "Like a pseudo heaven?"

"Yes. She was in a car accident, rendered brain dead when she agreed

to serve as my vessel." Castiel maintained a steady gaze on her much more powerful brother. She had little negotiating power in this other than sincerity in her duty to this vessel. "Until she can be reunited with her family in Heaven, I do this to ease her wait."

Gabe let out a whistle. "Huh. You sure know how to pick 'em."

Castiel's sincere gaze turned briefly annoyed, but she glanced away to hide it. She would conveniently leave out the part where such rigid requirements were entirely Dean Winchester's, decently sure that would not aid in her argument. Instead, she focused on the problem at hand.

"Allow me to place her in the loop, for her sake."

Gabriel stared. Which, for an angel, was tantamount to believing Castiel actually had lost her sanity. The Power shifted, uncomfortable under the scrutiny and judgment, but maintained eye contact.

"As my charge, her wellbeing is my responsibility," she continued, though she was well aware further attempts at explaining herself only sounded more pathetic, even to her ears. Comfort and wellbeing were two different things. Especially to a warrior. Especially to a warrior angel.

Still. Castiel flexed her grace absently, wondering if she could put the human into the memory loop herself if Gabriel refused her request. She'd made a promise, and she intended to keep it best she could.

"You're a weird little angel, aren't you?" Gabriel finally announced, and this time Castiel could not hide the flinch. "I'm not untying you." As the Power opened her mouth to argue, the archangel gave her a look that very clearly said 'stop talking', and continued in a pointed tone, " *So* … I'll do it. It'll be more convincing coming from me anyway. Good enough for you?"

Despite the question being both sarcastic and rhetorical – it was not like his sister had any true choice in the matter to begin with – Castiel nodded, solemn and serious.

"Those terms are acceptable."

Gabriel wanted to roll his eyes. So he absolutely did, raising two fingers as he reached out to the other angel.

Castiel did her best not to pull away from her brother's hand as he

touched her forehead, but she largely failed. Angels rarely engaged in physical touch, with the exception of healers. And given how her last bout of healing had gone, Castiel was unsurprised to find herself wary of another angel's touch.

She felt no difference as Gabriel pulled away, but that was not particularly surprising. Bound as she was, she would unlikely be able to sense the altered existence of Angela's soul. Castiel would have to trust that Gabriel had done what he said he would.

She really had no idea the odds of that.

"You'd probably crack her poor mind in two if you tried," Gabriel continued as he resettled in his seat, sipping on the straw once more. No liquid came forth, and the draw of air through the small opening was an obnoxious sound the archangel delighted in. "What with your grace in the state it is. What did you do? Take on a Wooly Mammoth for funsies and lose? Also for funsies?"

"Wooly Mammoths are extinct," Castiel replied on instinct, not understanding why the archangel would suggest such a battle in the first place, nor what *'funsies'* were.

"Wow. Can't get anything past you," Gabriel replied with what Castiel was fairly certain was sarcasm. The look he gave her certainly was. Human expressions were easier to read than tones, though Castiel was getting better at both. "Seriously, kiddo. What the hell did you do to yourself? I've seen fifteen car pile-ups in better shape than your grace."

And he would know; he'd caused his fair share through the last half century. Learning to drive while going ninety on a freeway was great fun, it turned out.

Surprisingly, the angel went pensively silent, lips sealed tight in a less than subtle physical cue she didn't want to answer. Even if, as Gabe suspected, she didn't realize it.

Huh. Well, that didn't bode well.

Gabe flicked his wrist, soda can and all, before putting the straw back in his mouth. His refilled drink slurped up through the loopty-loop with ease. "Sooooo, something to do with the Winchesters, then."

It wasn't a question; it wasn't intended to be. His sister managed not to wince, but it was a close thing, making it about as much of a

giveaway as an actual wince would have been.

“How’d you get involved with those two mooks anyway?” Gabe kept his question casual, covering his own inner turmoil with nonchalance. It had been a long time since he’d interacted with any of his siblings, and he was finding it more of a challenge to remain neutral than he’d anticipated. The state Castiel was in was not helping. Gabe had always hated to see any of his siblings in pain, and Castiel’s grace was *wrecked* . It had more spider web cracks running through it than an actual spider web, for Dad’s sake.

If this was a result of the Winchesters, Gabe had been right to separate his sister from them.

“They… summoned me.” The hesitation with which Castiel answered immediately peaked Gabriel’s curiosity. Possibly more than the actual answer, which was surprising as well.

“Summoned? Like… by *name* ?” Gabe leaned forward, soda temporarily forgotten and straw spinning idly with the directional change. The way Castiel was avoiding his eyes was a dead giveaway that he’d hit the nail on the head. He whistled, leaning back in his Lazy Boy again with a squeak of springs. “Well shit. How the hell did they get that?”

“I am the angel of Thursday,” Cassie hedged, still not looking at him and instead staring straight ahead. The attempt at subterfuge (coming from an angel who clearly had none) was adorable. “Information such as my name is available on the internet.”

Gabe took a long, drawn-out sip of soda, enjoying how Castiel squirmed without squirming. “Huh. I mean, I *guess* . But if two humans were looking for angelic assistance, you’d think they’d go for bigger fry then the littlest angel of Thursday.”

It hadn’t entirely meant to be a dig – well, obviously it *had* been a dig, but the dig hadn’t been the *point* – though Castiel finally looked his way with a glare worthy of a Warrior of God, be it a Thursday or not. Her gaze shifted back straight ahead. She was squirming-without-squirming again. Gabe wondered if any of the humans she now apparently associated with had explained to her what a ‘tell’ was.

“Perhaps they did not want to draw attention to themselves with *bigger fry* .”

It was equally adorable how offended she was trying not to be. Gabe

chewed on the end of his straw, though the hard plastic made it more of a gnawing. She was a terrible liar, but the archangel would drop it for now. He had the time to get the truth out of her, and eventually would.

“Do you like games?”

Castiel stiffened further – and how that was possible, Gabe wasn’t entirely sure (he’d forgotten how far up that heavenly stick went in most angels) – at the sudden non-sequitur, as well as the bright and cheerful tone he used to announce it. No doubt she was thinking of the many *games* a Trickster liked to play.

“Cuz I love ‘em,” Gabe continued, playing dopily oblivious to his sister’s discomfort. She was too easy, really. He swiped the remote off the arm of his chair and pointed it at the TV. “Humans have come up with some *really* interesting stuff in the last decade, let me tell you. They’ve gone digital!”

The electronic device came to life with a click and a hum, and Gabriel stifled his excited giggle. Given the look of dread in Cassie’s eye, he hadn’t stifled it well at all.

“This one’s called an ‘RPG,’” Gabriel intoned slowly, with an over-emphasized pronunciation, like he was explaining the concept to a child. The TV came alive with a main menu, pixelated castle and golden fields in the background. The room filled with the upbeat theme music of an awaiting adventure. He waggled his eyebrows at his sister. “Nerds, am I right?”

Castiel was frowning at the screen, glancing between it and the archangel warily. She said nothing, and Gabe’s grin only grew.

The archangel dug a second remote out of the cushions of his lazy boy, this one connected to the gaming console that hadn’t been sitting beneath the TV a moment ago but now blinked steadily with a green light. Castiel eyed it more warily than anything yet, and Gabriel cackled.

“Let’s play.”

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: We’re back!!! Okay, not the most interesting chapter to come back to, but oh man, I promise it’s about to get good. Some pretty packed (and verbose AF □) chapters ahead of us!

Reviews: Thank you everyone for your patience and endurance these last few months, your support and encouragement, your comments as you went through re-reads, and your sharing of this story. I know someone somewhere is talking about it 🤐 As soon as I started mentioning new updates coming soon, there was a surge of new readers ♥ So thank you ♥
There's some routine house cleaning we need to cover, so here we go!

Permissions: Several people have reached out over the years asking for permission to print this story out in book form, translate it, etc. I wanted to address those questions for everyone, since the number has started to grow.

I am instigating blanket permission to print, share, or translate this story, so long as you credit me as the author and do not alter the story in any way. For translating, please let me know so that I can add a link to your translation in this story. I would love this little beast to become more accessible to fans around the world.

Fanfiction/Fanart: I would be absolutely thrilled to see other fanfics or fanart pop up for this universe! The idea that my story could inspire others is a beautiful thought, so please feel free to contribute to this AU. Please credit or link TRSF(TTA) in your story or artwork, but otherwise have at! Feel free to send me a link and I will create a collection attached to TRSF(TTA) on AO3.

Tumblr: I have started a Tumblr account for this story in hopes that I can hold myself a tad more accountable to regular updating. I miss the pre-covid days, so I'm looking for more ways to inspire myself, and the best way to do that for me has always been interacting with others. Feel free to join my journey, poke and pester me, at www.tumblr.com/blog/8yearsofsilence

Discord Server: Along the same lines, I've been thinking of creating a Discord server just for this story. Someplace we can all chat, hang out, discuss the story or the show. Get inspired! I've really missed being a part of a fandom. When I first joined the fanfiction community, I very easily found others to chat with. But when I joined this time around, I've had a much harder time connecting with other readers. I'd like to change that! I miss surrounding myself with fellow fans. And I love talking stories! Mine or others. I really, really miss that. I wasn't particularly successful when I went in search, but I also haven't been a part of social media or the internet since college. I'm so old and out of it

I don't even know how to connect anymore So I figured I could setup my own space for it, if others are interested.

Update: The server is now live.
https://discord.gg/sDB7ZAwMAS

Request for Artwork: I now have an office/craft room/writing room in my new apartment, and I am absolutely covering it floor-to-ceiling in artwork. Nerd artwork, to be specific: Star Trek, Star Wars, LOTR, Marvel, DC - pretty much an homage to every show/movie/book that inspired me. So, naturally, Supernatural needs its own space! I have a couple items already, but what I would really love is a poster designed for this story. Fun fact: I did go to art school and I am a painter, but I loathe painting people. I'm more of a landscape gal. And, sadly, I'm total crap with photoshop despite more than one college course utilizing it. No patience for it, I'm afraid So! I would love to put out a request/competition/commission of sorts. Please let me know if there is any interest out there and I will follow up with details!
Update Schedule: I am going to start off a little slow until I'm certain the Muse is back for good and cooperative. I'm going to post every two weeks on Sundays (or Saturday nights, really, because I'm usually impatient) If we get back into the swing of things and I feel good about it, I'll resume weekly posts!

Alright, I'm done, I'm done. Thank you all for tuning back in!! I'm so happy to be back, and I hope you're happy to be back too!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 121: Season 2: Chapter 87

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Apologies this chapter is being posted later than usual. I spent the weekend in Las Vegas celebrating my birthday. It was a whirlwind, I may be a little hungover, I am definitely a lot exhausted, haha, but here we are!

Chapter Warnings: It's a lengthy one this time, withSam and Dean discovering where Gabe's thrown them. Dean's pissed, Sam's exasperated, there are spiders and trolls and goblins, Oh My! Gabe is cackling, Castiel is glaring, and the Authoress spent entirely too long chirping, 'Hey Listen!' Really, it's a party all around.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Temporary character death. Lots and lots and lots of it XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 87

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The transition from life-threatening situation in a busy morning diner to melodic, peaceful meadow under an afternoon sun was disconcerting to say the least. Dean blinked at the bright, shining ball of light in the sky that seemed… off somehow, but he couldn't quite place what it was. Actually, everything seemed a little off, and not just because he'd been magically transported to the middle of the Sound of Music, apparently, with the birds singing and bugs buzzing, and what Dean swore to god was elevator music coming and going with the wind.

Where the hell had Gabriel sent them?

Dean spun, immediately searching for his brother's beanstalk frame, and was surprised when the motion made him dizzy. Not fall-over-on-your-drunk-ass dizzy but more like vertigo; you can feel the earth beneath your feet, only it's definitely not moving. It's just your brain

that's convinced otherwise. Or was it the other way around? The thought made his stomach clench and initiated a whole second bout of dizziness.

When his head and gut had both cleared, Dean took a stabilizing breath and lowered his arms, uncertain of when he'd raised them. Like a gymnast on a balance beam, only he was on solid ground that definitely wasn't moving, in a goddamn field, feeling ridiculous.

Cautiously, uncertain what had triggered the reaction the first time, Dean tried turning again, slower this time. His vision remained perfectly clear, but his mind swore the world blurred and Dean found himself tilting to the left as the vertigo swelled once more. It wasn't nearly as bad as the first time now that Dean was prepared for it. He righted himself, staring way too hard for way too long at the long grass surrounding him.

He stretched his neck to the left. Then the right. Then abruptly slid his body a foot to the left.

The grass was *moving* with him. Sort of. No matter how he turned or moved, he couldn't move *around* the grass. The same side of the blade kept facing him, no matter what he did to see the other side of it. And trying made him dizzy as all get out. Because *every blade* was turning with him. Like those trick pictures in the mall, or those portraits where the eyes followed you no matter where you stood. Ugh, his stomach felt like sloshed soup.

"What the hell," he muttered, staring at the grass like it was the one that had definitely lost its mind, and not Dean. Definitely not Dean.

"Dean!"

The older Winchester spun towards Sammy's voice, coming from a distance. His giant of a brother was making his way through the field towards him, stopping every few feet to rub at his eyes. Apparently Dean wasn't the only one struggling with whatever the hell was wrong with this place.

The older Winchester took off at a jog only to very, very quickly realize running in this place was a *bad idea.* He had to stop and recover his inner balance as the edges of everything went fuzzy and shifted. Soon as he could stand up straight again, he started towards Sam at the same damn pace his brother had adopted. A cautious walk interspersed with frequent stops to give his eyes and brain a break from the freaky shifting of everything around them.

"Dude, what the hell," Dean growled as soon as the two brothers had met in the middle.

"I don't know," Sam replied with a wince, eyes wide and trying not to focus on the tall grass surrounding them, swaying in the soft breeze. Although now that they'd stopped moving, the edges had solidified and the whole field almost looked normal. Slightly off, but *almost* there.

'Like bad special effects,' Dean thought offhandedly. It reminded him of movies where the big bad was CGI and you could really tell. The edges stood out, the lighting didn't quite match. You knew what you were seeing wasn't real.

"No, seriously, what the hell!"

"I don't know," Sam repeated with the same level of distress in his voice as Dean. "What are you wearing?"

"Me?" Dean immediately baulked, comeback forming before he even glanced down at himself. "What about you, Legolas?"

The brothers glanced down at their respective clothing about the same time, Dean pulling at his red and gold tunic, leather belt tied in a knot – sword, sheath and all, attached – and, uh, well, he supposed *breaches* was as close a term as he could get to whatever the hell covered his legs.

Sam, on the other hand, had a fancy-carved bow and quiver strapped to his back, full of what Dean could only assume were actual arrows. The rest of him looked like he'd walked out of a monastery retreat in the woods. He was wearing so much green in the form of leggings and a shin-length tunic that really qualified more as a robe. Or a night shirt. It was tied around his waist with gold rope, which matched the gold embroidery along every hem. The younger Winchester pulled at the silky fabric with the kind of caution a member of the bomb squad usually reserves for work. And his hair (while already too long in Dean's opinion but still nothing compared to 2016 Sam) seemed longer here. It was also pulled back into a half ponytail. Dean might have found the whole thing knee-slapping levels of hilarious if he wasn't also pissed and confused.

"Are- are my ears *pointed?!*" Sam suddenly exclaimed with no shortage of horror. Dean couldn't help but snigger when the kid tucked his significantly lengthened brown hair behind a very real, very elvish ear that he kept tugging on.

"Well. It does suit you."

And it was so very Gabe. Which definitely soured how funny it was, unfortunately.

The glare his younger brother sent his way was positively murderous. Dean almost smirked again, just because. "Have- has the trickster- I mean… have we done this before?"

Dean spared his brother a look, smirk dying before it truly got started. If they'd done this before, he wouldn't be asking '*what the hell'*, now would he? "No. I mean, he did throw us in TV land once-"

"He what?" Sam cut him off, blinking widely at his brother. "Like… with sets and actors and-"

"No, like actual TV land. If they were actors, they didn't know they were acting. You starred in a Herpes commercial." Actually, that part had been pretty funny. None of the rest of it, though. Given the face Sam pulled at that – something between perplexed confusion at what Dean was saying and blanched, abject horror at the possibility he was about to relive it – he didn't find it very funny, either.

Most of Gabe's jokes ended up not being particularly funny. Go figure.

"But this isn't that," Dean continued before Sam could put words together to question any (or all) of it. "That was… *real*. I mean, it wasn't *real*, but the world around us was- I mean- it wasn't *this*. It looked-"

"Real," Sam finished, more or less understanding what his brother was trying to say. They'd been thrown into TV shows (and apparently commercials) as if they were real. Real people, real places. Whatever this was, it didn't feel real. Sam was on the same page. Well, except for the damn ears. Those weren't fake. They weren't *coming off*.

Sam dropped his hand, trying to focus on anything *but* his now very-not-human ears. Like why Dean didn't have pointy ears. Or how the tall grass around him bent under his hand, but a fraction of a second too early. Not to mention that Sam couldn't *feel* the grass under his fingers. Like there was a force field around his hand, and that was what grass reacted to.

Even as it bent, it seemed… flat. Not…. Sam didn't know the right words to describe it. Like a flat plane with the image of grass printed on it. Not real, three-dimensional grass.

"It's like the graphics in a video game," he muttered, not really meaning to speak aloud. But *he* was real. His hands held dimensionality, he could pull at the ridiculous(ly soft) clothing he was now apparently wearing. Dean looked normal too (wardrobe malfunction aside). It was just the environment around them that wasn't.

"What?" Dean asked with a frown, distracted. He didn't catch what Sam mumbled almost under his breath, instead focused on the gentle breeze sifting through the meadow. "Do you hear, like, dramatic music? I swear it was snooze tunes a minute ago, but now-"

Suddenly the ground shook. One shallow jostle that had both Winchesters bracing themselves against the jolt. A second later, it happened again, this time accompanied by a heavy thud and low rumbling.

"What the hell." Dean held his hands out for balance as a third quake shook the earth beneath their feet. Earth that, now that he was looking at it, didn't look real either. Like he was standing on a photograph of dirt. He shifted his foot, and he heard the sound of a boot dragging through packed earth, but the vibration of it – the *feeling* of it – was absent. Not a single grain of dirt shifted beneath his foot. It was… trippy. "What the *hell*."

The earth shook again, deeper and louder this time. Dean was reminded of Godzilla movies. Not the awful American ones (though he enjoyed those for entirely different reasons), but the old Japanese ones.

"Dean." Sam's voice, filled with growing horror and disbelief, resulted in an immediate, almost Pavlovian response. Dean's head snapped up to Sam's face, then whirled to follow the younger Winchester's wide-eyed, incredulous gaze. Dean's jaw dropped, and if it had been a cartoon Gabe threw them into and not a- a- *whatever* this was, he had no doubt it would have hit the floor.

There was a… a….

Dean didn't have any other word for it: *Troll*. There was a full-blown, ugly grey, warts-and-all, straight-out-of-Harry-Potter, twelve-foot-tall *troll* ambling toward them with giant, thudding steps that shook the very ground. It was dragging a crudely carved club that was at least as tall as Sammy and twice as wide.

"Oh my god."

Dean couldn't even process what he was seeing. Beside him, Sam numbly nodded right along.

"What the *hell!*" Dean all but yelled it. Where the *fuck* had Gabe sent them?

Unfortunately, his shout drew the- the- *troll*'s attention, and red-ringed, droopy eyes shifted to lock right on the brothers. Sam took a step back out of sheer, instinctual *wrongness*.

"Um…" He took another shaky step back, now reaching out to grab the back of Dean's red and gold tunic, pulling him back a step as well. "What- what do we do, here, Dean?"

"Hell if I know!" Dean shouted, allowing his brother to walk him back as the troll ambled right towards them at a slightly faster pace. The earth shook more consistently now. The thing bellowed, spittle flying from rotting teeth, and both Winchesters flinched back. "Run! Definitely run!"

The brothers took off at as fast a speed they could manage, given the blurred, ever-rotating blades of grass around them. Sam tried to keep his eyes on the tree line they were booking it for – the objects in the distance didn't change with their movement, so those were less dizzying. Still, it was like running with coke bottles strapped on for glasses. The heavy thudding of a *troll* chasing after them, accented by another knee-quaking roar (and Dean's knees could attest to that descriptor), and the increasingly climatic music they could *definitely* hear now, were all great motivators, though. They made it to the tree line with their foe trailing fifteen feet behind. Neither man managed a straight line worth a damn – both lost their balance occasionally, listing dangerously to one side before over correcting and stumbling in the other – but they made it to the safety of the trees with feet to spare.

Dean kept going a good twenty more feet before daring to turn and see if the troll could navigate between the trunks. Lucky for them, it was a pretty dense forest. The beast raged and howled and slammed its giant club into several tree trunks, causing the foliage around them to tremble. Leaves rained down from above. After another couple swings, with both Winchesters braced and eying the branches above them as they quivered and quaked, the troll finally lowered his weapon with a resigned, heavy thud. He turned and trudged away, dragging the weapon behind him like an upset toddler.

"Yeah, you better run!" Dean hollered after it, though the threat was as shaky as his legs. Once he felt safe, the older Winchester doubled over, grabbing his knees as he gasped for air after that run, the accompanying nausea, and *holy shit*, they'd just been chased by a *troll*.

"Holy shit," Sam breathed out, echoing Dean's inner monologue.

"I know," Dean concurred between heaves. He straightened, sword sheath bumping into his leg and causing him to spin, looking for whatever had touched him. Sam chuckled beside him, earning himself a glare as Dean grabbed clumsily at the hilt and slid the whole thing a little further back on his hip. "Shaddup. Useless weapon, a friggin' sword. I want my gun back, you son of a bitch!"

Sam huffed as Dean shouted and shook a fist at the heavens. Or, presumably, the trickster. When that didn't get him anywhere, the older Winchester sent a pointed look Sam's way, instead.

"Why didn't you, you know, shoot that thing?"

He was gesturing to the bow strapped across Sam's back. The moose of a Winchester glanced over his shoulder at it, while plucking absentmindedly at the string tight across his chest.

"Like I know how to shoot a bow and arrow, Dean," Sam countered, irritated-little-brother tone in full swing. In reality, he probably could manage if he had to. He'd had one or two P.E. classes through his school years that involved archery. He'd always taken to it better than the other students, although he'd assumed it was because he had *extracurricular activities* those same students could only have nightmares about.

So it was more like what the hell was a little arrow going to do against whatever the hell *that* had been?

Sam didn't bother bringing that up, however, uninterested as he was in a verbal spat with his brother. No matter how badly Dean wanted to start one. "We need to figure out where we are."

As he said it – looking around at the forest but really meaning the entire place as a whole – a large scroll appeared in his hand, already unfurled and sort of… hovering above his palm. Sam yelped, trying to drop the thing, but it followed him even as he took several half-panicked steps away.

"What the hell!" he waved his arm a little too frantically, trying to get

the magic-appearing paper, which followed along with his flailing arm, to detach or disappear or something.

As he thought it, the scroll blinked out of existence and Sam was left standing in the woods holding his arm straight out like it might end up exploding on him.

"Hey, how'd you do that?" Dean asked, having watched the whole thing first with confusion, then a touch too much amusement, and now definite curiosity. "That looked like a map. Maybe it can tell us how to get the hell out of here. Do it again."

"No," Sam responded, maybe a little too quickly.

His brother scoffed with that particular judgmental look all older brothers inherently had. "Chicken."

Sam speared him with the return look that all younger brothers learn real quickly. "You do it if you want a map so badly."

"I don't know what you did, or I would!" Dean argued, throwing his hands up. "Just do it again."

"I don't know what I did, either!"

"Well, figure it out!"

At this point, they were two grown men dressed like dorks standing in a fake forest yelling and flailing their arms at each other. Really, if Dean weren't the one living it, the situation might be hilarious. If Gabe was watching them, he had no doubt the stupid archangel was enjoying this way too much.

Sam forced himself to take a deep breath, even if that breath was released through gritted teeth, and raised his arm. He gestured to his forearm where the map had sort of appeared. "I just wanted to know where we were and-"

The scroll reappeared, hovering over his arm and causing the younger Winchester to stifle a yelp. He managed not to flail his arm this time, but it was a close call.

Across from him, Dean stared wide-eyed at the parchment – lines of a map, with a coastline and several cities nestled in neatly drawn mountains – before closing his eyes and holding out his hands. "I want a million dollars."

Even with his eyes closed, he could *hear* Sam's eye roll. "Can we focus, please?"

"Pfft, it was worth a shot." Dean opened his eyes and dropped his arms. "So, where are we?"

"Uh…" Sam turned to the map, squinting at the land it depicted. "Some forest called the Elder Woods."

"Well…that doesn't sound so bad," Dean half muttered, glancing around at the less than welcoming trees around them. Moss hung from the branches in ominous clumps, and the canopy overhead was dense enough to block a significant amount of sunlight. It didn't exactly scream *'Bambi'*.

"There's a town nearby, called Rocknesse. It's, uh… it's blinking, actually."

Dean frowned at his brother, who was leaning so close to the scroll at this point, arm raised up to his face, that the older Winchester half expected that map to have a dent the size of his kid brother's nose in it.

"Whatdya mean, blinking?" he asked loudly as he tromped over. He grabbed Sam's arm, forcing him to lower the map so he could lean in as well. "Lemme see."

Sam had actually been pretty damn accurate in his choice of words. There was a small town depicted – a wooden wall surrounding a couple dozen neatly drawn houses and larger buildings – with a handwritten, cursive name of *Rocknesse* above it. And there was a yellow dot in the city that kept fading in and out of existence. Essentially blinking.

There was both a green and a blue dot of similar size located to the southeast, atop a drawing of a forest. The forest was labeled *'The Elder Woods*', those dots weren't blinking, and Dean realized he was staring at the equivalent of a *"you are here"* marker.

"Huh. Well, you don't see that every day," he said far too casually and with a one-shouldered shrug.

"So… do we go to Rocknesse? I think the blinking dot is trying to tell us where to go," Sam reasoned aloud, still staring at the map but occasionally glancing at his brother. Dean had dealt with the trickster before, so he was more likely to know the best course of action for

what the demigod wanted with them.

"Hell no," Dean announced way too loudly as he finally let go of Sam's arm, already shaking his head. "No way we do what some blinking, magical-summoned map wants us to do. It wants us to go to town, well we're going deeper into the fucking forest then."

"Uh… I don't think that's-"

"We're not going to some town to get some quest, or go on a duck hunt, or rescue a friggin' princess from a friggin' castle in this freaky, fake-ass world." Dean put his hands on his hips and turned to regard the rest of the woods around them, deciding on his path forward. "Priority number one is to get the hell out of this place."

With that, he picked a direction at (what certainly felt like) random (in Sam's opinion, at least) and started traipsing through the woods. Sam glanced at the map once more and the little blinking dot that seemed like a pretty good indicator of where they should be going, before he dropped his hand and followed after his brother.

-o-o-o-

"Did you have a plan for 'getting the hell out of this place' beyond just picking a random direction to walk?" Sam eventually asked some five minutes later, when going deeper into the forest had not proven particularly easy or fruitful.

Dean had drawn his 'useless' sword several minutes back to chop at the branches, vines, and thorny bushes that grew thicker and more difficult to navigate the deeper they went, *Indiana Jones* style. It was pretty obvious to Sam at this point that this was not the direction they were supposed to go. Which was exactly why they were going, according to his hard-headed brother.

It had not helped Dean's argument that the music – always in the background, coming and going with the wind – was growing lower and, in Sam's opinion, more ominous.

"You think this is some sort of, like, video game, right?" Dean had picked up enough of the comments on bad graphics and the general vibe of the place – like the map – to put two and two together. It wasn't even off-brand, really. Last time Gabe had thrown them into TV Land. Why not Game Land for round two, huh?

Dean hadn't decided yet, but he was pretty sure he preferred TV Land.

"Well," he continued when Sam didn't bother answering him, "then someone built this world, and that means it's gotta end at some point. We're gonna find that end."

Sam opened his mouth to respond, then closed it and had to let the… not quite *stupidity* of that comment sink in. He had never been thrown into a video game before, so who was to say that Dean's theory was faulty. But Sam had played a fair share, between childhood friends with Gameboys and early consoles, then later during college where it turned out quite a few games, like *Mario Kart*, made for very entertaining drinking parties.

In all that time, he'd never found the edge of a video game map. He'd never gone looking for one, either, but usually you were stopped by something before you found the edge of the map. Or just plain killed, starting over somewhere your character was actually *supposed* to be.

"Even if we do find it," Sam reasoned, trying to ignore that last thought which sent an unwelcome shiver down his spine, "how is finding the edge of a world going to get us out of it?"

"I dunno," Dean answered, raising his sword to swipe at a particularly thick section of bush and vine blocking their way. He figured it would be like the ending of *The Truman Show*. They were gonna find a sky-painted wall with a staircase and, like, a door they could walk through or something. That would sound dumb out loud though, so instead he said, "Maybe we just walk right out of here. Who knows."

Sam was quiet for a moment as Dean kept hacking away. "That sounds too easy, if you ask me-"

Dean managed to slice at the last group of moss-laden, vine-wrapped, thorny branch and bush that stood in their way. The whole thing dropped as one single mass, falling to the ground with a heavy, sunken thud. Beyond was a dark, hooded clearing. It was more of a cave than anything that belonged in a forest, and the edges of where Dean had cut through were covered in a stringy, white substance that looked a *lot* like spider webs to Sam.

The music was no longer soft, and there was no question about the mood of it now.

'Danger, Will Robinson!' Sam had a second to think before dozens of glowing red eyes appeared within the webbed clearing. All of them were aimed their way.

"What the fuck-"

Sam's scream matched Dean's, decibel for decibel, as a massive spider – half the size of Dean, at least, and covered in spiny, gray and black hair – launched itself through the opening and took the older Winchester to the ground.

-o-o-o-

Dean sat up in the middle of a golden meadow, still screaming. He launched himself into the bright, sunny air, flailing at the giant-ass, furry, eight-legged freak that had been on him just a moment earlier. He punched and swung and spun for several seconds before realizing there was nothing attacking him. In fact, he wasn't even in the forest anymore. Patting himself down, still rather frantically, Dean spun in two quick circles, only getting a little dizzy at the tall grass that turned with him.

He was back in the meadow. There was a hint of a flute and harp on the wind, birds chirping distantly, and the buzz of insects all around.

"What the-"

Sam's screaming abruptly cut the air, and Dean spun. Two dozen feet away, in the same place he'd last seen Sam in this meadow, the younger Winchester sprung upright through the grass. He was doing a fantastic reenactment of the same spider dance Dean had done several minutes ago (not that he'd ever admit it to the beanstalk).

"Sam! Sammy!" Dean waved at the flailing man, even as he started in his brother's direction. Sam was still patting himself down, eyes wide and frantic, as he finally saw Dean.

"Did-" he gasped as Dean caught up, "did we just… *respawn*?"

"Re-what?"

"Spawn. When you die in a video game, you respawn back at the last checkpoint." Sam looked around, his eyes still a little too wide. "This meadow must be a checkpoint."

Dean opened his mouth to voice just how much of a *nerd* his brother was, when a shove to his shoulder sent him reeling back a good foot and a half. Sam had squared his shoulders, the look on his face a shade shy of murderous. Given the handful of times he'd seen that expression, Dean realized he was probably lucky his arm had been the

target instead of his jaw.

"What was that for?" he still growled, rubbing at his shoulder. Sam had not pulled that hit at all, and Dean hadn't done anything to deserve the younger Winchester's ire. Not recently, at least.

"For getting us killed by giant, freaking, *spiders*, Dean!" Sam was still running his hands over his torso, chasing away the memory. "I told you that wasn't the right direction!"

"Like you know what the right direction is!"

Which wasn't his finest comeback, Dean could admit, but like hell Sam knew what to do in this situation any more than him. He was the one who'd dealt with the trickster before, not his kid brother.

"You're right, I don't," Sam admitted, first throwing his arms out to the side then dropping them. "But at least I'm trying to listen to what this place is telling us!"

Dean immediately scoffed, rolling his eyes. "This place isn't *real*, Sam!"

"Well, we're stuck in it, Dean, and that *is* real."

Sam crossed his arms, defiant and stubborn, and Dean frowned because… well, just *because*. Maybe because that sounded all too irrefutable, and Dean didn't want Sam to be right about that. Just like he hadn't friggin' wanted Sam to be right about TV Land, and what getting stuck there had meant, either.

'Play your roles, boys.'

"Fuck that," Dean growled out, probably way more aggressively than Sam's comment deserved, but the man from the future's mind was currently stuck in the past. A past he had not enjoyed, and refused to repeat at the whim of a *brat* archangel who needed to grow the fuck up. "I'm not letting some fake game world tell me what I can and can't do."

With that, Dean turned and marched back towards the forest, this time at a different angle. He wouldn't run into those spiders again (and that was *not* a chill running down his spine at the thought of repeating *that* experience), but he *would* find the edge of this world and break the hell out. One way or another.

-o-o-o-

Sam gave up following his brother after the third respawn. He'd had enough of getting shot in the chest by poisonous arrows (apparently a tribe of some sort of very ugly, very aggressive little goblins lived in the forest), or *stomped* on by a troll (who was not pleased by anyone who tried to cross through the meadow to the other side, away from the town Sam knew they were *supposed* to be going to). It didn't matter if the deaths weren't real, the pain and fear and damn *memory* of it was, and Sam could do with less of all of those things, thank you very much. He would wait right here until Dean ran his thick skull into that stubborn wall enough times to finally have some sense beaten into him.

So Sam stood in the meadow, hands on his hips, as his idiot brother stubbornly stomped off in various directions, only to reappear some ten minutes later, throw a temper tantrum, and launch into a new direction all over again.

-o-o-o-

"Are you done, yet?" the younger Winchester asked after what had to be the ninth or tenth respawn. Dean had come back into existence screaming and flailing, which had happened a handful of times. Sam didn't ask and Dean didn't offer the information on what exactly had offed him this time.

The older Winchester, still panting, crossed his arms and Sam swore he'd knock that sense into his brother himself if he didn't relent soon. But Dean finally dropped his arms, defeat in the line of his shoulders that spoke to exhaustion. That weariness outweighed the irritation painted clearly across his face.

"Friggin' fine," the man from the future conceded with a pissed off mutter. He'd tried every direction except the one that led to that damn town he knew they were *supposed* to go to, and every way had ended in a truly gruesome death. He didn't like quitting, and he liked admitting he was wrong even less, but he had to call it quits. Gabriel wasn't letting them out of this place any way but *his* way.

Fucking dick.

"Lead the way, Legolas," Dean grumbled, gesturing with his hand for his elven brother to take the lead in the only direction left they hadn't tried.

Sam huffed at the nickname but gathered up his robes (at least in Dean's mind), and started towards the town.

-o-o-o-

Gabriel let out a low whistle as the pixelated meadow and two characters that looked very much like Dean and Sam were replaced by the main menu screen for the game. He tossed the remote to the side, not worrying where it landed. "That has got to be a record of some sort. Thickest skull of any human, ever. Call Guinness."

Castiel was not amused, if her renewed struggles were any indication. The littlest angel had gone absolutely apeshit the first time the Winchesters died in the game, only marginally calming down when Gabe finally got through to her that they were *fine*. It was a *game*.

Her struggles had not been quite as ferocious after that, but they were no less present at every onscreen death and respawn, until Gabe had genuinely started to worry about her. He could see those spiderweb cracks microscopically expanding, yet she showed no signs of calming down. Just like back in the diner, Castiel was risking herself actual harm if she kept at it, and she didn't seem to care.

Call Guinness for a second record breaker: most stubborn, moronic little angel that could.

"Will you calm the fuck down?" Gabe finally snapped. This was supposed to be *fun*, but just like Dean had ruined his game back in the diner, Castiel was putting a hell of a rainy cloud over his fun parade now. *He* wasn't actually causing anyone harm. Not permanently, anyway. Cassie, in the meantime, sure as shit was, and Gabe would be the one forced to clean up the mess.

He might not know this angel, but the state she was in genuinely bothered him. Grace wasn't supposed to look like that, and it was clear those stupid humans she'd been hanging with had very nearly gotten her killed. While she was fine now, Gabe didn't want to see those scars open back up and, loathe as he was to admit it, he really didn't want to be the cause. Which meant if she kept this up and it got worse, Gabriel would be the one helping her to heal.

He scoffed at the thought, looking away with a grumpy pout. Raphy had been the healer, not him.

Castiel was growling something, but it wasn't making much of an impact given the tape once more across her mouth. Gabriel had resorted to re-duct-taping the angel's mouth shortly after the first respawn. With an eye roll, he snapped his fingers and the tape disappeared.

"Release them." The demand was growled so lowly, Gabriel felt a small spark of pride for this littlest angel. He'd *almost* gotten a shiver from the threat promised in that demand. Littlest angel that could, indeed.

"Uh… *no*." Gabriel shook his head at his sister's obstinance. Demanding anything of an archangel was laughable. The kid had spunk, though. He could happily admit that much. "They've got a lesson to learn, Cassie."

The lesser angel bristled at the name. Well, actually, she probably bristled at Gabriel refusing to return her two favorite humans, but he liked to think it was the nickname. She really shouldn't be surprised her request was denied, after all.

"Then release me," she demanded instead, attempting to gain control of the situation with one hell of a fierce stare. It was an A for Effort attempt. Really. "Unless you intend to teach me a lesson as well?"

Oh, the sass on this one. Gabe leaned back in his chair, smirking at the littlest angel. There was something about this particular sibling that was quickly growing on him. For every ounce of annoyance she caused, she dished out an equal amount of potential. But potential for what? Mischief? Maybe, if Gabe could tilt those morality scales a bit more in his direction. Destruction? Oh, most definitely. There was a fire in Castiel, that much was for sure.

It was oddly… refreshing.

Gabriel might even claim that hanging around humans was doing the angel some *good*… were it not for the state of her grace.

"Don't know yet," the archangel answered honestly, shrugging his shoulders and slurping up more soda. "I'm betting there's plenty of lessons for you, Cassie-" and would you look at that, it *was* the nickname- "anything you're itching to learn in particular, little sis?"

"Where the Winchesters are and what it will take for you to free them."

Well. He'd walked right into that one, hadn't he?

Gabriel sighed and grabbed the game controller once more. He slouched down in his comfy chair with an overly loud, disappointed sigh and a pout that he hoped made the littlest angel the littlest bit guilty.

When it very clearly didn't – Castiel's eyes laser-focused on the tv screen, waiting for the menu to disappear and the game to resume so she could see the state of her precious humans – Gabriel rolled his eyes, but hit the start button.

"You're such a *bore*, Cassie."

-o-o-o-

The town was really nothing more than two dozen shabby buildings under thick-thatched roofs, all of which were surrounded by an eight-foot log fence with sharpened points at the top. There was one road leading straight up to the gate, which was conveniently the two-wheel dirt tracks the Winchesters were currently trekking. The meadow had been conveniently cut through by a road going the exact direction they needed it to go. And it had led right to the fucking town.

They were a bunch of puppets in this place, and it rankled Dean to no end.

On their way to the gate, a stopped wagon blocked their path, one wooden wheel clearly broken. The *very* colorful driver waved them down with a way too wide smile on his face. And what a face. It, like the rest of the environment around them, was just *off*. Like a living geometric breakdown of a face. So many planes. Just *wrong*.

Also, there was an exclamation mark floating over his head. But at this point, that was hardly the weirdest thing about this place.

"Hello, travelers!" the driver called, voice overly loud and as cheerful as the rest of him. "Have you come for the festival?"

"Um…" Sam exchanged an uncertain glance with his brother.

"It's too bad about this broken wheel," he continued, despite a lack of answer. "Now I can't sell my wares at the festival."

"Er.."

The silence stretched between the three, with Sam continuously glancing at Dean, and Dean looking at him like *'what the hell do you want me to do about this?'* The cart owner just kept staring right at them, smiling idly, like he was waiting for a programmed response.

Which… he probably was.

"Well, good luck with that." Dean turned and headed off the path to make his way around the downed cart.

"Dean!"

"Perhaps you could sell my wares at the festival!" the driver announced with sudden brilliance, and Sam was kind of surprised that exclamation mark still hovering over his head hadn't turned into a lightbulb.

Whoever wrote this game had spent one too many nights fueled by energy drinks. Next they'd be expected to throw chickens or play a musical instrument or something else equally inane.

"Um…"

"Yeah, we're not doing that." Dean had made it to the other side of the cart and was hoofing his way to the front gate of the city, hand on sword and goal clenched tightly between pinched shoulder blades.

Sam sighed and chased after him, grabbing him by the arm when calling his name wasn't enough to halt him. "Dean, come on."

"No!" The shout was more of a surprise than his brother whirling on him. Sam gave him the obligatory step back he certainly didn't owe the man, but he knew Dean too well. "No, I'm not coming on! This is *stupid*, Sam!"

"Agreed." The agreement came too readily, too calm and too genuine. Sam watched his brother deflate, that obstinate goal of making it to the damn city (if for nothing else than to say he'd done the thing) finally releasing from those tense shoulders. Sam continued, "This is beyond stupid, and I don't want to be here. But we are, so we're going to have to play along."

"Play along," Dean muttered viciously, his feelings on being forced to do anything very clear from the snarl on his face. "How the fuck are we supposed to know what to do, anyway?"

Sam knew his brother was griping more than asking a real question. The answer was as obvious as this entire scenario was stupid. Still, he couldn't help but rib the man that darn near never stopped ribbing him. He gestured to the cart, which was *literally* blocking the way to their goal. "Have you never played a video game before? Sheesh."

"No, Sam, I *haven't*. I've been hunting and saving people, not wasting

my time at college playing *games*!"

And wow, that had been an absolutely perfect rendition of 2007 Dean. The man from the future hadn't been aiming for 2007 Dean – he hadn't needed to since Sam figured it out and thank fuck for that, because now he could just be *himself* – but, yeah, trying or not, he'd nailed that one. Especially if the hurt bitchface coming off his brother was his scale of judgment.

Ugh. Fine.

Dean gave a growl that was as much a sigh of defeat as it was a declaration of war and tromped back to the cart and the driver, who was still just standing there, stupid idle smile on his stupid idle face.

"Hello, travelers!"

"Just give us the damn 'wares,'" Dean demanded, hand held out and stormy expression on his face. Coming around the side of the cart, Sam was trying – and failing – not to grin. Not that this situation was remotely funny, of course.

"Certainly!" The cart owner's face never changed. Dean's eye started twitching. "If you sell all my wares and bring me back the coin, I will give you a rare treasure as a reward!"

"Of course you will," Dean muttered as Sam thanked the driver for his generosity. Nothing happened, and the older Winchester gestured with his hand impatiently. "Well?"

"Good luck!"

The two brothers just stared at the driver, who stared back. Sam glanced at Dean, then held out his own arms out, palms up. "Um… wares?"

Bolts of fabric blinked into existence in his arms, and Sam staggered slightly under the sudden weight of unexpected material. Dean's eye started twitching worse.

"I hate this place."

With that he turned on his heel and trudged back off the path, around the cart, and towards the city. Sam followed diligently, managed to disappear the 'wares' as suddenly as he'd summoned them.

-o-o-o-

"I would be happy to buy your wares."

They were in a shop about two blocks in from the city gate. Sam had followed Dean down a main, cobblestoned street lined with colorful tents, people milling about and sellers hawking their goods. None of the people had had exclamation marks over their heads, which Sam quickly confirmed meant they couldn't be engaged with. Not that Dean had given him much chance to find out. The younger Winchester had paused only once to see what this festival was about before being grabbed, forcefully, by the shirt-sleeve (*robe* sleeve, Dean had corrected with snark) and pulled along to the nearest place they were likely to ditch the bolts of fabric and *end this*.

Which, of course, had been marked by a wooden sign with a sewing needle and thread carved in relief. Because of course it had.

"Great, good, do that and let's *go."*

Sam resisted comment – and there were oh so many he could pick from, but all would get him in more trouble than it was worth – and held out his arms. The wares that appeared with a single thought. He could admit, disturbing as that was, it was also kind of cool.

Dean was pulling him out of the store the minute the sound of clinking coins coming out of nowhere signaled they'd been paid. He only had to pull his brother past the stalls two more times on their way out.

-o-o-o-

They made it back to the cart owner, who thanked them with the same amount of fanfare as before – an *annoying* amount – and gave them… a key. An old, rusty key.

Some freaking treasure.

"Well that was totally worth it," Dean grouched with no lack of sarcasm, dripping and venomous. Sam steered clear. "Now what, nerd genius?"

The taller man rolled his eyes, knowing his brother's irritation was born from frustration and feeling less than competent in this environment. Heaven forbid the younger Winchester be more capable at something than his big brother. Dean had a lot of triggers,

but *that* particular one was damn near numero uno on Sam's list.

(Which Sam knew wasn't completely fair. Dean was fine with him excelling at plenty of things: research, books, spells, general knowledge, magic, anything that required study, and so on. Pretty much anything that didn't involve *action*. Unfortunately for the older Winchester, that was all there was to do in this world – boring as said action might be for the most part – and Dean didn't like failing at *action*. Action was supposed to be his one skill.)

((Which was also not fair. Sam knew Dean had plenty of skills beyond his abilities in a fight. It was *Dean* that didn't seem to know that.))

"We clearly have to find the door it goes to."

Dean stared incredulously at him. Then glanced at the walls of the town. Then Sam again. He gestured to the place with a wide, agitated arm. "In a freakin' *city*?"

Sam rolled his eyes again, grabbing the key from his brother and making his way back to where they'd just come from. "It's a *town*, Dean, not a city. There can't be more than twenty buildings to search."

"And it's such a good thing that every building only has *one* door," the older Winchester replied grumpily, knowing that was definitely not how their luck was going. "Not like emergency exits are a priority in a friggin *game*."

Sam didn't deign to comment, and instead re-entered the city. Lucky for his brother, he had a more interesting task at hand than the stalls this time, and no pulling-along was required.

-o-o-o-

Fifty-seven. Fifty-seven doors before they found the right one. Dean *hated* this place with the fiery, burning passions of hell. And he was going to unleash every one of those talents he'd learned in Hell itself upon the archangel when he got out of here.

The door swung open, the first to relent to the turn of the key in the lock, and the room was flooded with blinding, impossible light. It was so bright they couldn't see what was past the door, and Dean hated this place just that much more.

"After you, Legolas," Dean said just to be a punk because, even as he gave the door a grand sweeping gesture, he entered before his brother

could. Dean knew the kind of games Gabriel played, and as much as *he* didn't want to take a Japanese game punch to the nuts, he sure as shit wasn't letting Sammy take it first.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: One game down! This world is not meant to reflect a real game, and is instead very loosely inspired by games like Skyrim and Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

This chapter got away from me when I wrote it. I went back and forth on how the world would look – I really wanted it to feel like being inside a video game, but knew that would be a very visually–heavy decision, which is not always easy to translate in writing. I almost didn't commit to it, because I knew it was going to be very description-heavy, and wonky description at that. Eventually I committed, though I'm still concerned I didn't successfully pull it off. I work in the VFX industry, so I drew off that – trying to describe how those graphics would look from a 3-dimensional perspective, but I'm not actually sure how well it will translate for everyone. You all let me know if that was a misstep.

References: The Truman Show is a 1998 film staring Jim Carrey as Truman, a man raised on a TV set, though he doesn't know it. Danger Will Robinson is a line from Lost in Space and has colloquially become a general warning of "shit's about to go down!" :P

Next Up: Time for Game Two! What could Gabriel have in store for the boys next? Do they make games for Herpes?

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 122: Season 2: Chapter 88

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Okay, it's way later than I meant this post to be, and I have to get to bed, so author notes will be brief this time!

Chapter Warnings: More shenanigans! (See, so brief XD)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road so Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 88

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

When their vision finally cleared from the Magical Door of Blinding Light, Sam and Dean found themselves in an entirely new space. Gone were the bad graphics of the video game village, replaced by a long hallway of roughly hewn stone and wooden cross beams, all of which looked real enough. Torches provided the only light, dim and flickering as it was, hanging from the walls at twenty-foot intervals. While parts of the hallway were almost dark from lack of sufficient light, the stone directly beneath the flames was lit well enough to reveal chipped and faded paint. The walls had once been yellow and white, in a large checkerboard pattern.

"Oookay," Dean muttered, turning away from frankly regrettable interior design decisions. The door they had just come through no longer existed, replaced instead with more endless hallway, stretching into darkness for hundreds of feet behind them as well. Awesome.

Wherever they were, Dean instantly disliked it. And not just because Gabe had thrown them into it (but also, yes, absolutely because Gabe had thrown them into it). This was the kind of booby-trapped place someone like Indiana Jones wound up in. And as much as Dean was a fan of whip-wielding adventurers on the silver screen, their companions usually ended up dead by poisonous blow dart or covered in all manner of nightmarish bugs in these kinds of places.

Given that killing them off was something of a fucked-up hobby for the trickster, Dean was not optimistic about the new, horrifically

creative demises a setting like this promised.

"So, uh…"

At Sam's voice, he turned back to his younger brother, standing beside him with an expression of dread that matched just how Dean felt. At least they were back in their normal clothes, the ones they'd been wearing in the diner before Gabriel had zapped them into discount *Narnia* costumes. Jeans, t-shirt, flannel. Sam's ears were back to normal too, as was his hair. Dean momentarily mourned the loss of good teasing material. Not that Sam really needed help in that department.

"Left? Or right?"

Dean matched Sam's gaze as it turned one way, then the other. The hallway stretched endlessly in both directions, with no differentiating detail that might suggest which way was better.

"Uh…." The older Winchester's brain was about as helpful as his mouth. He shrugged and pointed the way they'd come in from the door-that-no-longer-was. "That way?"

"Works for me," Sam agreed with a corresponding shrug. "Any clue where we are this time?"

"Why would I know?" Dean countered as they started walking down the dark path. "You're the video game boy."

He could *feel* Sam's eye roll more than see it. "You're the future boy."

Touché. Not that Dean had ever dealt with something like this. Though… there was some key information about the so-called Trickster he'd been keeping from his brother. The man from the future glanced warily at Sam, knowing if the kid caught the glance he'd immediately call it *guilty*.

"So… uh… about that. There's something I need to tell you," Dean hedged, bobbing his head side to side as he considered how likely it was Gabe was watching them. Too likely. They needed to find somewhere safe they could ward up. Then they could talk. "But I don't think I should say it here."

Sam sent him one hell of a suspicious side-eye, but there was, to Dean's surprise, more trust than anger there. He was used to his kid brother being more annoyed over future knowledge he wasn't privy to.

Or, more accurately, that Dean had kept from him.

Not that he'd done this one on purpose. Or, er, consciously. He didn't know Gabe was gonna show up after they left that college campus. Of course, he should have told Sam as soon as they were back in the car…

…Which he couldn't remember getting into, now. Or leaving the campus. Or anything before waking up in a friggin' motel room to goddamn *Foreigner*. Son of a bitch, Gabe had been on that campus and thrown them into a pocket dimension then and there. Son of a *bitch*.

Well, it really wasn't his fault then. Dean gave himself a rewarding, firm nod. Sam's eyebrows went up, having watched that novella play out across his brother's face without much of a guide to the translation.

"About the Trickster?" Sam hazarded, and Dean shot him a surprised look. It was a little ridiculous how often he forgot how smart his brother was. "Cas had a lot more trouble with him than I, uh, thought she would."

"Mm-hmm," Dean confirmed with a little nod. "Stronger than he should have been, yeah?"

"Yeah." Sam sent him another look, one that conveyed he understood they were likely being watched. "You think… maybe he wasn't a Trickster?"

"Maybe. There was, uh… there was one, once, that we- uh, I mean, *I* fought. While you were off at college." Smooth recovery, Dean. Very smooth. "Turned out he wasn't a Trickster at all."

Thank god for Sam's intelligence. He didn't bother asking *what* he had been. "Got any idea how to stop this one?"

"A few. Maybe." Dean was already cycling through their options. They'd have to get Gabe to show up in one of these worlds. He'd shown up plenty in TV land, though Dean and Sam hadn't seen him every time. It was possible he hadn't shown his face yet here, either. Or he had, and unlike Doctor Sexy with his completely unsuitable, dumb sneakers, he'd blended in better this time.

Dean had his money on that damn, overly-cheerful, fucking cart owner.

"Nothing we can do yet," he continued, glancing behind them as the hallway they'd so far traversed stretched endlessly. They hadn't found any intersections, turns, or anything so far. Just an endless hallway stretching in one, long-ass, straight line. They needed supplies – something to draw with for warding, holy oil if they could be lucky enough to land in a game with the Impala.

"Wait, *games*." Dean blinked as something clicked that had been hovering on the back burner, trying to sort itself out.

"What?" Sam stopped once he realized Dean had, at first glancing warily behind them, then in front. Nothing had changed in the hallway though. "What is it?"

"*Games*," Dean repeated. "The last place was a video game, yeah?"

"Yeah," Sam confirmed with no hesitation. That place, whatever it had been, had definitely been some sort of video game.

"Games have *rules*," Dean continued, emphasis on words that suggested he was definitely onto something and had left Sam behind. "Ga- he- uh, the Trickster said we were cheating, that calling Cas was against the rules."

"Okay…" The younger Winchester glanced around again, still not sure what his brother was getting at.

"We're in another game, not-" Not TV land. Where they were expected to play their roles. Maybe that's what they had done in the last game, but there was no role to play here, in an endless hallway. "This is a game, and games are all about rules. His lessons are always- I mean- son of-!"

Dean took a deep breath, frustrated and tongue-tied. He was glaring at Sammy like he needed the kid to read his mind before he let the cat out of the bag in the form of verbal word vomit.

"He's trying to teach us a lesson," Sam covered for him with a small nod. He gestured with his hand in a circular, soothing motion that definitely meant *just breathe.* Dean decided to listen rather than gripe about the fact he *was breathing*, damnit.

"Follow the rules," Dean confirmed with a nod, trying to work on that whole breathing thing. Given the fact he was finding it harder than usual, maybe Sam had had a point. Not that he'd ever, on pain of death, admit it. "He's telling us we're not cheating our way out of this."

"Out of *what*?"

Dean's fingers curled into fists as he stared ahead at the hallway. No other direction but forward. One way they could go. God, he fucking *hated* the archangel when he was pulling this self-righteous shit.

"Our destinies."

Sam frowned immediately, brow furling in a way that Dean itched to warn would get stuck. But he held back – they had enough shit to deal with without him adding to it. There'd be other times. Like once they got the hell out of here.

"You dying, me selling my soul. The whole shebang," the older Winchester added, voice dropping low as he could in case Gabe was listening. Not that he was revealing anything he hadn't already said loud and clear in that diner.

"A crossroads deal *is* cheating," Sam muttered, the confusion in his voice almost as thick as the annoyance. Dean just snorted.

"Yeah, well, he was never great with hypocrisy. It's kinda his thing." Just wait until his kid brother – honest, good, moral to a bleeding fault – found out just who this trickster actually was. "Come on, let's keep moving. Figure out what the fuck kind of stupid game this is."

And how to follow the stupid rules that would get them the hell out of it.

-o-o-o-

They came upon a ladder before they found a turn or intersection or any other option than straight. It was just… sitting there. A rickety, old, wooden thing. It was leaning against the wall, leading up to a section in the ceiling where one of the large stone blocks was missing. It was dark beyond that square hole, with no hint of what might be up there.

"Well…" Sam turned a raised brow and a one-shouldered shrug toward his brother. "It's the only thing we've found so far. So… up?"

"Ugh, I don't want to," Dean muttered but already had one hand on a rung and was climbing up the rickety, rotting thing before he'd finished grumbling about it. The ladder held, though it creaked ominously and some of the wood steps definitely bowed under his

weight. He made it to the top without problem and stuck his head through the stone.

There was nothing but another friggin' hallway.

"It's the same," Dean called back down, frustration thick in his voice. He hauled himself through the opening, grabbing the edges of the hewed stone and pulling himself up until he was sitting on the lip. He looked back down at Sam, ten feet below. "Another fucking hallway."

Sam just shrugged. He hadn't known what to expect, and more of the same wasn't all that surprising. Certainly not the worst they could have found, though it was hardly encouraging, either. He pulled himself up the ladder as Dean swung his legs up and climbed to his feet. By the time Sam reached the top, Dean was standing over the hole, hand held out. The younger Winchester took it without hesitation and allowed his brother to help haul him through the space.

It was, indeed, the exact same above as it had been below. Enough so that Sam glanced more than once down the hole and ladder to make sure they weren't in some freak, Escher-like painting where they were somehow still in the same hallway. It wouldn't be the weirdest thing to happen to them today.

"It's like a maze," he muttered, more to himself than to his brother. Sam dug into his pocket with a sudden idea, pulling out the same, rusty old key they'd been given in the last world. It had still been in his hand when he crossed into this one, so he'd just shoved it into a pocket. It wasn't much of a weapon – unlike the bow and quiver or Dean's sword which had very much *not* come through with them – but it was probably iron, if nothing else. In their world, that was absolutely a weapon.

Not that they were exactly in their world.

Dean watched, pulling his head back with a confused frown, as Sam scraped the key against one of the blocks above the hole and ladder. He carved a large, crude X into the surface, then stood back to observe his work.

"I want to know where we've been," Sam offered as an explanation. "In case we cross it again."

The stormy look on Dean's face suggested he hadn't thought of that possibility, and really, really didn't like it. He gave a firm nod – the older Winchester equivalent of 'good thinking' – before glancing either

way down the identical hallways. "Same way as before?"

"Sure." Sam's shrug verbalized the unspoken *'why not?'* It's not like either of them had any real clue which way they should be heading.

So off they went.

-o-o-o-

"It's a hole," Dean announced helpfully when they ran into their next not-just-boring-hallway section. It was, indeed, a hole in the ground. A big one, stretching from wall to wall and about the same distance across. Maybe ten feet, give or take a few.

More like a gap in the floor, really. One big gap. Sitting right in their path, (obviously) purposefully placed (in Dean's opinion), with no clear way to get around it.

"What the fuck is this place?" Dean griped, running an annoyed hand through his hair. "What kind of game is this? Whatever kind, it *sucks*."

Sam didn't bother responding, though he didn't disagree. He was eyeing the distance they'd have to jump across before glancing back the way they'd come. He really didn't want to double back, fairly confident there wasn't any other way forward but this one. But they could go back for the ladder. Pull it up from the level below and use it as a make-shift bridge. If it held. But they'd been walking on this level for at least fifteen minutes. It wasn't a short trip back.

"Think we can make it?"

Dean snorted. He knew *exactly* what Sam was actually saying, which was, *'think **you** can make it?'* Sam's stupid cricket legs could clear that. He'd seen the beanstalk jump similar before. Maybe not in this timeline, but it's not like Sam had grown – or shrunk – any in ten years. Dean could probably make it. Maybe.

He muttered something, not quite under his breath but not *really* wanting Sam to hear it either.

"What?" Sam leaned in.

"I said I need a running start!" Dean snapped, overcompensating by shouting it now. He huffed at his brother before Sam could even react, though he absolutely knew how the beanstalk *would* react. The older Winchester spun on his heel and marched away, big heavy stomps

blocking out Sam's abysmal attempt to cover his snickers.

"I'll go first," Sam called after him, but Dean didn't acknowledge it. In a quieter voice filled with *way* too much smiling (Dean could hear it), he added, "In case I need to catch you."

The tips of Dean's ears turned red in anger (absolutely not from humiliation. Nope, not even remotely possible. Definitely anger) but he refused to respond, finally stopping when he'd gotten a couple dozen feet from the gap. Probably more than he actually needed for a running start, but damnit, there was a *point* to be made here.

(Not that Dean knew what that point was, exactly, but damnit, he was going to *make it*, regardless.)

Sam gave him a more serious, somewhat-somber nod – having moved a handful of feet from from the edge himself – then launched forward with three great heaping strides. He cleared the gap by a foot at least, momentum keeping him staggering forward a couple extra feet before he righted himself. He turned and walked cautiously back up to the edge, ready to give Dean as much of a hand as he could in case he shortchanged it.

The stupid giant offered a smile that was probably supposed to be encouraging but just looked patronizing. Or shaky. Dean picked the former. It was easier to be annoyed at.

"Okay," the older Winchester muttered under his breath, eyeing the gap and feeling pretty good about his chances of clearing it. He bounced on the balls of his feet a couple times, stance wide and shoes planted like a sprinter taking their mark. He blew out a breath between his teeth. "Easy as pie. You got this, Winchester."

Pep talk sufficiently pepped, Dean bounced on his feet one more time before he surged forward in as fast a sprint as he could manage. It helped that his body was years younger than he was used to, even after so much time here. While he was starting to forget the aches and loss of vitality that inevitably came with age, his mind hadn't quite forgotten that he wasn't actually in his prime. It liked to warn him he couldn't do things like jump ten-foot gaps in creepy dungeon hallways anymore.

His brain wasn't *completely* wrong. He almost made it. Landed one foot on solid ground, even. It wasn't his fault the ground didn't *stay* solid. The edge of the stone he'd managed to land the ball of his foot on (and nothing more), gave way with a little crumble that took the rest

of his weight with him. Forward momentum meant he was still going the right direction even as his leg dropped out from under him, and Dean hit the stones *hard*, chin bouncing off the ground with a crack even as Sam scrambled for him. He dug his nails into the grooves and cracks available to stop the backwards slide that threatened to sweep him into the death pit below (or whatever it was).

Dean didn't slip too far into the hole, just to his hips, before his brother had a solid grip on his arm and torso, and he had bloody fingernails but a damn solid hold on the edge of the stone he'd landed on.

"Ow, damnit," he grumbled, kicking his feet uselessly against the wall of the pit, looking for purchase. It took a bit of effort and longer than either was comfortable with, but between the two of them, they managed to haul him up and out of the hole. Dean rolled flat onto his back, Sam collapsing onto his butt beside him, both panting. "That sucked."

"Yeah. Let's not do it ever again," Sam agreed, the slight tremor in his hand the only giveaway to the adrenaline coursing through him. He was eyeing the hole with less-than-veiled distaste, obviously imagining a different outcome than the one they had. Dean hit his calf with a floppy hand.

"Come on, help me up." He flopped the same hand back and forth in Sam's face. His kid brother huffed something like annoyance, but they both knew he was playing along. "We've got another exciting hallway to explore."

Sam climbed to his feet, dusting his hands off on his jeans before clasping Dean's hand and hauling him up with a grunt. They both stared at the stretch of hallway before them with equal aversion, stone and flickering flames that eventually disappeared into darkness. Just how long would they be at this? It had to have been over an hour already.

As Dean started forward with begrudging steps, Sam drew up short, still staring into that awaiting darkness. A darkness he swore just moved. Or maybe… got closer? The younger Winchester squinted, trying to see that far down the dimly lit corridor. But as he did, the darkness absolutely grew closer. One of the furthest flames he could still see had been snuffed out. And then another.

And another.

Sam took a hesitant step back, acutely aware of the pit they'd only just managed to cross. "Um… Dean?"

His brother turned partially, glancing over his shoulder only to frown at the growing fear on Sam's face. "What?"

"I think…" Sam shook his head, still staring at the darkness. Two more flames were gone, and now it was obvious that something... something *big* was coming their way. Something dark that glinted in the flames before they disappeared. "Um. Run."

"What?" Dean repeated, staring wide-eyed at Sam before whipping back around to whatever it was he saw. It took a moment, Dean squinting into the distance as well, before he saw what Sam had seen. *"What?!"*

As it grew closer, they could *hear* it. A shift of scales on stone. The unmistakable hiss of a tongue tasting air and scenting *them*. Black, iridescent skin glittered as it caught the flames that weren't being extinguished so much as blotted out by the huge, approaching *snake*.

"*What*?!" Dean screamed this time, immediately stumbling back only for Sam to catch him by the elbow and keep him from stumbling right over the edge of the pit.

"Jump!" Sam yelled, immediately spinning and gearing up to undo what they'd only just managed to do. Without the couple steps leap and ample time to prepare, he only barely cleared the jump this time, stumbling to one knee and managing a tuck and roll to avoid the same problem Dean had had of catching the edge.

Dean stared wide eyed between that gaping hole and the fast-approaching snake. His brain still hadn't gotten over the freaking *Harry Potter* Basilisk that was very much baring down on them. It was like a skipping record of *what*? over and over again.

What the *hell* was this game? And oh, how he was going to *eviscerate* Gabriel once they caught up to him.

Dean stumbled as many steps away from the edge as he dared – putting himself that much closer to the freakin' *snake* (and good god, he would never make fun of Indiana Jones ever, ever again) – and then he ran.

He knew he wasn't going to make it long before his feet left the ground. He could tell he didn't have the speed to clear it. Sam's face

showed the same conclusion even as he scrambled on his knees to the edge, desperate to catch his brother. They managed an awkward as hell hand grab that had Dean slamming into the stone edge right at chest level, and he was certain he should have broken at least one rib from that impact. It hurt, sure, but he didn't feel the telltale crack or jarring pain of suddenly broken bone.

Sam desperately grabbed at his arm, but there was little he could do to haul Dean up as the older Winchester scrabbled for purchase with feet that found nothing but smooth stone.

"Son of a bitch," Dean growled out, trying and failing to pull himself up. He knew when Sam's head snapped up to stare well over his head, that getting him back up and into the hallway was the least of their problems. Son. Of. A. Bitch! "Let go, Sam."

His brother's gaze snapped back to him, and Dean would have primped and preened at the look of speechless shock there, had it been any other situation. "What?"

"Let go and run!" Dean hollered, trying to pull away from his brother. It didn't take much. Sam's shock made it pretty easy to pull right out of his grip. Dean had one moment to yell – and he was sure Sam would absolutely murder him for it later – "Fly, you fool!" before he slipped right over the edge and disappeared into the darkness.

"No!" Sam lurched forward, still reaching for his brother. "Dean!"

The hiss of a snake – a pissed off snake, by the sound of it – drew Sam's head back up to the approaching danger. He scrambled to his feet, eyeing the pit Dean had disappeared into, then the giant reptile only sixty, maybe fifty feet away and closing.

"Shit," the younger Winchester swore, realizing there was no way he could outrun that thing, even at his fastest. He stared at the hole that had swallowed Dean one more time before swearing, again, "Shit!"

Sam Winchester launched himself into the darkness, after his brother, and hoped whatever was down there was somehow more pleasant a death than being eaten – or run over – by a giant snake.

-o-o-o-

The pit, it turned out, was more of a chute. The walls narrowed quickly, and what should have been a rough landing turned into more of a sloping slide. Sam was pretty sure physics weren't supposed to

work that way, but given they'd been chased down said chute by a giant snake that certainly didn't exist in any world with physics Sam was familiar with, it didn't really matter much, did it?

The chute went from vertical to horizontal over the length of maybe two hundred feet, all in complete darkness, before a square of dim, flickering light visibly marked the end. Sam came tumbling out of an opening about twice as wide as his shoulders, which deposited him back into a less-than-surprisingly familiar hallway.

Dean managed to roll out of Sam's landing pad at the last second, having been sprawled across the stone floor, panting from what certainly felt like a near death experience. He climbed to his feet with a groan and a grunt as the younger Winchester went head over feet a couple times before coming to a rest in a very similar sprawl.

"Ow," Sam commented, mostly deadpanned as he stared up at the ceiling without bothering to get up. Aches and scrapes were quickly registering now that he wasn't tumbling to a possibly gruesome death. Dean offered him a hand, his other braced on his hip in a pose that radiated exhaustion. With a sigh and a grunt, Sam grabbed his brother's hand and allowed Dean to haul him up.

"Well. We're not dead," the younger Winchester offered less than enthusiastically. He walked the two feet back to the wall they'd emerged from, sticking his head into the opening of the chute. There was nothing to see, just the gentle slope disappearing up into darkness.

"Or eaten," Dean added with a similar level of grump and disdain. "Yay, us."

Sam pulled away from the hole and straightened, taking in the endless hallway that looked – surprise, surprise – exactly like all the others they'd been through already. The hunter didn't try to hide his growing agitation. "Giant snakes? Holes in the floor. What is this game supposed to be?"

Dean just threw his hands out in a clear, physical expression of *'fuck if I know.'* Whatever it was, he hated it. *Hated* it. With every fiber of his being. When he got the fuck out of here, he was killing Gabe. Timeline be damned. Archangel be damned.

Sam sighed, rubbing at the back of his head like he might have a lump back there. Dean hoped not. Even twitched a little with the urge to fuss. But Sam was a big boy, and he wasn't displaying any signs of a

head injury, so the older Winchester did his best to shove all those big brother instincts down.

"So… left or right?"

Dean snorted at Sam's question, his voice filled with resignation.

'*Neither*,' is what Dean wanted to say. '*Fuck this place, and this game.'*

But that wasn't actually an option at the moment, so instead he just growled and wordlessly picked left, taking off in that direction with clear irritation.

The sound of Sam's jogging footsteps preceded his brother joining his side. "Did you seriously quote *Lord of the Rings* before falling to your death?"

Dean's non-verbal grunt was confirmation enough. It had seemed fitting, at the time. Maybe even more so, now, considering how permanent that 'death' had been. "Did you seriously jump after me, Romeo?"

"God," Sam chortled, ignoring his brother's comeback (which was hard to resist. After all, Dean's choice of names made him *Juliet,* and that was not easy for *Samantha* to pass up*)*. Instead, he focused on his revenge, twenty-four years in the making. "You're such a nerd."

The scandalized expression that hit his brother's face with the force of a bag of bricks was worth every year he'd had to endure the same taunt.

-o-o-o-

"Take it back," Dean demanded, arms crossed, head tilted back as he watched Sam ascend the ladder first this time.

"Not a chance, Nerd."

If he thought the rungs had bowed under his weight, watching them dip under the beanstalk's was downright disconcerting. Not that they knew if this was the same ladder, of course, but Dean had a bad feeling.

"You take it back or I swear to God-"

Sam made a noise of disgruntled disappointment as he pulled himself through the square hole in the ceiling, legs disappearing. Dean already

knew what he'd found before he said it.

"It's the same," he confirmed, standing next to the large *X* he'd marked into the stone wall the last time they'd climbed a ladder. "My mark's up here. We got sent back to the start."

"The start of *what*?" Dean practically snarled as he started up the ladder, not bothering with Sam's offered arm and pulling himself up through the cutout himself. Sam's mark was, indeed, there and Dean wanted to spit at it.

So they'd fallen down a hole that somehow took them from a second story hallway to a first story hallway, at least a half mile apart. What. The. Hell.

"Chutes and Ladders," Sam suddenly said, straightening up.

Dean eyed him from the side. "What?"

"The kid's board game, *Chutes and Ladders*. Remember? We played it once, at Pastor Jim's." Sam was looking up and down the hallway like it suddenly, somehow made sense. Like any of this could ever make sense.

"Uh…" Yeah, no. Dean didn't remember playing some stupid board game thirty- twenty- forty- fuck it, *decades* ago.

Sam pulled the key out of his pocket and crouched down, drawing out a large rectangle which he then divided into sections. Like a tall building with ten floors. "Okay, so it's a board game where you start here-" he made a little *X* in the bottom right corner- "and you have to move along each floor until you come to a ladder-" he drew a crude approximation of a ladder leading up to the next floor- "where you get to move up, or a chute-" this time he drew what looked vaguely like a tunnel, leading from the second story back to the first- "where you fall down."

He drew a rough star in the top right corner of the rectangle. Then the beanstalk stood from his crouch, key still gripped in his hand as he looked back down at the game. "First person to make it to the top wins."

Dean stared at the drawing, caught between something akin to pride (his brother really was damn smart, and it was somehow better to know *what* they were facing) and disdain. "That's stupid. This is stupid."

"It's a kids' game," Sam admonished, like that somehow made any of it better.

"And the *giant snake*?" Dean challenged right back, hands on his hips and glaring at his brother. Daring him to explain away that one.

Sam shrugged, a sort of sheepish, regretful look taking over his face. "There's another version, called *Snakes and Ladders*. Where the snakes replace the chutes, and you slide down them instead."

Dean just stared. And stared.

"That's even stupider."

Sam didn't bother telling his brother 'stupider' wasn't a word. Not really the battle he wanted to wage at this juncture. Instead he just shrugged again. The fact that a magical being of immense power had trapped them in a *game* seemed to override the importance of getting the details of said game right. At least in Sam's opinion.

"The trickster probably just combined them."

Like a dick. One who thought he was funny. Yup, that sounded like Gabe, Dean thought, still irritated beyond what could be put into words or grunts and growls.

"The real question is how long it'll take to get to the top," Sam said with a sigh that was both resigned and annoyed. There were things to consider here. Things the younger Winchester didn't really want to consider. When would they sleep? Eat, or drink, for that matter (and not just *when* for those things, but also *what*). Between this game and the last, they'd probably been at this so-called lesson for at least twenty hours. Oddly enough, Sam wasn't hungry yet. He hadn't had to take care of any bodily needs, either.

Perhaps it was the Trickster – or whatever he was – taking care of their, er, needs for them? As disturbing a thought as that was, at least it was convenient (unlike anything else in this situation). Or maybe time, in the traditional sense of biological function – stopped in these illusions? Sam wondered if they were actually unconscious in the Impala, sitting outside that college campus and all of this was just in their heads.

Who knew how an unknown-entity's unknown magic actually worked.

"And how many times we get booted back to the bottom." Dean's

comment, added through clenched teeth, brought Sam's mind back to the present.

He eyed his brother from the side. What they needed was more information, and Dean had it. But he didn't feel safe sharing it, not here, which meant the Trickster was probably watching them. Sam wasn't sure how they were going to get around that. But until they figured it out, he had to get Dean to step back from that edge he was clearly toeing.

Dean had never done well stuck in situations out of his control. Luckily, Sam knew exactly how to diffuse that particular bomb.

"Well…" He shifted that side eye to be even less direct, then watched in amusement as Dean tensed, eyes narrowing in immediate distrust. "Your death count in that last game was what? Nineteen?"

It turned out, Dean could express at least some of his irritation fairly well in growl form. Of course, Sam was immune to such methods of communication, so it got Dean nowhere. The taller hunter just grinned sunnily. The growl went from expressing irritation to promising fratricide.

"Want to beat that record, *Nerd*?"

-o-o-o-

Lucky – or perhaps unluckily – for Sam, Dean didn't manage to murder him before the snake did it for them both. And boy, was that an unpleasant experience. Dean almost thought he'd take the troll and spiders back. Almost.

Best as they could tell, there was only one snake, and it roamed the corridors one at a time, level by level. They managed to get past the first chute – Sam scraping another *X* into the stone to mark where they'd been – and two additional ladders before they found the beast again. This time, they were not lucky enough to have a chute to drop into or ladder to climb. Dean woke up after the very, *very* visceral experience of having one's body flattened – and he meant *flattened* (bones crumbling, organs bursting, muscle and blood trying to push straight through skin for lack of anywhere else to *go*) – beneath a two-ton snake, only to find a hastily drawn X carved into the stone wall next to him and a ladder coming up from the floor below.

God Friggin' Damnit.

Sam materialized a moment later to his brother throwing a truly spectacular temper tantrum. The rage screaming and stomping wouldn't change anything, but it wasted some of that pent up energy, at least. Once his toddler of an older brother had blown the last of his steam, Sam climbed to his feet and pulled Dean off the wall he'd all but collapsed against.

"Feel better?"

"Not one damn bit," Dean snapped back, but sighed and allowed the tension still in his shoulders to loosen and slump. "We've gotta come up with a plan."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "For getting to the top?"

"For getting *out*." Dean gestured around them, but Sam knew he didn't mean this particular hallway or game. Out of wherever the Trickster had sent them.

"We can't plan if we can't talk freely," Sam muttered quietly, keeping his voice pitched as low as he could.

His brother straightened up suddenly, eyes holding a new determination. It was a look Sam hadn't seen since anger primarily took over every aspect of the older Winchester, two games and a hundred Sundays ago. "Yeah. Yeah, you know what, you're right."

Sam almost asked him to repeat that, but he was more interested in whatever Dean had just thought of than ragging on him. "Right about… what exactly?"

"Talking in private. Gimme that thing." Dean made an open-palmed grabby hand towards the younger hunter. Sam didn't actually know what that *'thing'* was, but considering all he had on him was the antique key from the last world, he handed it over without a clue as to what his brother was on about. In the meantime, Dean started grumbling and mumbling to himself about being stupid and not thinking of this sooner.

Sam didn't know what *this* could be, so he refrained from responding with several of his own choice comments.

The man from the future turned to one of the walls and started drawing on the stone to the left of Sam's *X*. The younger Winchester watched on, first in confusion, then realization, morphing finally into avid attention. Dean was drawing *wards*. He put up no less than eight

of them, in as much of a circle around them as he could. He got Sam to give him a boost up – a knee, actually – so he could scrape two of 'em into the ceiling.

Sam didn't recognize most of the symbols, but he could proudly identify those written in Enochian. The younger Winchester hadn't had much time to dig into the angelic language outside of working with Cas and Bobby to create a dictionary of sorts, so his understanding was limited. Wards had been high up on the learning to-do list, but Castiel insisted a basic understanding of the language was important; it would only make them more competent at specialized wards in the future.

She'd cast a look Dean's way that everyone in the room had been able to read. Clearly, his Castiel hadn't taken the time to form that foundational base. The man from the future had just glared and muttered that a friggin' apocalypse didn't exactly come with educational downtime, sue him.

When it came to Enochian sigils, Sam only had the angel-banishing one under his belt so far, so he didn't recognize most of what Dean was drawing. But from the individual words buried within the warding that he could read (thanks to, he was sure Castiel would say if she were here, a good foundation), it was for protection, privacy, and silence.

Dean was building them a space they could talk in.

Sam, realizing that such a place would only be better reinforced if Dean could ward all six sides rather than just four, went over to the hole where the ladder came up from the floor below. It took some effort, some grunts and heaves, but he managed to pull it up through the gap in the stone floor and let it clatter to the ground. Dean paused in his drawing efforts to stare at Sam in confusion.

"For the sides," was all Sam offered as he used one foot braced on a rung and a couple good pulls to splinter the ladder. He handed Dean one half – a long wooden pole with half the rungs still attached, and went about laying his half across the width of the hallway.

Dean grinned when he got it.

"And here I thought they called you the smart one for no reason."

Sam rolled his eyes but didn't deign that worthy of a return insult. Dean was already starting to carve symbols into the wood – albeit

smaller than those on the stone. But size didn't matter when it came to wards: only accuracy and completion.

Once the older Winchester had finished carving, they switched places. Sam laid the finished beam along the width of the hallway, as centered as possible, allowing them to 'close in' their warding bubble on either side. Dean started carving into the other piece of wood, already in position on the other side of the hallway.

When finished, the man from the future climbed to his feet, handed the rusty old key (the end of which was significantly duller now), and dusted his hands off. Sam had half expected the wards to do something – glow, flash, *something* – when completed, but he supposed whatever his brother had been drawing didn't have a form of activation.

"Are we…" Sam looked around, then turned to Dean. "Can we talk?"

"We should be able to," Dean hedged, giving the back of his neck an awkward rub. "I'm, uh- I was never the best with wards, but we should be good. Even if Gabe is watching."

Sam's brow furled immediately. "Gabe?"

-o-o-o

The archangel leaned back into his lazy boy with a huff of irritation and nothing short of a pout. "Well, that's just not fair."

Gabriel was glaring petulantly down at the board game spread out between him and Castiel. He'd turned her chair to face the low-lying coffee table, on which *Chutes and Ladders* (or, well, *his* version) was set up. Two of the pieces – the blue and green ones – were huddled together on one square, so very close to the bottom of the board. They were also surrounded by a glowing bubble of translucent blue power.

"It's not even necessary!" Gabe argued, using both hands to gesture at the pieces like his companion might agree with the outrage. "It's not like plastic tokens can *talk*."

Castiel just glared, wrists and chest still strapped to the chair, duct tape firmly in place over those mouthy lips.

"Oh please," the archangel 'pfft'ed, waving away the expression on his sibling's face. "You're just grumpy they're not winning."

The little angel that could was in the lead, actually. The white token was very nearly to the last level on the board, with a scant twelve more spaces to go. Not that Cassie had been allowed to move her own piece, tied up as she was. Gabe had been playing on her behalf as needed, good brother that he was.

Castiel just continued to glare in obligatory silence.

The archangel sighed loudly, poking at the bubble of power. Maybe he should make some more friends. This game night was mediocre at best.

-o-o-o-

"Gabriel."

Dean winced at the tone. And the emphasis embedded in the tone. And the bitchiness embedded in the emphasis. "Yeah."

"The *archangel*."

The man from the future went for a grimace this time rather than a wince. Just to mix it up. "Yeah."

"And that… that didn't seem worth *mentioning*?!" Samantha was practically yelling, but Dean knew that tone. It was the *'my brother is an idiot; why, why me?'* lecturing tone Sam always got when Dean had fucked up to some degree. It wasn't anger so much as… disbelief. Maybe a little outrage.

"I told you we didn't want anything to do with him!"

"That's not even remotely the same thing, Dean!" Sam threw his arms out to the side and Dean winced again.

"Look, I didn't think we'd be dealing with him, okay?" The older Winchester shrugged defensively, having run out of anything that might serve as a better excuse. "I thought we'd have time-"

"You always think we'll have time," Sam snapped back immediately, but he dropped his arms and with it the tension in his shoulders. He kinda sagged, and somehow that made Dean feel worse than anything yet. "We *both* think that. But we never have time. So you have to start telling me things as they come up, man. There's never time after, and it keeps biting us in the ass."

"Or running us over," Dean muttered under his breath, the memory of their recent death-by-snake still fresh in his mind.

"As they come up," Sam repeated firmly, insistence in every word. He gave Dean an eyebrow not quite a bitchface but building up to one – daring his brother to refuse. The older Winchester sighed.

"As they come up," he agreed, telling himself he'd figure out how to do that next time. As it turned out, forthrightness wasn't really his thing. Not without some conscious thought, at least.

Sam nodded in acceptance and uncrossed his arms. "Good. Now… how do we get out of an archangel's trap?"

Dean blinked at his brother's specific phrasing, spine straightening with a memory. He grinned at his brother, who seemed wary, at best, of his sudden change in mood. "We make a trap of our own."

The sasquatch raised an eyebrow, glancing around at their meager – very meager – supplies and surroundings. "We can do that? Here?"

"Uh…" Dean grimaced again, realizing that, at least for a moment, they were going to have to keep playing the game. "Not exactly. I mean, an archangel's still an angel, so all we need is-"

"Holy oil." Sam finished the thought, even as that second eyebrow joined the first. "Uh, Dean… I don't think an archangel is just going to give us a game with holy oil in it."

Not knowing what it could do to an angel, at least, Sam thought. He could still remember the heat from the flames they'd encased Castiel in that first night. And what Dean said it could do to the angel if she-he- *they* crossed it.

"No, but if he sticks the Impala into one of these stupid things, we're golden." When the younger Winchester turned a surprised expression his way, the man from the future shrugged. There'd been a container in Baby's trunk for three months now, tucked safely in the back of her trick compartment. "I don't like being without it in End Times."

Fair enough.

"So… is Gabriel likely to throw the Impala into one of these… erm… games?"

Dean shrugged again, this time both frustrated and clueless. "He did

last time. Granted, it was TV Land, not Game Land but… I mean, he's kind of predictable, really."

Sam stared at his brother for a good thirty seconds, then glanced around the live action game of Chutes, Ladders, and giant Snakes they were stuck in. *This* was predictable?

"Okay…" the younger Winchester drew in a breath, pushing all the crazy that was their lives to the side for now. They needed to deal with the problem in front of them. "So, we just need a racing game, or something."

The suggestion sounded even kind of hopeful. Racing games were pretty common, or so he thought. That didn't sound like a completely impossible probability, at least.

"Ooh, or Grand Theft Auto!" Dean practically crowed with excitement. "Now *that's* my kind of game!"

Sam didn't bother raining on his brother's happy parade by reminding him neither Trickster nor Archangel was likely to give him anything he wanted. But he kept quiet because in order to get out of here, they were going to need a certain amount of pure luck, and Sam didn't want to jinx that in any way.

"Alright," the younger hunter gave an encouraging nod. They had a plan. A weak plan that relied entirely on their enemy to slip up without realizing it, but at least it was a plan. Now all they had to do was survive the Archangel's tricks and games until they found one with the Impala.

Hopefully.

And if Dean's enthusiastic grin seemed a little too optimistic… well, Sam kept that to himself.

-o-o-o-

"Finally!"

Gabriel leaned forward as the little bubble of magic popped and disappeared. "Friggin' chatty Cathies over here, am I right?"

Castiel's only response was her ever-unchanging glare. Gabriel sighed.

"Alright. I'll tell you what." The archangel snatched up the dice from

the board, holding them out to the angel that couldn't take them. "Twelve spaces till you cross the finish line and win. Manage that with no more fuss, and I'll let you see the boys."

The amount his kid sister perked up at that, glare immediately replaced with the wide, innocent eyes of expectation, was almost gag worthy. Whatever those two mooks had done to get their weak little human nails dug so deep into his sibling, Gabriel didn't know. But he was going to have to undo it before it got her killed.

Piercing blue eyes (that were eerily reminiscent of the blues so commonly threaded throughout Castiel's grace) dropped down to the pair of dice sitting in Gabe's hand, then back up to him.

"Oh, right. Let me just roll those for you."

He gave them a toss, and the game resumed.

-o-o-o-

They got better at it. Whether that was experience, determination, or the optimism of having a plan (one that Dean was on board with, so he stopped whining (quite as much)), Sam couldn't say. But they were certainly making progress.

The younger Winchester began keeping a mental count every time they ran into the snake, trying to track how long it took for the beast to make a full loop and cross paths with them again. By his best estimate, they had about fifteen minutes between encounters. Dean kept track of their exits: the many chutes in the ground, and the almost-twice-as-many ladders scattered about. When Sam's counter got low, they stopped trying to make any progress forward, instead nervously hanging out by the nearest escape, ducking down a level until the thing passed, then scrambling back up before the stupid beast made it through the level below.

Without the giant death snake as an impassable obstacle, they started gaining real ground.

It rankled Dean to no end that playing along was pretty much the key to making any sort of progress at all, but that was Gabe's whole point, wasn't it? It had ended up being the archangel's downfall the last time he'd played this stupid game with them. It was going to be his downfall this time, too. Dean just had to be… patient.

His favorite.

"How many stupid levels can this stupid game stupidly have?" Dean practically screamed as they made it up a ladder to their eighth- no, *ninth*- identical hallway. Okay, so the whole being patient thing was only taking him so far, really. He still thought he was doing great, considering.

"Well-"

"Shaddup, it was rhetorical," came the immediate growl, cutting Sam off before he could start reasoning out an answer that would only piss Dean off more anyhow.

Sam opened his mouth to retort when the now-familiar slide of scales on stone had both men freezing in equal parts fear and surprise. The two moved instantly. Dean, who hadn't even gotten his legs out of the hole yet, just flat out dropped back down. He took the fall with a roll to avoid breaking any bones, but damn if his legs didn't protest the harsh landing regardless. Sam managed to half-scramble, half-slide down the ladder, losing his footing three rungs from the bottom and landing hard on his ass.

"Ow," he groaned, rubbing at his posterior which was currently reminding him just how little padding he had back there.

"What the hell," Dean said, staggering back to his feet. "What happened to your count!"

Which sounded like an accusation, but Sam ignored that part as his brother extended a hand and hauled him back up. Dean always sounded accusatory when he was angry. Or surprised. Or tired. Or… well, let's just say Sam was used to it by now.

"I don't know," he answered honestly, leaning into the space beneath the ladder hole, watching black snakeskin pass above in almost darkness. The iridescent shimmer and noise they made as the creature moved were the only giveaways of the near-silent, stealth killer. Finally, a tail passed overhead and the soft glow from flickering torches returned. Sam started climbing up, lest the snake appear on this level next. "Either his pattern changed-" unlikely considering how long they'd been playing and yet to see such a thing- "or this is the top level."

"Wait, what?" Dean shouted from below, voice a weird mix of eagerness and outrage, as if Sam had been holding back that information (and really, even if that was true (which it *wasn't*) Dean would be one to talk).

Sam cleared the hole as Dean started up the ladder, his pace faster than it had been in hours. "Well, the snake has to start somewhere, right? It starts at the top and makes its way to the very bottom level. Then… restarts."

Which would do more than just throw off his count (after all, who knew if the snake appeared on the top level right away, if it took time to travel from bottom to top, or where it might spawn along the level. All data Sam lacked. Magical Trickster-slash-Archangel worlds weren't exactly among the math examples taught in school). But at least if he was right and this was the top level, they had time before they ran into it again.

"Cas!"

Sam spun at his brother's exhilarated cry. Dean had made it most of the way up the ladder, hands already on the stone floor and arms bent in preparation to pull himself through the floor, but his head was turned to the left (where the finish line might be, if Sam's theory was correct).

The younger Winchester followed Dean's gaze, eyes widening in surprise. A hundred feet away, barely visible in the dim lighting, was the end of the hallway. A solid stone wall that created a dead end – a thing they'd yet to encounter on any other level – and sitting in front of it was Castiel.

"Cas!" Dean yelled again, scrambling and clawing his way out of the hole only to take off running. Sam started after him almost as eagerly, though a part of his brain was firing in overdrive, worried this was a trap. The angel was sitting in a chair and, from the stiff and awkward way she held herself, might be tied up.

"Dean-"

But the older Winchester was pulling ahead, running without reserve, and Sam had little choice but to follow. As they got closer it became obvious that Cas was, indeed, tied to a dining room chair: wrists, chest, and ankles all bound with rings of duct tape. Her mouth was covered in a single piece of it, which explained her silence as they approached.

She tossed her head animatedly as Dean rounded the chair, sliding to an eye-level squat in front of her. He immediately reached out, one hand cupping the back of her head, fingers sliding through that stupidly perfect hair, the other going for the tape across her mouth.

Those blue eyes were all but glowing with ferocity, and it made Dean's chest do loopty-loops he was totally on board for. After all, if Cas still had fight left in those beauties, he – *she* – was alright, and that was worth all the loopty-loops.

"Cas! Thank fuck," he half-growled, half-prayed, and the angel tilted her head with a chastising look that had him almost gasping with laughter. He was pretty sure that was her *'Dean, it's too early for blasphemy'* expression. His fingers slipped on the edge of the tape, again and again, unable to find purchase, and the hunter realized it wasn't *normal* tape.

'*It's grace, Dean. It is intent.'*

Right, right. Bullshit, is what it was. Same as it had been in heaven. With a growl, Dean dropped his hands to settle atop hers (for lack of anywhere else to put them, of course) and started clawing at the tape there that had no grip, either. Like it was a part of her skin, rather than stuck on top of it. With a growl, he focused on the important thing: "You're okay."

Well, as okay as an angel could be taped to a chair in some fucked up game with a giant snake out to kill them.

Castiel tried to say something – it sounded like a warning – just as Sam caught up, coming to a stop a few feet away. Something about this didn't feel right, even if the younger hunter couldn't put his foot on it.

"Dean… maybe we should-"

His words were interrupted by a glow that started at the feet of both hunter and angel, then started to build. Sam took a step back in surprise, gaze dropping to the stone below his brother and Castiel. Unlike the rest of the hallway, which was a repeated pattern of roughly hewn square stones, the ground beneath the two of them was one, long rectangle that stretched from one end of the hallway to the other. Its top was smoother than the surrounding stone, as though it had been polished.

And carved into that flat surface was the word *'Finish'*.

Dean stared down, slightly dumbfounded, as the glow – the same damn bright light that had signified the end of the last game too – grew too bright to continue staring at. He didn't even have a chance to look back up, to meet Cas's eyes, before the light took over the end of

the hallway entirely, engulfing them both.

"Son of a-!"

When the light faded, Castiel was still tied to the chair, glare full of righteous fury and utter dismay as she stared at the empty space in front of her. Dean was gone, leaving just the angel and the younger Winchester alone in the empty, dimly lit hallway.

Sam sighed. He should have finished his warning after all.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Ain't I a stinker?

Up Next: Even MOOOORE shenanigans! But for real, next chapter is the essence of Changing Channels and possibly the most fun I've ever had writing a chapter. I can't wait to share it with you all.

Chapter 123: Season 2: Chapter 89

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Welcome to the main event!

Chapter References: Before being thrown into Gabriel's pocket dimensions of hell, the boys were at Bobby's. While waiting to head out, Dean hollered to Sam that he was taking so long because he was packing like a girl, which Castiel then had to ask about, not understanidng the differences between the genders and their packing habits. See **Chapter 115**.

Chapter Warnings: We've got some rapid fire gaming to do, but first! Sam gets to have a conversation with Castiel (well… a one-sided one, at least), becasue he's patient, unlike his brother.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 89

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam approached the bound angel a lot more cautiously than his brother had, careful not to cross the line onto that final stone where Castiel sat. She watched him, head turned practically ninety degrees, blue eyes full of warning and frustration.

"Are you okay?" he asked, crouching down just as Dean had so he was at the angel's eye level, but keeping a good foot back so he wouldn't trigger the end of the game.

She nodded slowly, eyes neither blinking nor moving away from his own. She tried to speak again, the words still muffled by the tape that Sam didn't dare reach out for. It sounded different than what she had tried to say to Dean, but it was still a warning. Sam could hazard a guess.

"We know," he said softly, nodding at her doubtful expression. "About the Trickster. We know."

When both eyebrows rose in surprise, Sam sighed.

"Dean's known the whole time."

Those same brows dove sharply in the opposite direction, and the younger Winchester found himself nodding again.

"I know. I know. He's bad at this. We're… working on it." Sam sighed again, mentally shelving his own frustration with his brother's inability to communicate in anything even remotely resembling a timely manner. Instead, he focused on Castiel. "Are you really okay?"

Her nod was firmer this time, eyes softer (yet no less fierce, a talent Cas seemed particularly skilled at). Sam was still learning how to read the far more stoic angel, but he was fairly certain she was trying to tell him to worry about himself. And his brother, of course.

"I'll watch out for him," Sam said firmly, just as firm as her own, non-verbal response had been. He rose to his feet. "Stay safe, Cas. We're coming for you, okay?"

With that promise, Sam crossed the finish line, placing his hand on the angel's shoulder as he came to stand in front of her. Those blue eyes looked conflicted – no doubt a protest about them prioritizing her when they should be escaping themselves – but they were quickly overtaken by the blinding light of the next transition.

-o-o-o-

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Gabe said the minute Castiel rematerialized in his living room. He hadn't even lowered his hand from snapping her back into existence. Sheesh. "I told you you'd get to *see* them. I didn't promise anything more."

Her glare spoke whole lectures, all at once. It was pretty impressive, actually. Gabe snickered.

"Dean's face was pretty good, wasn't it? You think he'll ever learn to look before he leaps?" The archangel threw himself into the Lazy Boy once more, rocking back and forth with the obnoxious squeak of old springs. "And Sam! Clearly the brains of the operation. We knew that, of course, but sometimes it's just nice to be right."

Castiel's glare continued. In fact, that lecture was quickly deteriorating into a scolding. Gabe might even get it up to a full rant, with a couple more well-placed pokes and prods.

Grinning, the trickster dug the TV remote out from under his butt and flipped the device on. He gave a sharp whistle and Jack, curled up next to the TV stand in his little donut bed, popped up. He swiped the game controller off the edge of the coffee table and trotted over with it, short tail wagging.

"Who's a good boy?" Gabriel cooed as he took the controller from him, exchanging it for chin scritches. "You are. Aren't you?"

With a chirpy little bark, Jack returned to his bed, circling several times before settling back into a curl. Gabe pressed a couple buttons, then settled in to watch the loading screen pop into existence.

Time for the next game!

-o-o-o-

It was dark. Sam blinked at the pitch black that confronted him. He tried to turn, to look around, but found that he couldn't. He was able to turn his head, lean side to side, but he couldn't turn his body. Or seemingly move forward or backwards at all.

The wave of panic wasn't unexpected. Sam tried to keep his thoughts on top of it, rather than get pulled down into the fear of not being able to move. This was just part of whatever trick the Trickster – *archangel* – was playing now. He was fine. Once he figured out what he was supposed to do, he'd be able to move again.

With that line of reasoning helping keep the panic at bay as much as possible (which wasn't to say all that much at all, just enough to keep thinking through it), Sam started testing what he could move. Neck, fingers, arms all fine, although only so much as up and down. He couldn't cross his arms in front of him or reach behind at all. Just up and down in line with his sides. A pattern was forming, as far as Sam could tell. He could only move side to side, along a line.

"What the friggin' hell is this supposed to be?!"

The scream – pure annoyed outrage Sam was way far too familiar with – caught the younger Winchester by surprise. It was coming from some distance away, but most definitely in front of him. Sam squinted, trying to locate his brother in the darkness. There was a far-off light source, but it was too distant to identify as anything other than a rectangle of light. There was nothing else but the black.

"Dean?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Sam!"

Sam let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Yeah. You okay?"

"Oh, I am so far from okay-"

"I can't move," Sam interrupted what was mounting into a surefire rant. "Can you?"

"No!"

Ignoring the anger behind that barked response – like it was somehow Sam's fault – the younger hunter tried again. "Can you move side to side?"

Another stretch of silence followed. Sam could almost make out whatever curses his brother was grumbling, *loudly*. But not loudly enough. He was at least fifty feet away, Sam estimated.

"Yes. What the fuck game is this, Sam?"

Before Sam could answer (that not only did he not know, but why did Dean think he had all the answers to these places?), there was a loud, low, electronic beep. It droned out once, twice, then a third time.

"What the-" Sam tried to look around for the source of the sound.

A ball of white, like a perfectly round balloon filled with light, flew out of the darkness, straight at him. With a yelp, Sam threw himself to the side and out of the line of the projectile, whatever it was.

A second beep blared out from the darkness, and a giant, red '*1*' – like one of the numbers on the face of a digital clock – appeared in the sky to Sam's left.

"What just happened!" Dean yelled from the other side of the darkness.

Sam climbed back to his feet, rubbing at his elbow which had taken the brunt of his fall. The gears in his head started clicking, in tune with the next three beeps. A countdown.

"Dean, hit the ball!"

"Hit the wha- holy shit!"

There was a beat of silence, then the low-tone sound rang once again, and a second, giant red '*1'* appeared in the sky, this time on the right. Sam pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I know what game we're in," he called out, tone giving it away well before Sam actually gave name to it.

"This better not be Pong!" came Dean's absolutely furious, outraged response as the countdown began again. "Are we in friggin' *Pong*?! I'm gonna *kill* him!"

-o-o-o-

"I don't know how to drive *oxen*!"

Branches creaked around them in the building wind, leaves rustling. The air smelled like wheat, sun-soaked dirt, and an approaching storm.

"I don't even know what oxen *are*!"

Sam shook off a shiver as a push of wind swept his bangs off his forehead. His grip on the hunting rifle tightened, for all the good it would do him. This was tornado country, and he didn't like the look of those gathering clouds. "I don't think they're what you should be worried about, Dean. Pretty sure most people die from dysentery in this game."

His brother cast him a side-eye that lasted a little too long, reins in hand as the oxen trotted along, pulling their wagon behind them. "I don't want to know what that is, do I?"

"No, you do not."

-o-o-o-

"Run!" Dean screamed, just about at the top of his lungs, as he streaked down the blood-spattered hallway faster than he ever had in his entire life.

"I *am* running!" Sam yelled right back and backwards, given he was ahead of Dean.

"Run faster!" Dean tried to close the widening gap between him and his stupidly long-legged brother.

"Is it even following us?" Sam didn't turn around to ask; he kept his

eyes and flashlight – the device having been in his hand when they landed in this awful, *awful* game – trained on the ground and walls in front of them as they came up fast. Outside of that ten-foot circle of light, they could see nothing. The hallways they'd found themselves trapped in were the darkest black Sam had ever encountered.

Dean made the mistake of checking over his shoulder, following it up with his own flashlight. Whatever he saw caused him to whip back around and start gaining ground on that gap. "Nope! Nope, nope, nope!"

"There!" Sam yelled as he rounded a corner just seconds ahead of Dean. "There's an elevator!"

"Oh, thank fuck!"

The taller of the two Winchesters slammed into the open space at the end of this nightmare labyrinth. He twisted around just as Dean hit the wall beside him and scrambled forward for the 'close' button by the time his brother righted himself. With the button hit repeatedly, Sam pressed himself back against the rear wall next to his brother. Two beams of light and two pairs of horrified eyes were locked on the darkness beyond the elevator doors.

"Come on, come on, *come on*!" Dean glared at the panel of buttons beside the still open doors.

"I thought you said it was chasing us," Sam whispered harshly, somehow afraid to raise his voice. If it had lost them in the dark, he certainly didn't want to attract it back.

"Yeah," Dean panted, eyeing the 'close' button just scant feet away, taunting them. He weighed whether it was worth moving closer to the open doors so he could hit the damn button again. "But like, slowly. Dude's fucked up."

"What kind of game *is* this?" Sam hissed. "Who *plays* games like this?"

"Normal people, man." Dean swallowed heavily before making a sharp lunge for the buttons. It was at that same moment that the doors started to slide shut.

And the thing chasing them staggered into the light, arm raised and already swinging.

Dean screamed as the doors stuttered closed on the blade of a giant

knife – more like a friggin' sword – and, thank fuck, they stayed closed around it. That did not stop Dean from continuing to scream like a little girl until that rusty, blood-splattered blade was tugged free from between the doors and the elevator started a shuddering, chuggy trip upwards.

"Dude." Dean stood on shaky legs, hand pressed over his pounding chest.

Sam wasn't doing much better. He was pressed to the wall like he thought he could melt into it if that thing came back. "I know."

"It had a *triangle* for a *head*, Sam!"

"I *know*." Sam closed his eyes, trying to see anything other than that. "Though, uh, it was, um… technically more of a pyramid."

Dean turned his head slowly to stare at his brother with an expression one could almost call it a bitchface, though Sam would never deign to say such things aloud.

-o-o-o-

"I feel ridiculous. I *look* ridiculous!" Dean yelled into the sky in his polo shirt and plaid, knee-length shorts. He glanced over at Sam, whose long hair was elegantly tucked behind a lime green paddy cap. It matched the color of his shorts. "You? You fit right in."

"Oh, shut up," Sam snipped back as he raised his arms back in an elegant arc before swinging the club down and through. The whack of a golf ball sent flying into the air was surprisingly pleasant. He raised a hand to block the sun from his eyes ('Making the purpose of the stupid hat, what, exactly?' Dean grumbled under his breath) and watched the little white ball plop down and bounce onto the green, coming to a stop a dozen feet from the flag.

Dean stared at, both impressed and disgusted.

"Right. In."

Dean sliced his ball directly into the nearest pond. Whether that was on purpose (as an act of a rebellion, according to Dean) or not (even remotely, according to Sam) was a matter of some debate.

-o-o-o-

"This is copyright infringement! You hear me!"

This game found Dean shaking his fist at the sky he continued to yell at. Sam ignored his brother in favor of directing the twelve-foot stone statue of a horse to F6. He, himself, stood in the position of the King's Rook. His brother had chosen to be the King. Sam wasn't entirely sure Dean knew how a game of Chess was won.

"You're going to hear from Rowling's lawyers!"

-o-o-o-

Sam kicked his ass at Chess. Literally. The final move from his Queen quite literally kicked Dean off the board. Which hurt like a bitch.

But that was okay, because he repaid his nerd brother the favor when it came to Risk. Dean knew how to command soldiers, as much as it irked him (stupid divine destiny and all that crap). Plus, he always had taken a little too much joy in conquering Australia.

-o-o-o-

When Sam slammed into him three games later, pushing him off the main path to stumble back to his home base, he shouted out a very, very unapologetic, "Sorry!"

-o-o-o-

"You have to throw it."

"Why do *I* have to do it?"

"Because it's *your* battle." Sam pinched the bridge of his nose when his brother continued to stare obstinately at him. "You're the one with the Pokéball."

"Pokéball," Dean grumbled, glaring down at the red and white sphere in his hand. "What a stupid name."

"Dean."

"Yeah, yeah, alright." He tossed the thing up once, caught it, then pitched it into the field in front of them.

Their apparent opponent (a friggin' child who was fourteen at most, if they were *lucky*) stood on the far end of the circle of grass. In the center was a really big, orange, gecko… lizard… thing that had come

out of the kid's pokéball.

Its tail was on fire, so that was neat.

According to Sam, that was a Pokémon, summoned by the snot-nosed brat across the way from them, and Dean was going to have to fight it. Well, not Dean himself, but his *Pokémon*. Whatever the hell that was gonna be.

The red and white ball bounced twice on the grass before rolling to stop a few feet from the cute lizard. Nothing happened. The orange reptile blinked at the unopened pokéball, making a cute noise of confusion, but keeping its distance.

"No, Dean, you have to-" Sam cut himself off, planting his face into his hand. Through the meat of his palm he mumbled, "You have to call out the Pokémon you chose."

Dean pulled his head back, making a face that would not be out of place on a toddler. "I have to what? *Why?*"

"Have you seriously never heard any of this before?" Sam blew out an exasperated breath and his bangs lifted off his forehead from the strength of it. "You have to say the name of the Pokémon, then '*I choose you*.'"

The older hunter just stared at him, face perfectly portraying exactly what he thought of that.

"*Dean*."

"That's stupid. This is all stupid! You're in *pigtails*, Sam!" And he wasn't even going to mention the short-shorts and red suspenders, or the weird, multi-colored *egg* his brother was just… carrying around for no apparent reason. Dean spun back to face the field, where Charmander and his inactive pokéball both sat. "You're *stupid*! Your game is stupid, your orange lizard is stupid! You hear that! You're all *stupid*!"

Sam buried his face in his hand once more.

"Dean."

"Well, which one am I supposed to pick, man?" The older Winchester crossed his arms over his chest defensively. "I don't know any… po-kay-whatever-they're-called."

"Well, uh…" Sam struggled to recall some of the names he'd heard in passing when the game had been such a craze. "There's Pikachu. And, um… bull… bull… asaur? I think he's a water Pokémon, which is probably good against a Charmander-"

"Castiel, I choose you!"

Light flashed on the field as the ball sprung open. When the glow dissipated, Castiel sat on the field, still bound to her chair. Her back was to them, the angel facing her soon-to-be opponent. She blinked down at the small, orange dragon with its big eyes.

Dean was grinning, clearly proud of himself, by the time Sam lowered his hand from his face for the third time.

"*Dean*."

"Well, it worked, didn't it? She's all I could think of!" Dean snapped back defensively, grin shrinking. When Sam's eyes climbed into his hairline, that smile turned right upside-down. He shoved a warning finger his brother's way. "Not like *that*!"

Their opponent cried something out in the background of their bickering, and Charmander charged. Dean spun back to the field as the little thing let out a battle cry – something between a squawk and a roar that was way too cute to be remotely frightening – whipping his body around to lash his tail out against Castiel. Fire streaked around him as he spun out of the attack, sliding to a halt on all fours to face his enemy once more.

The angel stared down at the small creature, face stern but otherwise nonplussed. The very bottom corner of her tan coat was on fire, lazily burning against Castiel's leg. She didn't seem to care much, though her stare darkened as she continued to smolder.

Charmander actually looked repentant, taking a step back and letting out something of a meep of confusion.

Dean was back to grinning winningly. Beside the older Winchester, Sam groaned.

"*Dean."*

-o-o-o-

"Are you kidding me right now?!"

"Well," Sam reasoned as he dodged something that was round, blue, and really fast. It shot by on his left and kept spinning forward. "We did, technically, want a racing game."

"*This* is not a racing game!" Dean bit back, despite the fact that they were, very much, racing. He struck his palm against the steering wheel of his very pink go-kart. "*This* is not my Baby!"

Sam snickered from the next cart over, swerving dangerously for a moment on the translucent, rainbow road they were speeding across. The ridiculously large, polka-dotted mushroom cap he was wearing slid dangerously to the side, almost coming off his head. "I think it suits you."

Dean put all his weight down on the pink pedal beneath his high-heeled foot just so he could pull in front of his brother's stupid, blue car and drop a banana peel.

-o-o-o-

"We can't keep doing this," were the first words out of Sam's mouth as they came into existence in the next twisted game Gabriel had lined up for them. Sam didn't know how long they'd been at it, but it had to have been at least two days. He suspected longer. The younger Winchester was exhausted, even if his body didn't ask for food or water. He didn't know how much longer he – either of them, given Dean's own exhaustion and increasing frustration – could keep this up. "We could die here. For real, I mean."

He held out the colorful pieces of paper to the man behind the teller, who looked suspiciously like Milburn Pennybags. "St. James Place, please."

"I know," Dean said beside him, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket with a grumpy look on his face. The folded piece of leather had a silver shoe stamped into the surface, the style of which matched the thimbles printed across Sam's tie. Dean shoved a handful the same colorful paper at the teller, a lot less politely than Sam had. "Electric Company. And St. James? Really? Rude."

"You're the one who insists on wasting money on the Utilities." Sam took a small slip of cardstock in receipt of his purchase, turning to Dean. "We can't wait for him to put the Impala in a game. *If* he puts it in at all."

"It's not *wasting;* Utilities matter. And she is not an *it*, mister. But,

yeah… I know." Dean collected his own card, turning away from the monocled teller. "What do you want me to do? We didn't come up with a Plan B, Sammy, and I'm out of ideas over here."

"Well… is there anything else we can use against an angel?"

The man from the future scoffed. "Yeah, sure. Uriel's angel blade."

For a moment, Sam lit up in surprise at another option even existing. It didn't last, however, when he realized where that weapon must be. They were right back at square one. "I didn't know that was in the trunk."

"It's not. It's at Bobby's." At the look of surprise on Sam's face, Dean gave a one shouldered shrug, leaving the extravagant lobby of the bank through the old-timey, wheelhouse door, glass set into tarnished brass. "I figured he needed it more. Didn't think an angel would make a move against us anytime soon. But if they found where Cas was hiding out…"

Sam's gaze slid away from his brother's as they walked into the hustle and bustle of a city mid-day. He hadn't thought of that – that Cas had likely become a target of her own family years earlier in this timeline. And she'd been defenseless in that healing trance. Bobby too, though not so much on the defenseless part. Certainly outmatched, regardless. They could have lost them both, and it hadn't even been on Sam's radar.

Sometimes, he supposed, Dean had good reason for keeping things to himself. Knowing was a burden. Of course, keeping all that weight to himself never ended up well for them in the long run. Plus, Sam really didn't like not knowing. But he got it. At least, sometimes.

"Good," the younger Winchester agreed, clearing his throat when his words came out quieter than he'd intended. They stopped at the curb, waiting for the traffic to clear so they could cross the street. "That was a good plan, but with Cas awake now, we, uh, we should probably keep it on us."

Especially if they were going to keep running into angels Dean hadn't told him about.

"Gee, thanks, Sherlock. Where were you twenty-four hours ago?"

"You mean before getting killed a couple dozen times by a trickster you forgot to tell me about?" The side-eye Sam cast him was Ultimate,

and Dean flinched because… *fair*. "Pretty sure I was being accused of packing like a girl, Dean."

Surprise flashed across the older Winchester's face for a moment before that memory came flashing back. He managed not to laugh, but just barely. Instead, Dean cleared his throat loudly, glancing away and making the wise choice of not commenting on that one because *touché*.

"There's nothing that'll make a dent against an archangel. At least, not that we're gonna find in a friggin' video game. We're pretty much weaponless unless he gives us the Impala." Dean ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "I mean, we could blast him with the banishing sigil, but I don't think that'll kick us out of this place. Just him… away from us."

Which was tempting, both Winchesters could admit, but ultimately unproductive. If this is what an archangel did for *fun*, they didn't want to see what he could think up to if they made him angry.

With a tired sigh, Sam reached up and adjusted his way, way too expensive thumble-stamped tie over his equally too-expensive dress shirt, which felt like the softest silk against his skin. He didn't even want to think about how much it cost. The last car passed in front of them and Sam stepped into the street to cross, drawing up short once he noticed his brother hadn't followed.

The man from the future was still standing on the curb, gaze almost a decade away. Back in a library with an exhausted, bloody-eyed Cas suffering an Attack Dog spell.

"Dean?"

"There is something else that might work," the older hunter said, coming back to the present and stupid capitalist boardgame they were trapped in. There was an idea forming behind those green eyes. A risky one, but they'd faced worse odds. Dean stepped into the street with renewed confidence, briefcase swinging at his side (which he absolutely did not need; it made him look like a total douche and was completely useless as an accessory. It didn't even have anything *in it*). "We just need a game with cops."

Sam frowned, jogging after his brother as they crossed Wall St and headed for a lower-leveled, green building with orange trim. The sign above the main doors identified it as a Hospital. A very old-school one, apparently. That Sam now owned, given it was on St. James

Place.

"What can we get from the police that would work against an angel?"

Dean grinned. "Handcuffs."

-o-o-o-

Dean was a frog. A frog that looked very much like Dean Winchester, in open boots ill-fitted on slim feet, his green jacket open and flapping in the breeze, and an abundance of bracelets wrapped around a thin, green wrist.

"I am so done with this shit."

Sam's big, bulgy eyes were no less puppy-dog effective in frog form. Which was deeply disturbing. "Not like I'm enjoying myself over here. I think I'm sitting in my own slime."

Dean's eye slid his way in a very disorienting roll. "Ew."

"So… we just cross the road?" Sam tried to look either direction down the pavement they were sitting on the edge of, but his vision was distorted and entirely unhelpful. Except for flies. When those passed by, he seemed to actually have some degree of focus. Everything else was a wet, warped blur.

"Uh… I guess?" Dean was looking around with bulbous eyes of his own, rolling in his sockets as he tried to glance back and forth. "Can you see anything?"

"Not a thing."

"Great. Well, here goes nothing."

Dean took a mighty hop, launching into the middle of the road right as a speeding truck went by. Sam flinched as it slammed into his brother mid-leap with a blaring horn, not even stopping.

-o-o-o-

"Oh, come on!" The older Winchester yelled up at the metal ceiling. "Is one stupid pair of handcuffs too much to ask!"

Sam adjusted the cap on his head, staring nervously at the panel of blinking lights, buttons, knobs, and gauges in front of him. He turned to his brother and hissed, "I have no idea how to use any of this."

"And you think I do? Just push one and hope it does something." Dean hissed back, pulling at the navy blue neckerchief around his neck. The striped shirt beneath was a particularly garish detail of the game. Sailors stopped wearing that shit before submarines even *existed*, damnit. He pointed at the radar screen in front of him, which looked conveniently more like a grid than any radar he'd ever seen, but at this point who cared. "Aim here."

"Like I know how to aim," Sam grumbled. Nervously, he raised a hand and, after only a second of hesitation, pressed a button that looked like it might fire a torpedo. There was a soft thud and a minor shudder throughout the control room. They waited in silence as the seconds ticked by.

There was the distant sound of an explosion, muffled by water and metal, but the crew around them broke into cheering. Someone shouted in the distance that the enemy battleship had been sunk. Sam let out a breath of relief, and Dean slumped in his chair.

"The next came better have friggin handcuffs in it, or I swear to god-"

-o-o-o-

"Oh god." Sam didn't entirely know how his brain was processing enough to get the words out, but they bared repeating now that he had. "Oh god, I'm traumatized."

Dean was standing beside him, equally dazed, a little shocked, definitely a little too curious, but holding his prize.

"I'm never going to see again. No amount of soap will ever fix this."

While his brother lamented the irrecoverable loss of his (questionable) innocence, Dean lifted the handcuffs up, dangling from one finger. He stared at the pink fur that lined both the inner and outer rings. "I didn't even know they made games for *Fifty Shades of Grey*."

Sam turned his way. The ruddy-red blush high on his cheeks (and ears) (and neck) had yet to subside, and Dean found that just fantastic. (No comment on his own coloring, of course.)

"Fifty shades of what?"

"Don't ask. It's a future thing you *don't* wanna know about." Dean tucked the pink monstrosities into his jean's pocket (happy to be fully dressed, once more) before anyone in this new game might notice

them. "Let's just figure out where we are and find somewhere safe to carve these guys up."

He didn't bother wondering how they were going to draw sigils in that fluff. That was a future Winchester problem. Sam gave a one-shouldered, '*here goes nothing*' shrug, and opened the door in front of them.

-o-o-o-

"Just get out of the pool, Sam!" The older Winchester stood at the edge of the backyard swimming pool, watching his brother swim laps back and forth on route. Occasionally, the beanstalk of a man would stop and try to pull himself out of the swimming pool, which couldn't even be six feet deep. But he fell back in every time he tried. Dean, tapping his foot against the edge of the pool impatiently, repeated himself, this time with more expletives.

What Sam heard through the splashes of water around him was, "Whippna choba dog."

"You think I haven't tried?" he yelled back, stopping mid stroke to turn and grab the ledge of the pool. For the fourth time, he braced his wrists, locked his elbows, and tried to pull himself up. A second later he was back to doing laps.

What Dean heard was a bitterly growled, "Boobasnot."

"Speak English, damnit!" Dean yelled, now pacing the poolside, but it came out as, "Garnar frash. Uhh shamoo ralla poo."

Sam gave it a fifth attempt with no better luck. "Mik mak maka!" He splashed back into the pool with a flail of arms that suggested frustration.

This would all be pretty damn hilarious – annoying as hell, sure, but still *hilarious* – if Sam wasn't actually starting to look tired and was, apparently, no longer able to climb out of a swimming pool without a ladder.

"Ooh shanga day!" Sam whined as he started yet another lap.

-o-o-o-

"Are you friggin' serious, right now?!" Dean yelled from the driver's seat of a modified '67 Chevy Impala. The car swerved at incredibly

dangerous speeds as he found himself, quite suddenly, behind the wheel and on a racetrack, mid-race. He'd be pissed about the alterations – and he was, let there be no mistake about that – if having the inside of his Baby rearranged to resemble a professional racing car wasn't at least sort of cool and maybe a childhood dream come true. "*Now* we get a game with Baby?!"

"Just stay focused," came Sam's voice from within Dean's helmet. His kid brother must be part of the pit crew. "You still have the handcuffs, right?"

A flare of panic resulted in a very-near miss with the car next to him, but Dean corrected pretty smoothly and started patting himself down with one hand and driving with the other. Luckily, they were on a fairly straight stretch of track. There was an audible sigh of relief in the car and through the headset as he found them tucked inside the racing jacket he was wearing.

"Yeah, I got 'em," he reassured his brother, who echoed his sigh of relief.

Dean could practically picture him: a pair of racing overalls (not quite long enough for his stupid beanstalk legs, of course) that matched Dean's own suit, clipboard in hand, big ole' headset over his ears, mic in front of his mouth which he would be unnecessarily pressing closer as if that would magically make Dean listen to him.

Total nerd.

But back to the part where they now had Baby – meaning they now had holy oil – which Dean was driving around a course at truly impressive, thrill-inducing speeds. Really, he'd be enjoying the hell out of this if it wasn't for the timing.

"Do you have any idea what I went through to get those cuffs!"

"Yes, Dean," came Sam's pained, pointed response. "I do, and I will never, ever be the same."

The older Winchester rolled his eyes. His brother was such a prude.

"But now we have cuffs *and* holy oil." Sam was ever the voice of reason. It annoyed him as much as it calmed him down. "That's a good thing. So stay focused."

Dean took a deep breath, fingers flexing around the wheel of his Baby

before he did as his smart brother instructed and kept his focus. Driving a race car was no easy thing, not at the speeds he was currently rounding the track. A crash could be deadly. At the very least, it would totally suck.

"Alright, I'm fine. I'm good. Totally calm, totally focused." The older Winchester took in and let out an even breath and worked on passing the car beside him on the next curve. "What's the plan?"

"After the next lap, come into the pit." Sam adjusted the microphone in front of his mouth, glancing between the clipboard in his hand (full of information he couldn't actually make sense of) and the Impala zipping its way around the far side of the track. "I'll grab your cuffs and get the holy oil out of the trunk."

"And I'll keep racing while you set the trap!"

Sam lobbed a generalized bitchface in the direction of his brother. "You could try to sound a little less excited about me doing all the work."

"Oh, but I am so very excited, Sammy. I was *born* for this."

Dean's grin was audible, his excitement evident. Fanboy vibes were practically dripping off him, and the only thing that kept Sam from rolling his eyes was the fact his brother was driving a hundred plus miles an hour around a track where a resulting crash could very easily cost him his life. The younger Winchester didn't dare take his eyes off the Impala for even a second.

"Get the crew ready. I'm coming in for a pit stop."

-o-o-o-

Watching the crew work in a flurry of perfectly timed motion around the vehicle was really impressive. Sam had only just shut the trunk, holy oil in hand, when a member of their pit crew hit the side of the car twice and Dean was speeding off with tires spinning and smoke trailing. He hadn't been stopped for more than ten seconds, if that, and six of them had been taken up tossing the fluffy cuffs to the closest, random pit crew.

"You got them, right?"

At his brother's voice in his ear, Sam dropped his eyes down to the light green thermos gripped tightly in his hand. It had been right

where Dean said it would be, in the trunk (Sam considered themselves lucky the Impala still *had* a trunk in this game), next to the holy water and rosaries. Their best chance out of here.

"Yeah, I got them," he answered, gesturing to the pit crew guy who was still staring at the pink handcuffs in his hand, clearly confused as to why his driver had tossed them to him, or had them on his person to begin with. With a surprisingly complex expression for an NPC, he handed them off to Sam with both befuddlement and relief.

"Alright. We've got six more laps to halfway and we can switch drivers then. So get a'carving, Sammy."

This time Sam did roll his eyes. It was just like Dean to leave him with all the *actual* work while he played and somehow made it sound like he had the hard job. The younger Winchester left the pit but kept his headset on so he could keep track of his brother, who was busy humming Metallica's '*Fuel*' as he drove. Sam made his way into the stadium tunnels, hoping to find a quiet place to set their trap. The wide hallway had an underground feel to it, with its twenty-foot cement walls and lack of windows. It didn't seem particularly utilized, either; it was limited to crew and staff only, and with the race in full swing there weren't many, if any, wandering the halls. It would work.

Sam set to work pouring out the circle of holy oil. He kept it as wide as he could without risking running out before it was complete. It wasn't as large as the one they'd drawn for Cas – the thermos didn't have as much holy oil as Pastor Jim had given them – but Sam wanted to increase their odds that Gabe showed up inside it, or close enough they could get him into it without the archangel noticing their plot.

Once he finished and was fairly satisfied – if not also fairly nervous – that they had as good a trap as they could, Sam looked around for a place to stash the thermos. He left it atop an electrical box attached to the wall a few feet down the hallway. The beat-up thing blended right in; an innocent something left behind by a passing employee. Then he pulled out Dean's fluffy cuffs and a knife he'd snagged from the Impala as well.

Time to give a pair of handcuffs a shave and a carve. But no, no, *Dean* had the hard job.

-o-o-o-

By the time Sam made it back to the track, their next driver was suited up and raring to go. There was a twitch in his leg and enough

other crew hovering around him for Sam to realize the computer-simulation of a man was annoyed.

The Impala was nowhere near the pit lanes. Heading away from it, actually.

"Dean, it's been six laps," Sam said into the mic, voice tense. "Where the hell are you?"

"One more, Sammy."

His brother's tone was anything but in trouble, and Sam dropped his head, rubbing his forehead and the headache forming behind it. How. *How* was he technically four years younger than this man, who also had ten years in the future on him.

"Dean."

"Just one more lap! Come on, what's one more gonna hurt?"

Sam pinched a little harder. "Need I remind you, we are trapped in this *game* by a souped-up Trickster and this is our *only* chance to get out of it."

Despite the fact his older brother probably didn't mean for him to hear it, the grumbling came over the headset loud and clear. "Guy can't even have a little fun around here."

Sam dropped his hand to glare at the approaching Impala as it pulled off the track and into the pit lane. He grabbed the microphone at his cheek so he could pull it closer to his mouth and say, "I think you got plenty of *fun* in the last game. Don't you?"

He could see Dean's grimace as the car came to a quick halt. A deep whistle came over the headset, reverberating painfully through the speakers. Sam could see his brother's lips pursed through the windshield even as his crew started pulling him out of the car. "Low blow, Sammy. Low blow."

The Impala was screeching back out of the pit before Dean was done pulling off his helmet. He watched after her with a deep frown. He did *not* like strangers driving his Baby. But this was a video game. The real Baby was waiting for him on the outside. With a determined growl, Dean headed for his brother and the two hurried into the cover of the stadium's lower levels.

Sam pointed out the ring of holy oil as they came up to it in the hallway. Dean could just make out the shine of it on the linoleum. Sammy had done good, keeping the liquid spread as thin as possible so it wasn't noticeable but would still light. Hopefully, this way Gabriel wouldn't spot the trap before they could spring it.

The younger Winchester pulled a lighter out of his breast pocket and the de-fluffed cuffs, holding both out. Dean took the bracelets – eyeing the patches of pink that still remained with a side-eye his brother only returned (in the form of a far more successful Bitchface) – but held the lighter back out to his kid brother.

"Keep it. He might expect it less coming from you."

Not that he thought the archangel suspected anything. They'd likely already know if he had. But there was something about Sam that was always just… less aggressive. If Dean kept his attention, maybe he wouldn't pay much attention to what Sam was doing.

It had worked the first time, at least. Of course, Sam had been a car in that version, but details.

Sam raised his eyebrows in response but didn't question it. He tucked the lighter into his palm, keeping it loosely fisted at his side. "So… cuffs first, then fire?"

Dean let out a puff of air, tucking the carved cuffs into his racing jacket where he could grab them quickly. His hands settled on his hips as he stared down at their trap. Hopefully, with the last-minute inclusion of the Impala and the switch back to Plan A, they wouldn't need handcuffs at all.

"Let's stick with the fire. It's the safer bet. Cuffs'll keep him from using his powers, but he could still rabbit the old fashion way. Fire will keep him in place. Keep him trapped."

Plus, the circle would be easier to trick the Trickster into than the cuffs. Dean hadn't been looking forward to getting them on the archangel when they'd become the primary component of Plan B.

"Alright, this is gonna go down fast," Dean warned, rolling up the sleeves of his race suit. "I'll call him down, you light the oil soon as you're sure he's inside it. Got it?"

Sam nodded firmly, eyes also trained on their trap.

Dean let out a breath and physically shook the tension out of his shoulders. "Ready?"

Sam glanced at his older brother, then nodded with all the confidence he didn't entirely feel. He thumbed the lighter in his palm, reassuring himself that they were as prepared as possible for this dangerous plan. He flicked it open.

"Ready."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: [*Author cackles maniacally*]

Games in Order of Appearance: Pong, Oregon Trail, Silent Hill, Golf Pro, Chess, Risk, Sorry, Pokemon, Mario Kart, Monopoly, Sims, Frogger, Battleship, Casa Erotica (the Game!), Grand Turismo. The previous chapters were inspired by a mix of Skyrim/Zelda, then Chutes and Ladders. Some were more inspired-by, others were downright copyright-destorying-but-what-is-fanfiction-for-right, yaaaaay!

Fun Fact 67: I am not much of a gamer, which means most of this chapter required assistance from my gaming friends! So a big THANK YOU to my partner for many meals spent describing various games and how to write certain genres accurately, to Forestpelt for helping me come up with all the games to throw the Winchesters into (you all can thank her for that Silent Hill excerpt), and Vaesse for Beta-ing this chapter!

Fun Fact 313: All the sims language I used is legit and translatable ;P

Fun Fact 314: I had a part planned in Sims where Cas showed up, presenting Dean with a heart, asking him out on a date but no clue as to why, or what Dean was saying (in a language the angel had never heard, and she'd heard them all). Buuuuut that didn't end up working out because Gabriel isn't onboard the Ship yet. (Key word there? *yet* ;D) If we weren't Jane-Austen-On-Steroids slow burning, here, we would have gotten so much game shippage [insert verbose-AF-sobbing here]

Comments: Alrighty, wonderful people! If I am being quite honest, I could use some cheering on. This is probably my favorite chapter I've written so far, and I hope it was cackling-worthy for you all as it first was for me. Unfortunately, I seem to have lost

that joy. I don't know if I've read through the chapter too many times or if I'm just having some holiday blues (maybe stress more so than blues? It has been a very rough year, which I think I'm only just catching up to mentally and emotionally), but I was so, so excited after I first wrote this, yet that excitement has since withered. Which is so disheartening.

So, on that note, I would really, really like to **hear from you** on this one. Pretty please, if this chapter made you laugh or grin like an idiot, share that with me. Whether you're a lurker or a first time reader, a regular commenter or a only-on-the-truly-delightful-chapters, please let this be your one comment for the year! I will always, always take the simple but much appreciated, "Like Button pushed!"

Thanks everyone!

Silence

Chapter 124: Season 2: Chapter 90

Chapter Notes

A/Ns:
Was I watching Good Omens when I started this chapter? Yes, yes I was. If you haven't seen/read it, I highly recommend it

(Though… maybe wait for Season 3 to come out if you don't like cliffhangers.)

((Then again, if you don't like those, what on earth are you doing here?!!?))

Chapter Warnings
: Despite ^ that, I do not leave you with a cliffhanger today (mostly). I do, however, leave you with the end of the Gabriel Arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 90

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"So then there's this angel, named Aziraphale- yes, yes, I *know* that's not a real angel," Gabe flapped his hand up and down as his sister's eyes once again interrupted him mid-story. "You've seriously got to get this whole pop-culture thing down. Nobody cares about real things anymore, Cassie. It's all characters, books, and shows. Take *Doctor Who* for example-"

Before Gabriel could launch into his next educational breakdown of essential information his sister somehow did not possess – the sixth or seventh in a row with no discernable transition point that he could tell

was both confusing and irritating to the smaller angel, which only made him plan for *more* topics to jump to – he drew up short as Angel Radio hummed to life inside his noggin'. It was a private prayer.

Castiel, who had been working very hard to tune her baffling brother out (with varying degrees of success), noticed the abrupt silence far quicker than she would have any specific word. Her head snapped to the side. Gabriel was staring into the distance, head tilted ever so slightly up and to the side, expression serious, and Castiel knew he was listening to a human prayer. Her vessel tensed, stomach clenching in a way that could only be described as tying itself into knots.

Guess that was one less human expression that needed deciphering.

Gabriel tuned back into his surroundings, glancing at his sister offhandedly. The archangel held back a burst of laughter the second he noticed Castiel's rigid posture and guarded eyes. Despite the unblinking stare locked on him, she couldn't hide the concern that flickered through her grace in ochre rivulets. Each vein bled green dread along the edges, mixing together to form eddies of tarnished bronze.

She already knew the Winchesters had given up. The little angel that could was finally seeing how weak human resolve was. Good. If she learned that lesson now, she wouldn't end up on the wrong side of everything when the world tore itself in two.

He held up a finger and offered her a wink. "Hold that thought, Cassie. I've got to see a man about an Apocalypse."

Gabriel left behind the muffled rage of his sister. Alone in the Ether for the first time since kidnapping his sibling, the archangel allowed his smile to drop. He headed for the Winchesters and, finally, the beginning of the end.

-o-o-o-

"Uncle!"

Dean let the words echo along the tall walls and long hallway. When no snarky comeback came, Dean dropped his arms.

With an annoyed roll of his eyes, the time-traveler added, "We'll do it!"

Still nothing.

Dean had just turned to give Sammy a, *'What now?'* look – they definitely hadn't come up with a Plan C – when there was a slow clap from behind them. Both Winchesters spun around, surprised to find the short, familiar vessel of the Trickster standing five feet away from them. And at least fifteen feet away from the circle of oil he was supposed to appear inside.

'Son of a bitch!' was the look Dean now wanted to send his brother, but tapped down on it hard as both Winchesters squared up to the archangel.

"I'm surprised this is the game that broke you." Gabe raised a sardonic eyebrow at the hunter in the racing suit. "Let me guess; nobody puts Baby on the racetrack?"

"You shut your piehole," Dean growled. "You don't get to say her name."

The Trickster snorted, shaking his head with an eye roll that threatened to tear orbital muscles. When they managed to roll back into his skull, he raised his hands up, fingers curling into air quotes. "So. *'You'll do it.* ' Do what, exactly?"

The boys exchanged looks. How were they going to talk the archangel in a *literal* circle around them. Dean cleared his throat and decided, well, *here goes.*

"Follow the rules."

"Which rules?"

The Righteous Man rolled his eyes. "The rules of the *game* ."

Gabe grinned. "Which game?"

"You know which one," Dean growled, already getting worked up. Sam put a hand on his shoulder.

"The biblical one," Sam spoke up, glaring at the archangel but trying to remain a calmer, more neutral party. Or, at least a less aggressive one. "You want Dean to sell his soul. For me."

"Well…." the Trickster shrugged haplessly. Sam's jaw clenched. "Doesn't have to be for you, but… pretty sure that's the only way it

can go down."

"You don't know that." Dean took a step forward, and Sam clamped his hand down harder. They didn't need to back the archangel even *further* from the circle they needed him to be in. "You don't."

Gabe had the gall to look regretful. "I'm sorry, guys. I really am. But I do."

The silence stretched between the three, with the two hunters torn between what the archangel was saying and what they needed to do to escape.

"So. Ready to go quietly?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Dean found himself saying without thinking. They needed to stall, they needed to get Gabe on the other side of the hall behind them, and he didn't have much going as far as a plan. "Not so fast."

Gabriel raised his arms in an annoyed gesture and an impatient look that said, *'What is it now?'*

Dean exchanged a glance with Sam, whose eyes were a touch too wide. The older Winchester bit back a groan, realizing his brother didn't have a better plan than his not-a-plan-so-much-as-a-half-formed-thought he was working on.

Damn.

"Well, back to Plan B."

The hunter charged the Trickster with no warning, tackling him to the ground.

"Dean!"

The cuffs were out of his racing jacket by the time they hit the hard floor in a mad scramble to get both of them on the archangel before Gabriel could react. Dean managed to get one snapped tight around the man's wrist with a resounding click. He had a firm grip on the other arm, but no real way to get the metal wrapped around it. There was a scramble as Gabriel realized what Dean was trying to do, and the two rolled and fought for control over the remaining cuff.

There was a click-click-click and the tightening of metal around skin.

Everyone froze. Dean pulled back, taking Gabe with him as the chain between the two cuffs pulled tight. One bracelet was closed around Gabriel's wrist, the other, Dean's.

"Ha!" Gabe yelled triumphantly and raised his one free hand, fingers preparing to snap.

A leather band closed around the archangel's raised wrist, locking shut with the snap of a buckle. A second followed, closing around the other wrist, just below the first, metal handcuff. Sam, standing just behind Dean and leaning over him to get into the tussle, released the sigil-covered leather cuffs and pulled back, having successfully bound the archangel.

The world around them blinked out of existence, causing both Winchesters to snap their heads around at the abrupt change of scenery. The stadium hallway was replaced with a large, empty warehouse. There were oil stains on the ground, empty shelves randomly left about, and broken windows high up on tall walls. The distant sound of roaring crowds and racing engines was gone and, in its place, the echoing silence of a large, open space.

Gabriel, meanwhile, unsurprised as he might be by the environment, was surprised by his newly imprisoned wrists. He stared at them in something akin to disbelief.

"The rhinestones are a nice touch," he commented casually, raising an eyebrow at what was very, very clearly bondage cuffs attached to his wrists. Rhinestone-studded, chain-linked, black leather bondage cuffs engraved with binding sigils.

Not really his kink. Particular the whole sigil-binding, bit.

Above him, still straddling him, Dean snorted. There was a downright mischievous grin stretching across his lips. "You should have seen what Sammy here had to do to get those."

The glare the younger Winchester pinned his brother with was impressively cowing, though somewhat undercut by the way his entire face turned tomato red.

"I'm starting to see where I went wrong," Gabriel kept his bound arms raised, this time spreading his hands out in apology. He'd never been particularly good at those. However, considering the sigils were in *Enochian* , he was pretty sure the game (or *games* , ha! Get it?) was up. Time for damage control. "The erotica game crossed a line. I get

that now. But we can talk this over, right guys?"

"Oh, sure. We'll talk." Dean leaned back on his calves, heaving out a triumphant, but rough breath from the struggle. He dug the handcuff key out of his jeans pocket, the racing suit replaced by his familiar, comfortable clothes. He stabbed the thing into the cuff on his hand, twisting until he was able to release himself with a single click and the slide of metal. "We'll talk once you-"

The minute the cuff fell from Dean's wrist, Gabe punched him in the face with both fists. Dean fell back on his ass and off of the archangel with a flail of surprise and a burst of blood from his nose.

"Dean!"

Sam didn't have time to reach his brother or get the archangel back under control. An obnoxious shout of *'Nutcracker!'* and a well aim kicked had him doubling over, re-learning how to breathe through the lightning storm of pain between his legs.

Gabriel scrambled to his knees, then his feet, and took off running. Fortunately for the hunters, he headed right for the circle and Dean knew they still had a slim chance. Hand clamped over his bleeding nose, the older Winchester launched himself to his feet and gave chase. He didn't make it far before pain flared in his chest, like an anchor had been left behind buried in the floor of the warehouse, and its chain, attached right to his heart, pulled tight. Dean hit the floor for a second time, this time on his hands and knees, clutching at his chest as it tried real damn hard to stay right there, regardless of where the rest of him was headed.

"S-Sam!"

Still hurting, the younger Winchester managed to turn and stagger after the archangel. His much longer legs and sheer determination saw him close the gap between them. As Gabriel crossed the line of holy oil, running for his life, Sam leapt forward, tackling the angel around the waist. They both went down hard.

"Dean!"

Dean lifted his head, teeth gritted against the pain in his chest. It was forceful and demanding, nothing like Chest Cas's usual warnings. If he didn't have an angel taking up residence in his chest, he would assume he was having a heart attack. Only he'd had one of those, after losing fifty years to a poker-playing witch. He knew what a

heart attack felt like, and this was *worse* .

“Light it!”

A zippo clattered across the floor towards him, tossed by his brother. Jaw clenched, bearing through the pain as it finally started to fade, Dean stumbled to his feet and scooped up the lighter. He made it to the circle, his brother and the archangel struggling within it. Gabriel might not have access to his powers, rendering him basically human, but he was a scrappy little fucker. Sam had his hands full, even with the foot and a half he had on the archangel.

“Dean, light the circle!”

Trusting his brother had an out, Dean did as Sam demanded. He flicked the lighter to life, flame dancing in the air, and dropped it atop the oil. It took immediately, igniting a ring of fire that quickly grew in height. With a well-timed kick, Sam managed to roll away from the archangel, and continued rolling straight through the flames.

Dean stumbled away from the fire as it roared upwards in sync with a flare of pain in chest. Chest Cas really, really didn’t like being near those flames. So Dean kept a wide berth as he hurried around the circle to his brother, who was smoldering. He patted out the flames and embers on the back of Sam’s flannel as the younger man scrambled to his feet, trying to extinguish the flames on his arm, which thankfully went out pretty easily. Despite being a bit scorched in the clothing department, the kid seemed okay. Other than a hell of a shiner on his right eye, courtesy of their new captive.

“You okay?” were the first words out of Sam’s mouth, despite the fact he was still smoking slightly. Those worried, hazel eyes dropped to his brother’s chest.

Dean rubbed at his recovering sternum, but nodded. In a low voice, ignoring their imprisoned archangel for the time being, he leaned towards his brother and mumbled, “Don’t think Chest Cas liked the idea of ending up in a ring of holy fire.”

Sam’s eyes widened, cheeks losing some of that red color from the struggle, and he dropped his gaze down to Dean’s chest again. It had been a while since he’d thought of that sliver of grace in his brother’s chest as having consequences. But it made sense, he supposed. Their Castiel had been warning them for some time now that Dean’s soul and the sliver of grace were merging dangerously fast. Cas’s grace must have been trying to warn him not to get caught in the circle,

because he wouldn't be able to get out as Sam had.

It was… a little disturbing to think his brother – his *human* brother – might not be able to escape a trap intended for an angel. A problem for another time, Sam decided. He nodded at his brother, who seemed okay for the time being, and turned his attention to their prisoner, instead.

Gabriel had climbed to his feet amid the flames, cuffed hands held in front of him, one bracelet dangling free, patches of pink fur still stuck to that metal. He grimaced, the expression something of a grin but falling shy, as he lifted his bound wrists. The metal handcuff wrapped around his wrist was in worse condition than its twin, covered with even more splotches of fuzz. The Winchesters had obviously tried to clear the metal to the best of their ability.

Best being a relative (and weak) term, here.

"Don't you just hate it when your girl can't do a Brazilian to save her life?" Gabe waggled his eyebrows, jiggling the dangling cuff. It swung back and forth like a patchy, pink pendulum of kink. "I've got a fella, let me get him your number. One rip and *wowza!* Bald as the day you were born, let me tell you."

"Please don't," Sam immediately responded, forehead smoothed out and glare firmly in place. At the same time, Dean's voice came from beside him, "Could he do Sam's hair?"

The glare turned on the older Winchester was beyond *Ultimate* . It was in a bitchface class of its own. Especially with that growing shiner.

"What? He offered!" Dean gestured to the bound archangel, green eyes trailing up to Sam's luscious locks. "And you could use it."

" *Dean* ."

"Where'd you get the holy oil?" And wasn't that just a pleasant little cherry on top of his dangerous friggin' Sunday.

The older of the two brothers grinned at him in a way that made Gabriel want to slap the expression right off the human's face. "Shouldn't have given me a game with my Baby."

Right. Gabriel sighed. That was a predictably dull answer. It wasn't even creative! Gabe had literally handed the two hunters the weapon

they needed to escape. Twice, apparently, he thought as he spared a glare for the dual handcuffs wrapped around his wrists. Unnecessary now, given the holy fire, but no less annoying.

"So how did little Cassie do it, hmm?" The question, asked so nonchalantly, drew both hunters' frowns. Dean growled, taking a step forward at the overly casual mention of his captured and missing angel, only to be halted by a hand from his brother. Gabe shrugged, unintimidated by the display. "Gotta imagine she figured a way to tell you who I was."

"She didn't have to," Sam answered honestly, but without giving any information away.

When Gabe raised a genuinely surprised eyebrow, Dean snarled. "We're not playing the same game as you, asshole."

The archangel's eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

"We make our own rules," Dean growled out. Beside him, Sam glanced his way, hand still on his shoulder to hold him back.

"Well, that's just cheating." The archangel's lips formed a perfect little pursed pout. He raised his wrists again, jingling the chain between the leather bindings. "Not to mention, puts me at a biiiit of a disadvantage here."

"Cry me a river," Dean snapped.

"How does an archangel end up as a Trickster anyway?" Sam asked, confusion and hurt-fueled curiosity filtering across his face. Dean had been pretty sparse on the details; they'd had more pressing matters than a backstory at the time.

Gabriel offered a tight, unamused smile. "My own private witness protection. I skipped out of heaven, had a face transplant, carved out my own little corner of the world."

"Why?" The younger hunter shook his head. "Why would you leave your home? Your family?"

His genuine turmoil was painful for the brother beside him to hear. That was Sam, Dean thought. Always wanting to see the best in people, believe in the best. That maybe this archangel had his reasons. Like it would make what he'd done to them somehow understandable. Forgivable. That was Sam, always willing to

forgive. It wasn't something Dean had ever been able to understand. Not really.

"Oh, you do not know my family," Gabe laughed out, tilting his head back. When he finally lowered it, he did so with a sigh, face solemn and perhaps even sad. "I love my brothers. Love them. Dad too. But watching them all turn on each other? Tear at each other's throats? I couldn't bear it, okay? So I left. And I was happy. Until you two came along."

Sam's confusion turned into a sharp frown. "Us?"

Gabriel glanced between the two brothers, confusion and caution flickering across his face. "You don't know?"

The younger Winchester glanced at his brother, but Dean wasn't entirely sure what the archangel was referring to. He tried to convey that with his gaze, lest Sam think he was hiding things again. To Gabe, he hedged, "We know you want us to start the end of the world."

The archangel barked out a laugh that had no mirth. "Oh, want has nothing to do with it, boys. You're *destined* to end the world. From the moment Dad flipped on the lights around here, we knew it was all gonna end with you. Always."

The silence was thick in the warehouse. Sam didn't dare look at his brother. Dean had always said it was some bullshit 'destiny' of theirs to end the world but hearing it from an Archangel…. The weight of that firm belief – a biblical belief coming from damn near the horse's mouth – was pressing down on the confidence Dean had instilled in his younger brother that they could change it. That they *had* changed it. Sam could feel the doubt starting to worm its way through his mind. He did his best to bury it.

"Guys… I wish this was a video game," Gabe confessed, expression genuinely sorry for their fate. For all of their fates. "Easy steps to follow, try as many times as you want to get it right, satisfying ending after so much work getting there. But this is real, and it's gonna end bloody for us all."

"But it doesn't have to," Dean snapped. "If you would just friggin' man up and face your family-"

You don't know anything about my family!" Gabriel yelled, hands fisted in their cuffs. "You think Armageddon is a big deal? That was

Sunday dinner for me. There is no facing my family!"

"Then help us stop it," Sam insisted, desperately throwing an arm out as he tried to get through to the angel without telling him they'd done it once before. They could do it again. "We can stop it."

"You two-! Like talking to a brick wall!" Gabriel raised his arms, fingers curling towards each other in frustration. He spun away, letting out an irritated growl, struggling to keep his emotions from bursting out without his permission.

After a stretched moment, the archangel deflated, shoulders dropping. When he turned around, his eyes were watery but hard. "It can't be stopped, Sam. This isn't about a war…. This is about two brothers who loved each other, and betrayed each other. Unresolved anger like you can't even imagine. And it's about to be unleashed. You can't *stop* that.

"As it is in Heaven." The angel raised his hands above his head, fingers reaching towards the heavens. When he lowered them, each palm faced a different brother. "So it must be on Earth. As it is written."

Dean stared at the archangel. Little brother to Michael. To Lucifer. Little brother to a shitty family handed a shittier deal. He turned to his own little brother. A man that had found out Dean traveled back in time ten years to stop an Apocalypse, and asked how he could help. Didn't run away from the shit hand *God* dealt him. A God he still believed in, even after learning what had been 'written' for him by that god.

He could have run away. He could have stayed at Stanford, refused to believe Dean. Or he could have crumbled. Given in to Azazel and taken the blood, any number of times it was presented to him. Gotten it over with. Any of them could have. Andy could have found his little corner of the world and smoked himself to an oblivion, still able to talk. Or went his brother's route and leaned into the plans of the Yellow Eyed Man. Bobby could have told Dean to fuck off after he invited a demon into his house, or brought an angel into the fold like he was family. The old hunter could have told Andy to make his own way or the boys to take a hike. Could have said no, to any one of the too-many favors Dean and Sam demanded of him far too often.

But they didn't. They'd all faced the impossible and decided screw it. Might as well try.

You'd think if a human could do it, an archangel could at least consider it.

"You're such a coward," Dean spoke firmly, repeating his brother's shocked and disappointed words from the diner, after finding out a Trickster had been messing with their lives so he could get the end of the world started that much sooner. His own words, from a decade past, came readily. "This isn't about some prize fight or some destiny that can't be stopped. This is about you being too afraid to stand up to your family!"

"Get this through your thick skull, you arrogant dick." The archangel's eyes were dark. Deadly. Gabriel clenched his teeth, hands curling into fists again, this time in anger. "I am going to have to watch my brothers kill each other, and there's *nothing* I can do to stop it. Just like there is *nothing* you can do to stop Sam from dying. How can you not understand that I just want it to be over! You'd think you could relate."

Sam blinked, the "What?" escaping his mouth in a mind-numbing matter. He glanced at Dean, who the archangel was staring so fiercely at.

"Oh, you sorry sons of bitches," Gabriel breathed out, shaking his head with realization. "What did you think all of this was about? It was a *warning* . Sam, you're going to die. It has to happen, so it *will* happen. There's nothing you or your brother can do to stop it.

"And Dean." The archangel turning his gaze to the furious older hunter, whose face was so stony any mortal man would fear for his life. "You're going to be there. You're going to be right there as Sam dies, and you won't be able to stop it. You're going to sell your soul to make it right, because you can't live with knowing you couldn't save him. You proved that. Again. And again. And again."

"In a *game* ," the older Winchester bit back, taking another step forward only to have his brother bring him up short once more, hand to his upper chest. "A sick, twisted *game* ."

"It's going to happen in the real world too, bucko. As it happened in Heaven, so it *must* happen on Earth. Might as well get it over with." Gabe sighed at the end of his gritted, bitten out response, suddenly exhausted. This was going nowhere, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon. He felt bad for these two morons, who couldn't accept the fate headed their way.

He looked away for a moment, wanting nothing more than to leave this conversation behind in a beat of wings, before clearing his throat. “So. Boys. Now what? We stare deep in each other’s’ eyes for the rest of eternity?”

The older of the two hunters sneered at him, while the younger just looked disappointed. Gabe found it incredibly annoying how much that bothered him and brutally shoved it aside.

“Well, first of all,” Dean squared his shoulders, drawing himself up to a demanding height, “you’re gonna bring Cas back from wherever you stashed him.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “Him?”

“Her. Whatever,” Dean growled, managing not to roll his eyes in annoyance. Really, he was supposed to be the backwards one. Why was everyone else so caught up on gender? “Bring Cas back. Snap to it.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed once more, neither liking being ordered about, nor the order itself. “Aaaand if I say no?”

“We're gonna deep-fry ourselves an archangel.” Dean’s grin was purely predatory, and even though he was pretty sure the hunter was bluffing, a shudder ran through Gabe regardless as he glanced at the dancing flames encircling him.

Dean’s eyes narrowed when Gabe didn’t ‘snap to it.’ He raised his head to the ceiling and called out in prayer, “Cas?”

The imprisoned archangel’s brow furled, looking dark and dangerous, Sam thought. But also uncertain. Like he’d possibly approached this whole thing on the wrong foot and was now reconsidering. Sam supposed being surrounded by one of the few things capable of killing you would make anyone feel like that. Still, the younger Winchester waited with baited breath for the faint sound of wingbeats and the arrival of their angel.

When nothing happened, he got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, formed entirely around what his impulsive older brother might do next.

Dean, still glaring daggers at the encircled archangel, pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket and hit the speed-dial for Cas. It didn’t even ring, just immediately switched over to the beep-beep-beep and the

pre-recorded voice of a woman informing him the number he dialed was no longer in service. He hit the end button hard enough to damage the phone.

Gabe gave a sheepish grimace, raising his hands in the face of all that fury, and a fire far too close for comfort. "Now look-"

"Where is he?" Dean snapped, and for a moment the archangel was taken aback by the look in the hunter's eyes. Then his own narrowed.

" *She's* fine. For now."

Sam immediately took a half step closer to his brother, muttering Dean's name warningly. He knew Dean would have picked up on that threat, and he was absolutely worried it would tip his brother's rage to a boiling point. And while Dean's fists curled and his shoulders shook with tension, he didn't move. Or deep fry the archangel.

"Let Castiel go," Sam insisted, keeping his voice firm but more reasonable than his brother's. "And we'll put the fire out."

For a moment, fear flickered across Gabriel's face before he covered it with anger. "Come on, guys. Try to see my side, here. You don't let me out, Cas is dead."

Sam's gut twisted, realizing he'd given the archangel all the ammo he needed to turn the tables one-eighty on them. But Dean just scoffed, arms crossed over his chest, eyes never leaving the archangel.

"No, he- *she* isn't."

His words were backed with such confidence, both brother and angel were left blinking. Sam knew where that confidence came from; the archangel did not. Still, Gabe recovered first, burying the increasing feelings of unease. There was something up with Dean Winchester. Something… wrong. Something off script. But he had bigger, hotter, flame-related problems to deal with right now. Getting out of that was priority numero uno.

"Yeah?" he asked, putting more bravado into his tone than he necessarily felt. "You willing to risk her life on it?"

"Yeah, I am." Dean uncrossed his arms, leveling a finger at him. "Because you may be a giant douchebag, but you're not a killer."

Beside him, Sam whipped his head his way. "Dude, he just spent

weeks killing *us* ."

Even as he said it, Gabe gestured wildly with his bound rests, as if to say *'Listen to your brother! He's the smart one!'* But Dean wasn't listening. He didn't need to; he knew this angel.

"Oh, he may not give a shit about anyone else's family, but he won't hurt Cas," Dean continued, speaking to Sam but never taking his eyes off Gabriel. "He's your brother."

"I got thousands of those," Gabe shrugged with pretty convincing nonchalance. Sam glanced at Dean, but the man from the future wasn't buying in.

"Yeah, but they matter to you, don't they? Every single one of 'em. You can't even fight against the literal devil, cuz he's family," Dean scoffed, the judgment in his eyes all-consuming. It only made Gabriel angrier, and the archangel really didn't want to reflect on why that was. Instead, he buried that rage beneath the hypocrisy of Dean Winchester judging anyone for loving their brother too much. "You're definitely not gonna kill the one angel that actually deserves that title. You may rough him up a bit, throw your weight around as a big brother, but you'd never kill one of your own. You don't have it in you."

Gabriel was breathing deep, even breaths to keep his calm, but he couldn't keep the growing fury off his face. There was a power building around them. A tension Sam could practically feel. It reminded him of the terror he'd felt when they first summoned Castiel, only more powerful. But Dean never wavered, and Sam still didn't know how his brother did it. How he stood so strong and confident in front of the wrath of an archangel.

"You just love your brothers too damn much," Dean finished burying the knife, then twisted it. " *That* is gonna be the death of *you,* Gabriel."

There was a finality to that statement that left the warehouse and its occupants in a tense silence. Sam had heard such certainty coming from his brother before, and now he had no doubt the archangel in front of them did die where Dean came from. There was something tragic about that. Sam found himself wanting to change it.

"Help us," he tried one last time, pleading with the archangel. "We can change it. We have to try."

Gabe stared at the younger Winchester and, for just a moment, let himself imagine a different future. But he knew it couldn't be. He knew his family. And hoping – dreaming – would only hurt worse in the long run. "I'm sorry. But you're going to fail. And I'm not letting Castiel go down with that ship."

"That's not your call to make," Dean growled, taking another step forward. His chest burned the closer he got to the flames, but he ignored the pain; it was manageable for now. "Cas can make his own damn decisions."

Gabriel actually snorted. "Wow. Have you tried saying that in a mirror lately, Mr. Big Brother?"

Sam grabbed Dean's shoulder with strong, bruising fingers to keep him from rising to that jab. (Not that the archangel was entirely wrong, though Sam definitely didn't need to add his opinion to this mess.)

"You have to know Heaven is corrupt at this point. They're not even going to try and stop the end of the world!" Sam tried a different angle of attack, the honest desperation clear in his voice. "Castiel isn't safe up there. She's safer with us-"

"Ha!" Gabriel leaned his head back and laughed loud and long. "Safe? *Safe* ? Cassie's grace is a Dad-damn *mess* . That didn't happen in Heaven, I promise you that."

"What?" Sam's eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced between his brother and the archangel. "She- she got hurt in a demonic trap, but-"

"And how, exactly, did she end up in a demon's trap?" Gabriel snapped out. "Pretty sure that never would have happened if she hadn't gotten tangled up with you two chuckleheads."

"She is helping us stop the end of the world!" Dean yelled, fists curled and face red with rage. Not all of that anger was for Gabriel, but taking it out on him was easier at the moment than facing his own guilt. "While you sit on your ass-"

The chipped and broken windows high up on the walls shattered completely with a thunderclap of power. Sam flinched, the pressure that had been building finally popping with enough tangible force to feel like a slap across his entire body. Gabriel was still imprisoned within the circle, leather bindings smoking but thankfully intact. His face was a myriad of emotions, fury the primary one.

"You shut your cakehole," he hissed and spat, eyes locked on Dean Winchester. "That is my *sister* you are talking about, you mud monkey, and you are going to get her *killed*! I am protecting her by keeping her away from *you*!"

If Dean was taken aback by the ferocity of Gabriel's defense, he didn't show it. The confession, more than anything, proved Dean's point that the angel could never hurt Castiel. Not really.

"Cas is the best of all of you," he growled, voice low and dangerous. "The only one in your family worth a damn. Keeping him from us isn't gonna save him from anything. He'll make his own damn decision – and it's gonna be the *right* one – with or without input from me *or* you."

Gabriel's jaw snapped shut, clenched in an angry silence that covered a turmoil of emotions.

"So. You gonna let him go, or are we walking out of here with that fire left burning?" Dean's voice was a no-nonsense threat, and everyone heard it loud and clear.

The muscle in Gabe's jaw flexed as he ground his teeth, but he didn't say a word. Dean scoffed and turned away.

"So what? You're just gonna… you're gonna leave me here forever?" There was a vein of panic in the archangel's voice, but Dean didn't stop walking. Sam stared after his brother, even as he felt the angel's angry gaze shift his way. "Sam? Come on, Sam."

Dean pushed the nearest exit door open with a harsh squeal of metal. It slammed shut in his wake, and the younger Winchester turned back to the imprisoned angel. A tense quiet filled the space between them, Sam not quite meeting Gabe's fierce eyes.

"Can you heal her?"

Gabriel blinked, taken aback at the soft question. "What?"

Sam's brown eyes met his, and they were so damn earnest, Gabe found himself blinking again. "Castiel. You said her grace was…. Can you help her?"

It was Gabe's turn to look away. He hadn't meant to reveal all that. To let slip how conflicted he'd felt seeing the damage to his sister's grace. It had been a long time since he'd been around any of his

siblings. It was frustrating, really, to find himself so quickly returning to old habits. Caring.

"Yeah," he muttered, still not looking into those stupidly desperate brown eyes. To acknowledge that maybe these humans cared about Cassie the same way he did when all physical evidence was to the contrary. "I'll help her."

Sam nodded, expression thankful and comforted. Gabe looked away again.

When the younger hunter turned and started walking away, however, his gaze snapped back. "Hey! Come on, seriously? You gotta let me out!" But Sam kept walking, so the archangel raised his voice. "I can't help her if I'm trapped here, you know!"

When Sam got to the door he paused, turning to meet Gabe's eyes. He reached over to the fire alarm on the wall beside the door and pulled the handle. Water sprang from the ceiling in a shower of droplets, and Gabe looked up at the ceiling, squinting in the rainfall.

"Just…don't hurt her, okay? She's our family too, Gabriel."

The clinking sound of something metallic and small bouncing across the cement floor drew Gabriel's gaze back down. The key to the handcuffs was just feet away, glinting in the firelight. The archangel turned his admittedly surprised – though no less pissed – gaze to the warehouse door, but Sam Winchester was gone.

The flames – sputtering, sizzling, and flickering – died down around him.

-o-o-o-

The Impala was right outside of the warehouse, and Dean had to close his eyes against the frustration of having no memory of parking her there. He simply had to trust that he had, and Gabe hadn't messed with his baby. They really needed to get her angel proofed. Soon as they figured out how to exclude Cas from the warding.

Dean was waiting in the driver's seat, checking over Baby's interior, when Sam came out of the warehouse. He closed the door slowly behind him, face pensive. Once he was safely in the passenger seat, Dean pulled away from the building.

"I triggered the sprinkler system," Sam confessed quietly, some miles

later. He was staring out the window. Had been since they'd left the archangel behind. When Dean didn't say anything, he added, as if to explain himself, "Sometimes to gain trust, you have to give it first."

The man from the future cleared his throat, staring straight ahead as the seconds ticked by. Eventually, he nodded. He'd sort of figured that's what Sam had done, anyway. It's what they'd done last time. And Cas probably would be better off if the archangel made it back to her sooner rather than later.

"You're not wrong," he admitted, the words thick in his throat. "And I'm not gonna tell you it was the wrong move, either. Time'll tell."

Sam let out a quiet sigh and Dean merged the Impala onto the nearest highway, pointed towards Ohio's southwestern border. From there they'd turn due west, heading for South Dakota.

"What about Cas?"

The younger Winchester almost didn't ask the question, worried about the response it might trigger in his brother. But Cas deserved better than Sam's avoidance. She was one of them, and they were leaving her behind for lack of any other option. He understood it, but it didn't sit right with him. He knew it wouldn't be sitting right with Dean, either.

"She'll be alright, for now," the man from the future acknowledged begrudgingly.

He was pissed, of course, but less at Gabriel than he thought he'd be. No, at this point his anger had reached a higher level. He was sick of getting his angel back only to lose her to one thing or another. It was like Time itself disliked her presence this early in the timeline and kept stealing her away. Dean was getting real, real damn tired of it. Of feeling like there wasn't anything he could do to stop it from happening.

She would be alright, though. At least this time she was with a brother Dean knew wouldn't hurt her. Unlike with Uriel, Dean didn't have to worry. Well, as much. He was still going to worry plenty, and pray about as much. Because Cas was being held prisoner by one of her douchebag family members hellbent on keeping her away from the dirty, useless humans.

Dean really hated angels. All of 'em except Cas, of course.

“How do we get her back?”

The older Winchester sighed, part exhaustion, part frustration. They had no leverage on Gabe, not for averting the apocalypse and not for bargaining Cas’s return. Dean rubbed his chest, which seemed to ache with sympathy for his plight.

“I’m working on it,” is what he said, even though he had no plan. He didn’t even have the beginnings of a plan. But he’d figure out a way. Hell, He’d gone to Heaven and back to get her last time. Gabe couldn’t be nearly as much of a pain in the ass as that.

At least, he friggin’ hoped not.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns

: Sooooo, that got long real quick 👀 Usually during such a pivotal moment or important plot point, I try to use as much dialogue from the episode as possible. Some of it’s an ode to the show, some of it’s laziness (😒), most of its sticking to a wibbly-wobbly concept of ‘if nothing changed in the timeline, the character should say the same thing this time around.’ This one was a little rough, though, because I was pulling from multiple episodes, and I struggled deciding what to keep and what to skip. I think I maybe should have skipped a little more than I did □

They Left Cas?!?

I know, I know, I see how this looks. I swear, this both is and isn’t me, as the author, needing to keep Cas out of the way. I knooooooooooow. But I do, sorta, need her out of the way, and look, so does Gabe! 😬 How convenient for me!

But fear not, dear readers! Unlike when I got her out of the way with heaven that first time… or healing in heaven that second time… or healing at Bobby’s that third time… or going off to make some safe houses that fourth time (does that one even really count? It was only, like, yesterday story-time wise!) this time we’ll still get plenty of her in the story! Just, stuck with Gabriel 😬 Which means we get plenty of Gabriel in the story!

(That's right, you heard me. From this moment out, Gabriel is now a recurring character worthy of main title credits)

Comments:
Thank you everyone who took some time to comment on last chapter! I really needed it, and it was wonderful to get to be on your reading journeys through the game chapter. I appreciated that boost ❤ I have not replied to most of you, but I will be making an effort to get around to at least some this week.

(I am definitely battling a particularly anti-social bout of depression, so at the moment I am struggling just to answer texts Ugh, it's the worst. But as it clears up I'll hopefully start replying to comments a little more regularly!)

Fun Fact #90: Season 2 is now officially three times longer than it was supposed to be. Whoopeeeee! [insert headdesk here]

Thank you all for your encouragement and support! And for enjoying mah little beastie of a story

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 125: Season 2: Chapter 91

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Me: [*playing VR mini-golf at 12:15 in the morning*] Whelp, I think I'm all set with the Castiel part. Thanks for the story help. Now, off to write!

Forestpelt: [*Also playing putt putt and kicking my ass*] Are you gonna post a chapter tomorrow?

Me: O.O Oh f***!

Chapter Warnings: SO. This chapter might have a little *cough* less editing than normal *cough cough*. Shorter chapter as well, but it's all Castiel! That's right, you heard me, and ENTIRE CHAPTER of our favorite angel. And it only took… um… 123 chapters to pull it off? [*headdesk*]

Chapter References: Last time on the Gabe and Cas show! Gabriel commented on Cas's messed up grace and refused to let her put Angela into a memory loop, saying she'd just mess it up with her current state. The last we saw of Gabriel, he had received a prayer from Dean (saying they were giving up) and told Castiel he'd be right back, he just had to see a man about an Apocalypse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 91

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Castiel was, admittedly, bored of staring at the large expanse of black, empty television screen in front of her. And it had taken a lot of staring before she'd been willing to admit that, stoic warrior that she was. She could turn her head, as only her chest and arms were affixed to the chair, but the rest of Gabriel's dwelling, at least what she could see of it, left little more to stare at.

It had been almost a full day since she had last seen her brother.

Castiel was unsure what Gabriel intended to do with the Winchesters, but considering his firm stance on the Apocalypse to come… it was not something Castiel could allow to come to pass. Unfortunately, there was little she could currently do to stop her brother.

Gabriel had not been completely wrong about the state of her grace, though he certainly had exaggerated parts of the diagnosis (for what Castiel could only assume was the dramatics of it all) (or so Angela would surely suggest, were her consciousness with him at the moment). While almost fully recovered from the Prince's trap – as much as it would ever be, at least – the physical appearance of Castiel's grace was… disagreeable.

Had another angel assisted with the healing, those cracks may have closed over with time, mending in appearance, though not strength. That was unlikely to ever fully recover, unfortunately. Like an old wound, Castiel would carry the evidence of the injury for the rest of her existence. Healed but never gone.

It was not much of a concern to her. Her grace was functional with or without scars. However, a healer would have performed a much better… cosmetic repair, Castiel reasoned. Patching the cracks had not been as important to her at the time as mending the grace. Gabriel's taunts, while annoying, were inconsequential. Nothing was more important than Castiel's mission to assist the Winchesters in averting the Apocalypse.

None of them were likely to come through such a task unscathed.

Of course, sending Angela into a loop of her own memories would hardly have been taxing. Gabriel was a ridiculous exaggerator Though, Castiel supposed, if she had been staring at a brother with recently fractured grace, messily mended by an amateur's hand, she too might be concerned. Perhaps not so… *vocally* , of course. But damage that severe was uncommon among angels, certainly not in the last several millennia. Not since the Fall, Castiel supposed.

Gabriel likely hadn't seen evidence of such trauma in a sibling since it had been Lucifer and Michael doing the damage.

The smaller angel decided the current train of thought was unproductive towards escaping and stowed it away for later contemplation. While placing Angela into a memory loop was well within the limits of her mended grace's abilities, breaking free of Gabriel's hold was not. She had attempted several times since the

onset of her captivity, though those attempts had been strategically half-hearted. Mere tests against the limitations of her brother's restraints.

Limitations that were, unfortunately for Castiel, not within her restrained reach.

Realistically, as much as Castiel did not want to admit it, Gabriel's power was beyond her strength, restrained or free. A Power had no chance against an Archangel in any situation.

Still, that was no reason not to find a way. Castiel closed her eyes and put her not-inconsiderable strategic resources to work forming a plan. One that would not require her grace to break her out of her confines. Which, very unfortunately, meant relying on guile. Castiel tried not to feel as utterly hopeless about that as she very well knew she was.

She hadn't gotten far – certainly not as far along as she had hoped to be – when Gabriel came back. Unlike the previous times he had disappeared and reappeared in the apartment, this time the archangel came back through the front door. The Jack Russell Terrier the archangel kept for a pet was yipping happily at the return of his master, tail wagging as he pranced about Gabriel's legs.

The archangel paid him no mind, however, instead heading directly for the bound angel. His expression was grim, bordering on restrained fury, and Castiel immediately tried to withdraw from the approaching wrath.

A hand curled around the back of her chair and she was yanked off balance, tilted onto the back two legs.

"What have you done with the Winchesters?" she tried to ask, fearful of what an enraged archangel could have done to her charges. What came out, however, was a muffled, unintelligible mess of tangled sounds bound by tape.

"I'm so not in the mood," Gabriel growled as he dragged the chair and the angel bound to it across the floor towards the front door. Waving an arm, the coat closet beside the entryway flew open and he tossed both chair and sibling inside. The duo tilted dangerously to one side, given he'd spun her about so she faced him, before righting in a wobble on all four legs. "So shut it."

He slammed the closet door in the face of a bewildered Castiel, who was cast into the confines of darkness and several musty-smelling

jackets.

She heard Gabriel muttering angrily to himself on the other side of the closet door for several minutes. His voice was too low and too muffled by the wood to properly hear, though she gathered he was talking to the dog. Ranting was probably a more proper term, considering the dog was not an active participant in the conversation.

Heavy footsteps passed by the closet door and Castiel straightened with expectation, but the door she heard open was not the one in front of her. It was the door to the apartment, and it slammed shut just as quickly.

The dwelling – her closet included – fell into heavy silence.

A moment passed in which Castiel, confused and uncertain as to what had led to this change of events, pondered the silence, unsure what to do next. The sound of small nails skittering across hardwood floors suggested the dog had retired to his bed by the TV. Castiel waited for several more minutes, but Gabriel did not come back.

There was no other noise or movement in the apartment for hours and, eventually, Castiel had to resign herself to waiting in the dark for the return of her brother and, hopefully, some answers.

-o-o-o-

When the closet door finally opened once more, Castiel expected her brother. Possibly wrathful (intent on releasing whatever anger remained onto his sister) or back to his falsely jovial, mischievous self (which was quite possibly worse, Castiel really wasn't sure). What she received was neither. The man standing in front of her was one she did not recognize, blinking wide, human eyes at her.

"Huh," he exclaimed rather bluntly. He had slicked-back, dark hair and a lanky, wiry frame which was covered in tight jeans, a white button up, and an ill-fitting vest. "There really is a woman in his closet. Usually Mr. Laufeyson is joking when he says stuff like that."

"You must release me," is what Castiel tried to say, though it more closely resembled, "Mff mfft rmm meef mee," which the human had very little chance of understanding.

"Sorry, Miss, but Mr. Laufyeson was very specific. I'm not supposed to talk to you." The human reached into the closet, taking a long, red leash off a hook on the wall. Gabriel's dog raced into view, yipping

excitedly as he circled the human's feet. "We'll be back in a little bit."

The man closed the closet door once more, and the sound of him and the dog leaving through the front door left Castiel in stunned silence once again.

-o-o-o-

Castiel's glare when the closet door opened once more was nothing short of irate. The human had the decency to look apologetic, at the very least, as he hung the dog leash on the wall where it apparently belonged. The dog was preoccupied in the kitchen, muzzle deep in a bowl piled high with food – the contents of which were entirely inappropriate for the diet of a small canine, from what Castiel could tell – which was being devoured at an alarming rate.

"Erm… well, Mr. Laufeyson didn't say anything about *keeping* you in the closet, I suppose," the human offered with a weak smile that was far more of a grimace, considering the bound angel's obvious displeasure. "Let me just…"

The man dragged Castiel's chair forward by the arms. The legs of the chair scraped loudly across the hardwood floors, causing both humanoids to wince at the noise. Once out of the closet, the human turned her around and dragged her in a very similar fashion as Gabriel had, only far less easily, until she was positioned once more in front of the TV.

Castiel's protests, grievances, insistence for freedom, pleas, and threats – all equally unintelligible through the duct tape – were ignored.

"Sorry I can't untie you," the human offered in apology as he adjusted the angle of the chair, regarded the positioning of the angel, and approved of his choices with a nod. He reached for the remote, resting atop the arm of the lazy boy beside Castiel. "It's just, Mr. Laufeyson pays for me not to ask questions, and he pays *well* . So. Animal Planet?"

The television turned on with a click and a warm buzz. The human shuffled through channels faster than Castiel could keep track before settling on two cheetahs chasing a gazelle through wide open, golden plains.

This must be the Animal Planet, whatever that was. Castiel missed Angela Garrett fiercely in moments such as these.

“Okay, so… uh, I’ll be back same time tomorrow. See you then!”

The human made his exit in quick order, leaving the bound angel and feasting dog alone once more.

-o-o-o-

The human did, indeed, return the next day at the same time. Gabriel’s dog was glad to see him, for he had spent most of the morning trying to nap on the warm space provided by Castiel’s thighs, meeting with little success. The third time he slipped off – entirely his own fault, as he was wont to roll in his sleep, belly to the sky – the dog had regarded her with such disdain that the angel had not been entirely surprised when he lifted his leg and urinated on her pant leg.

Displeased, of course, but not surprised.

“You know,” the human said once he had cleaned up the mess and patted her leg dry the best he could with paper towels, “he’d warm up to you a lot more if you paid him some attention. He loves having his belly scratched! You could try that.”

Castiel stared up at the human, wrists and chest bound to the chair, and tried her very best to ask exactly how she was supposed to do that with an irritated gaze alone. The human didn’t take notice of the predicament, so she must not have done a very good job of it.

When they returned from their walk, the human asked if she needed anything – to which she muffled through another round of demands to be set free – before departing once more.

The dog jumped into her lap for attempt number four, and Castiel resigned herself once more to another twelve hours of Animal Planet. Which, it turned out, was recordings and narration about Earth’s many animals, of which she already knew everything there was to know. In fact, many of the programs got details wrong, particularly about the mental and emotional capacity of many species. It was rather tiring, actually.

-o-o-o-

When the human returned on the third day, Castiel regarded him with such desperate eyes (she’d been practicing) that he relented.

“How about the movie channel?” he asked, picking up the remote with a sympathetic smile.

Castiel dropped her head, let out a sound of pure defeat, and nodded dejectedly.

-o-o-o-

Gabriel's dog, while certainly spoiled to a fault (that fault being a complete and utter disregard for obedience or respect), was not all that bad, Castiel reasoned. It was rather nice to have company, even if that company was consistently unimpressed with her presence.

They had worked out something of a compromise on the whole napping situation. Castiel would roll her feet to the tips of her shoes, decreasing the angle of her thighs and providing the dog a flatter space with which to take a nap. It was tedious, but it did seem to please the small creature. And unlike a human, Castiel could keep the position for as long a period of time as the dog deemed necessary.

It would be easier if the canine was a feline, Castiel thought during the dusk hours of the third day of Gabriel's absence. Sometimes when the dog strutted by, he would rub himself against Castiel's leg for attention. The angel did her best to return the gesture, knowing the creature sought the companionable comfort of touch, but she was limited in what she could do while bound.

A cat was far more likely to do the work itself, which would be a great relief. Cats did so love rubbing themselves against humans, as Castiel had observed on multiple occasions (and had experienced personally a handful of times across the millennia). They were neither shy about their affections, nor particularly displeased when such attention was rebuffed. Plus, they were far more appropriately sized for laps.

Yes, this would definitely be easier were Gabriel's dog to become a cat instead.

-o-o-o-

Castiel was watching a movie about a British spy who (for reasons she had not quite followed) was now participating in an international poker game, when there was noise at the front door. Surprised, for the human dog walker did not come at this time of day, the angel turned her head to the door as it swung open, revealing her brother. The archangel, who did not look his usual playful self but still rather serious, froze at the sight of his angelic house guest and less-angelic house pet.

Jack was sitting on his hunches in Castiel's lap, very much in the

shape of a cat.

A significantly lengthened tail of silky black fur flicked from its place. curled about a slim, feline body, and he regarded Gabriel with slit pupils and an unblinking stare. Above him, Castiel's expression was an open book: eyes the size of saucers, eyebrows up yet somehow still void of emotion. Gabriel was certain that had there not been tape over her mouth, those lips would be ever so slightly parted and downturned in a nervous frown.

It all said, so clearly, *'I didn't do anything, I swear.'*

Gabriel burst into laughter. He didn't try to hold back as it bubbled up from deep in his belly. He doubled over, one hand braced on the wall, the other on one knee. He laughed so hard he almost choked on his own mirth.

Jack jumped off Castiel's lap and, tail in the air, strutted out of the room.

"Oh, dear Dad," Gabriel straightened, wiping at his eyes. "Oh, that was brilliant."

Castiel looked like she could not decide between being worried and being annoyed. Gabe took pity on her.

"Didn't I tell you? Could have sworn I did. Jackie does that," he offered with an ear-to-ear smile, eyes still shining with mirth. He threw himself into his Lazy Boy, shoulders still shaking. Castiel's expression was leaning decidedly towards annoyance.

"He used to be a lot bigger. And a wolf! We had to downsize to fit through the apartment door." He spun the chair towards his sister with a lazy grin. "I take it you're a cat person?"

Castiel frowned, as if she didn't know what kind of person she was. Oh, right, she wasn't a person at all; she was an angel of the Lord, and they were neither dog nor cat people. Castiel settled on annoyed. Definitely annoyed.

It triggered another round of laughter from her brother.

"Ah, I needed that." Gabriel let out a deep, content sigh as his laughter settled into an occasional chuckle. He felt better than he had all this past week. Spinning about lazily, he caught sight of Castiel once more. She was entirely unamused. "Oh, right."

The archangel reached forward and ripped the tape from his sister's mouth. Once more, she didn't even flinch. Serious spoil sport.

"Sorry about the closet," Gabriel apologized mostly sincerely, head bobbing side to side. "That was a pretty dick move. I needed time to cool off. But hey, Lenny took good care of you, didn't he?"

He gestured to the fact that she was no longer in the closet. If anything, his sister looked even more annoyed. Gabriel delightfully ignored it, twirling his hand through the air, coming back with a can of pop in his grip.

"You know how I found him? He pickpocketed me. Me! Pretty good at it, too, for a kid." The archangel popped the soda, then summoned another loopty-loop straw with a quick snap. He plopped it into the can and took a long, slurping draw. He turned his head to Castiel with a Chesshire grin, straw lazily spinning in the can's small opening. "Talent like that shouldn't be wasted. Don't you agree?"

"What have you done with-"

"The Winchesters. Yes, *them* ," Gabriel finished for her with a look. He wanted to sigh, definitely roll his eyes, and maybe put his sister back in the closet. Ultimately, though, the archangel decided he'd been cruel enough to the smaller angel. So he did none of those things and instead answered honestly. "Nothing. They called me out."

Castiel's eyebrows climbed into her hairline, blue eyes wide with… was that hope he saw? Oh brother.

"Yup. Put me in a ring of *holy fire* . Wonder where they got that idea." He tilted his head towards the other angel, one eyebrow raised accusingly.

"I did not reveal your identity," Castiel returned, face forcefully stoic in a way that told Gabriel she knew *exactly* how the Winchesters figured it out. Whether or not she'd admit it to him. When he harrumphed in reply, she pierced him with a glare. "You did not give me any opportunity."

Well, she wasn't wrong there. Which only piqued the archangel-turned-trickster's curiosity all the more. Somehow, she had found a way to tell them. Or… they'd already known. Gabriel puckered his lips as cartoonishly as possible and wrapped them around the tip of the straw. He tucked the plastic into his cheek and started chewing

on it obnoxiously. He glanced at Castiel, the littlest angel that could, out of the corner of his eye.

"Is Dean Winchester from a different timeline?"

His sister hid her surprise well. Gabriel barely even caught the recoil, but catch it he did.

"Wasn't all that hard to figure out," he offered with a smirk in the corner of his mouth. "That man of yours talks a lot. Like, *a lot,* a lot. And that's something, coming from me."

Castiel sighed. Audibly sighed. Gabriel could barely contain his glee.

"Yes. Dean is from the future," the smaller angel confessed, avoiding her brother's gaze by staring at the TV, still playing the spy movie. Agent zero zero seven was now being tortured by the man he had beaten in the poker game. Castiel was not certain she properly understood human entertainment. In moments like this, he missed Angela. She was excellent at explaining movies in a way that made sense. Or, at the very least, made them entertaining. "A timeline from which I sent him back to avert the Apocalypse."

"Ah-ha!" Gabriel shook his head, looking far too amused for the topic of conversation. Castiel turned to stare at him. "I knew they were cheating! So Dean comes back from failing the first go around, summons you down – breaking the timeline, I might add – and convinces you – just like that – that you and him can change it."

Castiel frowned. "We can change it. We already have."

Gabriel scoffed and leveled a look at his sister that caused something inside her chest to clench uncomfortably. "Have you, now?"

She eyed him with a hint of wariness. "Yes. Not enough to avert the apocalypse, not yet. But we will."

"Well… I think you're wrong."

Castiel frowned at her brother's words, said so simply, as if there was no other option but the one he declared.

"I think you've been duped by two – admittedly persuasive, I'll give you that – human mooks. They're wrong, too, of course. What's coming is written in *stone* , Cassie. You should know better. But hey," Gabriel reached over to the side table next to the Lazy Boy and picked

up the TV remote, “I’m nothing if not a fair guy. I’ll give you a chance to prove me wrong.”

With a click and a buzz, the television turned on. His sister was staring at him, that wariness growing.

“What do you mean?”

“I think Dean is going to sell his soul for his brother and jumpstart the Apocalypse, little sis,” the archangel proclaimed, tone inappropriately cheerful. It irked the other angel immensely. “He couldn’t manage not to in my fake reality, so I don’t see him standing much chance in this one. You think he won’t – by some miracle, I might add – and if he doesn’t, that will fix everything! All hunky-dory.”

The black screen of the television flickered to life, revealing a wet night outside a small building on the side of a country road. Neon-lit signs indicated the human dwelling provided fuel and sustenance.

“Guess we’ll see who’s right, huh?”

Castiel turned a slow, piercing gaze from the television set to her brother. She recognized the tangible weight pooling in her stomach as dread. “Gabriel, what did you do?”

“I got the ball rolling. Might have told a demon or two where to find the Winchesters.” He held up an object, delicately pinched between two fingers. It was a hex bag: one of the Winchesters. The last of their supply, formally hidden within the safe confines of the Impala. “Pickpocketing ain’t all Lenny’s good for. Did you know Dean warded that car of his against angels? Sheesh. Paranoid much?”

A vehicle pulled onto screen, and Castiel took in a sharp breath at the sight of the Impala, coming to a stop outside the building. Dean Winchester climbed out of the driver’s seat and the heart Castiel did not need started to beat very fast.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: See! A whole chapter of Cas! In… the closet…

We’re doing Jane so damn proud. I think at this point even she’d be fed up with the pace of this burn

Okay, I know that was mostly filler, but hopefully it was entertaining filler! And necessary to set up our -- wait for it –

waaaaaaaaaait for it – SEASON 2 FINALE, whaaaaaaaa?! No way. You mean…. FINALLY?!?!?!? Sixy whole chapters later than predicted/aniticpated/necessary?!!?

[Did I mention a *headdesk* yet? No? Well *HEADDESK*]

Gabriel's Dog, Jack: A reviewer asked if the name choice for Gabriel's dog (who does appear on the show in Tall Tales, but never again), was a reference to Jack Kline. It was not, actually. The dog is a Jack Russell Terrier It seemed right up Gabe's alley to name his dog something that was just one step above naming him "Dog". I almost, aaaaaalmost called him "Wolfie" and also hinted as to why

Also, he shapeshifted into a cat because of all the wonderful, adorable artwork I have seen of Castiel and cats. I don't know how/when that became a thing, but it's definitely a thing. And it's adorable.

Fun Fact #121: I have figured out how to sneak Jack (Kline) into this story, at least in reference! It won't be for a while, but I'm very proud of figuring out how to wiggle something of him into the first five seasons

Fun Fact#808: During this chapter I learned that "loopty-loop", which I have always used to refer to a roller coaster's loop, actually comes from Loop-the-Loop, which was the name of a very early looping roller coaster!

Hope you all enjoyed! I know this one was short, especially since lately all chapters have been damn near twice as long. Next chapter will be back to being that long Because of course it is. [*authors wanders off muttering different variations of the word "verbose" to herself*]

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 126: Season 2: Chapter 92

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Ooookay, so it's Sunday. Y'all probably knew it was Sunday. I… vaguely new it was Sunday. But more in the "that's the name of the day" sort of way and not in the 'hey, you were supposed to post a chapter last night' way that actually mattered. So, heh, apologies for the late update! I realized this morning and spent the day editing (because I forgot/slipped up enough that the chapter wasn't even ready to go) At least it was an enjoyable chapter to edit. Especially since it is twice as long as usual. Because of course it is.

Chapter References: Since this is a bit of a prep-chapter for all that is about to come, there is a lot going on! Few things to remember.

--> Gabe broke Dean's favorite ivory-inlaid gun during the Mystery Spot Redo.

--> Dean hasn't worn his Amulet since the first month of time-traveling (too much of a reminder of what it represents to him). However, when Sam called him out on it, he hung it on the rear-view mirror (to honor what it represents to Sam) and it has been there ever since.

--> During the bank heist/shapeshifter fiasco with Ronald Resnik, Roger "Okie Dokie" Miller was the security guard for Milwaulkee Trust International.

--> Cole Trent went MIA from the military when he spotted Dean on TV at the robbery.

--> And lastly, our favorite FBI Agent Victor Henriksen has been working with Dave "the Analyst" Attingwood (who many of you have called out as being a possible demon) to identify the Winchester's cell phone numbers from every number that was active in the Sturgis Hospital during Andy's stay. Poor Demon Dave (I'm not actually admitting he's a demon. I'm just playing along with alliteration. Because I can. And because I'm evil.)

Chapter Warnings: If that wasn't hint enough, we're busy this chapter! Dean and Sam are still searching for Ava, Ron and Ash

are teaming up, Bobby's restricting Andy to the grounds, Andy isn't listening because when you gotta go, you gotta go, Roger "okie dokie" Miller is paid a visit, Henriksen apologizes and doesn't spontaneously combust (it's a pre-season-finale miracle!), Tom's got himself a new body, Persephone's asking Chuck the hard questions, and things. Are. Finally. HAPPENING.

Here we goooooooooo!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 92

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Yeah, yeah, we got it," Dean said as he leaned against the front of the Impala, phone pressed to his ear. He glanced over his shoulder at Sam, who was sitting in the passenger seat, window rolled down, having a conversation of his own with the Roadhouse. "We'll make ourselves scarce. Thanks for the heads up, Bobby."

The older Winchester shut the phone with an aggravated sigh, tilting his head back and closing his eyes against the noonday sun.

Really, when were they going to get a break?

They had been missing for five days. And in that time, friggin' FBI Special Agent Victor Henriksen had shown up on Bobby's door. It wasn't entirely surprising – one of the reasons the boys had chosen to clear out of Sioux Falls was because of the possibility – but it was a pain in the ass, regardless. Henriksen hadn't done anything more than throw his weight around, but Bobby couldn't rule out the property being under watch. He didn't think the FBI had sufficient cause for a warrant or surveillance, but now they wouldn't know for sure.

Dean couldn't recall Henriksen ever bothering Bobby before. Which meant they'd changed shit again and didn't that just figure. Not like any of the unexpected changes they'd dealt with so far had ended well for them, and Dean had no illusions that this would somehow be the exception. Not with Henriksen involved. Of the many things they'd faced over the years – demons, angels, monsters, humans, the friggin end of the world – the Law had always been the most frustrating,

efficient, and painful distraction. Never an enemy, not really, but absolutely the most bullheaded of obstacles. From local LEOs to FBI, getting the Colt back to hunting down Lucifer, the threat of being locked up was hardly the scariest thing they'd faced, but damn if it wasn't always the one thing they never had time for.

Especially now that their access to Angel Air had been cut off for the foreseeable future.

Worse yet, Henriksen had gone and dragged local law enforcement into it. Bobby hadn't named the Sheriff who'd shown up at his door, but he hadn't needed to. The town only had one.

Jody.

Dean hadn't flinched at the mention of her at all, and his chest – both human and angelic – certainly hadn't *ached* at the thought of seeing that particular friendly face.

Not that it would be friendly right now.

The man from the future lowered his head with a silent sigh, stowing all that ache away somewhere he couldn't feel it quite as strongly. They had bigger problems that future friends lost to time travel. Like the loss of access to their best (and only) safehouse. If they couldn't go back to Bobby's, the boys were left traveling the roads. Which wasn't foreign to them by any means – they'd done just that for years before the presence of demons brought them back to Bobby's front door.

But somehow, it felt wrong, now. No Bobby, no Cas. It felt like all the cards were stacking up against them. Like something big was coming. And Dean, no matter how much he'd tried to prepare, just wasn't ready for it yet.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair rather viciously, the older Winchester pushed off Baby and made his way around her to Sam's open window.

"Thanks, Ellen," his brother was saying from where he was seated inside the Impala, catching Dean's eye with a nod. The dark circles under his eyes (formed over a dozen Sundays and then a Russian roulette of games) hadn't improved with the night of sleep they'd tried to get in a heavily warded, angel-proofed motel room. "Have him call us whenever it comes through."

Sam lowered the phone and rested his elbow on the door, device in

hand. At Dean's raised brows, he said, "Ellen says Ash has some new data for you, but the algorithm's still running."

The older Winchester shrugged, nonplussed. "It's nothing I don't already know."

And maybe if Ash kept that information to himself this time, demons wouldn't feel the need to blow him up. Dean could only be so hopeful.

"Don't be so sure," his brother said with a disbelieving half-smile. "Apparently Ronald is the one who gave him the idea."

Dean's eyebrows climbed in surprise. Huh. Imagine that (and he totally was – the idea of Ronald Resnik and Ash teaming up on anything was… well, it was something, alright). Perhaps, for once, Dean was going to be proven wrong about their track record with timeline changes.

"Damn," is what he said, matching the smile on Sam's face with one of his own. "Alright, then. Guess we'll see."

"Ellen said he'll call us when he's got the results. Until then," Sam tapped the side of the car with his cell (gently, of course. Heaven forbid he get Dean started on a rant about the car's paint job), and Dean raised his eyebrows questioningly. He knew the signal, his brother was telling him to get in the car. "There's something up in Wisconsin. Part of Ash's algorithm, I guess. Lots of unidentified omens? Maybe demonic, Ash doesn't know. It doesn't have any ties to the other psychic kids yet, but…"

"It's something." Dean nodded in agreement, trying to absorb some of that optimistic energy for himself. If Sam could muster it, then so could Dean. He knew his kid brother was still worried about the missing Ava Wilson. If Sam wasn't planning on giving up the search for her anytime soon, no matter what distractions – bank robberies or Tricksters-turned-angels – got in their way, then neither would Dean. Omens weren't much, especially if they weren't even the usual demonic ones, but they were something, which was more than anything they currently had to go on. "We'll take it."

Sam was already sliding over into the driver's seat, which resulted in Dean's eyebrows turning decidedly judgmental, but he ultimately opened the passenger door and climbed in. As they pulled away, Sam switched the radio on, adjusting the tuning knob. Dean's eyebrows went full Bitchface.

"Driver picks the music," the younger Winchester offered with a pleased grin. He didn't even have to finish that statement – *Credence Clearwater Revival* already coming through the speakers – for Dean to start groaning.

-o-o-o-

When Bobby got off the phone with Dean, Andy was rolling on the balls of his feet. Sarge's leash was clenched tightly in both hands, the kid having been about to take the German Shepherd for a walk around the property when the boys had finally called. Now Andy was waiting anxiously for whatever news Dean had about where they'd been for the last week and a half. Sarge was sprawled at his feet, deciding on a nap since a walk was apparently not in the cards yet.

"Boys found themselves a Trickster," Bobby started, pulling his hat off and running a hand through his hair. Andy's widened and the fidgeting got worse. "Which turned out to be an archangel in disguise."

(And boy, did Bobby have words for the time-traveling Winchester about *that*. How, exactly, had the archangel *Gabriel*, disguised as a trickster (who had, apparently, messed with the boys *multiple times* in his timeline), *not* made it into his cliff-notes on the future?!)

Andy's eyes grew impossibly wider and Bobby raised a hand to stop the rapid-fire Sign already in progress. Sarge's leash was forgotten, draped haphazardly over an elbow as he frantically moved his hands.

"Everyone's fine, for the most part. Cas got nabbed-" he had to raise that hand again when Andy immediately launched into another round of hand gestures – "but Dean's certain she's alright. Gabriel won't let her go, but apparently he won't hurt her, either."

Or so Dean said. Unfortunately for everyone else involved, there wasn't much they could do but trust his future knowledge. And where Feathers was concerned, Bobby knew better than to question it. If Dean said she'd be alright, then she'd be alright.

Lord knew (and so did everybody else) that boy would move Heaven and Earth if he thought otherwise.

Andy deflated a bit, but it was a mix of released tension as well as distress. Bobby could relate. He put his cap back on.

"As for the FBI-" The kid straightened, distress returning but in a rigid sort of way- "Dean agrees. You're lying low. Which means no leaving the house."

Hands started flying, blurring with the speed the kid was trying to protest. But Bobby was having none of it.

"*And*," he added loudly, forcing Andy to curl his gesturing fingers into fists and *listen*. Not something the kid was great at. Or thrilled to be doing. Well, tough luck. Bobby reached forward, taking a hold of the dog leash, pulling it free from where it was tucked into the crook of Andy's elbow. "We're getting too close to Azazel's battle royale. Which means you are camping out in the panic room from here on out."

Andy's eyes all but bulged out of his head. He waved his hands – really, the full length of his arms – in a big, crystal-clear gesture that said *'Oh Hell no.'*

*'That's in **May**!'* he argued immediately in Sign. *'That's **two months** away! You can't keep me locked up for two months!'*

"I can and I will if it keeps you alive, kid," Bobby argued right back, though he knew realistically he had no real way of keeping Andy locked inside. But if the kid was smart, he'd listen. It was his life they were discussing, after all.

Andy stared. And stared.

When he lunged forward suddenly, Bobby wasn't all that surprised. It didn't stop Andy from snatching the leash back and bolting for the front door. Sarge scrambled to his feet, nipping at the kids heels as he followed, barking joyously at the new game. Bobby gave chase, hollering at them both.

The images that flashed through his brain were a jumbled mess of protestation, childish outrage, and desperate pleas to at least let him live in the van, of all things.

-o-o-o-

"Alright, so," Agent Attingwood drawled into his FBI issued desk phone, receiver pinched between his ear and shoulder so he could juggle a stack of papers in one hand, scroll through a spreadsheet on his monitor, and type one-handed with the other. He'd been the damn King of Multitasking since Agent Henriksen had given him the Phone Number Assignment from Hell (what he'd been calling it in his head for the last three months) in addition to all his other Analyst work (thank God Victor had finally gotten him a starting number or it would be another three months before he had anything worth calling the man over). "With that number you gave me, assuming it is Robert

Singer's cell-"

"It is," came the confident, intimidating voice that had never once actually intimidated Dave in the slightest. It reminded him of his older brother, really. Just like Agent Henriksen, Josh thought he was right about everything all the time too. And was equally terrible at admitting when he wasn't.

"-even though you refuse to tell me *how* you got it," Dave continued, completely unphased. "*If* it's the real deal, then I've narrowed it down to three numbers in the Sturgis area that consistently sent messages and made calls to one another or Mr. Singer during the time frame you provided."

Dave flipped the top page of the stack, said numbers highlighted among hundreds of calls made in the week-long period the Winchesters were believed to be in and out of that hospital. "Of the three, two consistently texted back and forth with the third, while only making a few calls or texts to each other. I can only assume – emphasis on the assumption part of this, so no blaming me if it's wrong later – that those two numbers belong to the Winchesters, and the third is Andy Gallagher."

"Run them," Henriksen demanded immediately, hardly letting Dave finish, let alone congratulate him on the gargantuan feat of pinpointing three numbers among thousands. "I wanna know where those phones are and who else they've been talking to."

Dave huffed. A little appreciation would be nice. And certainly not misplaced.

"Gee, Analyst Dave, great job with that!" Agent Attingwood said into the phone, making a face he knew Henriksen couldn't see. "You're the best! I sure take you for granted!"

"Agent Attingwood," Henriksen warned, and Dave sighed.

"You're impossible, you know that? And also, totally undervaluing my skills." Before Henriksen could warn him further – which Dave could tell was coming – he continued, "I already ran them, Mr. Bossy."

Silence stretched down the line. Dave enjoyed it immensely.

"*And*?" Victor practically barked.

"Aaaaand," David drawled, using one hand to scroll down his

spreadsheet to the data he needed. "The Winchesters are currently off-grid, if they're even still using those phones. There's been no usage, coming in or going out. Last ping was from a college town in Ohio, two weeks ago."

Henriksen growled down the line, and Dave decided he'd probably had enough fun. He did value his job, after all. He'd rather keep it.

"However, Robert Singer has been in frequent contact with a number in Nebraska registered as a… uh, hold on," Dave had to switch tabs, pulling up the search he'd made minutes before calling Agent Henriksen, "a bar and restaurant in central Nebraska called the Roadhouse. Listed owner is Eleanor Harvelle."

"Any information on her?"

"Not much." Dave shuffled papers again, looking for the file he'd printed out on the woman. "No priors, she's owned the bar since her husband passed in a hunting accident-"

"Hunting?"

Dave blinked at the surprise – and suspicion – in Victor's voice. He double checked the info. "Uh… yeah. Don't have the details. Want me to get them?"

"Yes. And I want a full workup on this Harvelle woman."

David resisted sighing. It was all he managed to resist. "I do have other work, you know. Other agents in the FBI who need things too. Whole office full of 'em."

The growl that came down the line did not form words. Dave rolled his eyes but jotted down Ellen Harvelle's name on a pad of sticky-notes on his desk, half buried under all the work he was currently doing for the demanding agent.

"As for Andy Gallagher, he has been chatting up a proverbial storm," Dave continued, switching back to his spreadsheet and shuffling papers once more for the list of numbers this particular phone had been texting. "No calls, weirdly enough-"

"The man's mute," Henriksen interrupted with a gruff response.

"Aaaaand *that* information would have been seriously helpful three months ago," David deadpanned. "'Our suspect can't talk, so look for a

number that only sends texts, Dave.'"

Silence stretched down the line again, though this one had a distinct flavor of not-angry to it.

"Sorry."

Dave blinked. Then blinked again. He straightened, freeing one hand to pull the phone away from his shoulder and stare at it. It wasn't spontaneously combusting. Huh.

"Apology accepted," David said, still stunned he'd gotten one, as he tucked the phone back into his ear. "Alright, so now we can be a lot more confident that number is Andy Gallagher's. So, Mr. Gallagher has been texting the Winchesters' numbers a decent amount, or at least he was when they were still receiving. He's also texting a number with a Nebraska area code – same as the Roadhouse – that has been all over the place."

And Dave meant all over the place. Montana, Wyoming, Iowa, Michigan, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and that was just the last two months. There were plenty more states before that. Whoever owned that number lived on the road, far as the analyst could figure.

"It's a pre-paid, so I don't have a name for you," he continued, only a little bit apologetic (he was a damn boss for getting Henriksen all this already). "And last of all we have a Sioux Falls number he's been texting a lot-"

"Wait, what?" Victor's voice had taken on that surprise-suspicion thing again.

"It's not that surprising," Dave replied, digging for the file he'd printed up on the woman who owned the number. The only surprising thing, really, was that she was a sheriff. "Given that Mr. Gallagher's number has pinged off a Sioux Falls tower almost exclusively. Guy doesn't really get around much."

The silence that followed wasn't so much a silence as an intake of breath and a beat.

"*What?*"

Even Dave straightened, phone falling from his shoulder to be caught in his hand. "What, what? What'd I miss?"

"Robert Singer lives in Sioux Falls," Henriksen all but growled.

"Yeah," David answered easily enough, confused as to why that information – readily available and widely known at this point – was a big deal. "Singer Salvage Yard, just outside city limits. The same place the number's coming from, probably, given the tower it keeps pinging off of is, like, two miles down the road from that address. Why's that a big deal?"

The only answer he got was the dial tone of an agent that had just hung up on him. Dave sighed and put the phone back on its cradle on his over-crowded desk.

"Thanks, Dave. You really cracked the case, Dave. You're awesome, Dave!"

The FBI analyst gave a little shake of his head in something between irony and resignation and got back to work. Twenty minutes later, still annoyed at Victor hanging up on him (not surprised. Hardly surprised. He knew the man, after all. Just annoyed, is all), Dave decided to do a little digging of his own. He typed Agent Henriksen's government-issued cell phone number into his computer and clicked on the last number he'd contacted, seconds after he'd hung up on Dave.

A federal judge.

Huh. Guess whatever information Dave had provided was enough to get a warrant.

-o-o-o-

Persephone lowered the pages of Chuck's latest chapter, settling them in her lap as she transferred her gaze to the window right beside her. A woman was walking past the prophet's house, a dog trotting several feet in front of her at the end of a leash. The mailwoman was making her rounds in the odd, square truck that all mail carriers seemed to use. The world beyond kept spinning, heedless of what was coming.

She had already read this section of the novel twice. The prophet seemed to be dragging his feet writing what remained. Persephone was not entirely surprised. It was clear from the mounting tension of his latest writing that they were building to something. The Grand Finale, as human entertainment would call it, usually in a tone that implied nothing good to come.

Just like the author, Persephone was not entirely sure she wanted to get there in any rush, either.

"Hey, Steph?"

The millennia-old creature turned her head to the prophet, who was sitting at his makeshift desk across the room from her. He had a pen in hand and another tucked behind his ear, which he had probably forgotten was there. His right leg was bouncing up and down in a manner Persephone had quickly learned to read as unease.

"Yes, Chuck?"

"Do you, uh… want to, um…" Chuck tried for a smile, but it was a faltering, weak thing that he gave up halfway through. He cleared his throat, instead. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," she replied immediately, uncertain why he would feel the need to ask.

"Oh. Uh. Right. Good, I mean! That's, uh… good." The writer turned back to his computer, that leg jiggling faster now.

Persephone set the pages down on a side table and rose from her curled position. She didn't need to reread them a third time and the prophet's behavior suggested something was up. Persephone made her way over to the writer, who had clearly noticed her approach, given his leg stilled, then resumed its bounce, then stilled again. All the while he kept his gaze locked on his screen, fingers poised to write, even tapping nervously at a key or two, but not actually pressing any of them.

She came to stand beside the desk, positioned against the back of the couch. She leaned against the sofa, arms crossed casually, which was far more relaxed than anything she'd done when she first showed up on his doorstep all those months ago. As far as Stephanie went, it was downright making herself at home.

"Are you alright?" she asked the writer.

"Yeah, yeah, totally. I'm great. Wonderful. A-Okay." Chuck leaned back in his chair, going for casual as well but missing by a mile. His hands landed in his lap as he turned towards her, abandoning the attempt. The shaky smile was back. Steph raised her eyebrows at its return.

"Is your head starting to hurt?" She automatically reached for his pill container, buried in the couch cushions from the prophet's last headache-inducing burst of inspiration.

"No, it's not that," Chuck admitted, then winced when he realized he'd just confirmed it *was* something. "Just the, uh, story. Going somewhere I'd prefer it didn't. As usual."

As Stephanie straightened from the sofa, pills in hand, she regarded the writer with an expression he couldn't read. Chuck turned away from it, fearing it was pity, and instead reached over to his laptop and struck a key. The printer next to Steph stuttered to life, spitting out page after page until a healthy collection lay in its tray. Chuck grabbed them, hesitating only for a moment, before he held them out to his editorial assistant.

"Here you go. Final chapter."

In the moment it took his assistant to take them, the writer couldn't help but stare at the freshly printed pages. So fresh the ink would still smudge if he rubbed at it hard enough. For a moment, Chuck entertained doing just that. Just rubbing away the last hour of work – the last year's, the last millennia, the last… forever, really – and do it all over again.

The writer shook his head, freeing himself of such morbid and… existential thoughts. The story was what it was; it always seemed to write itself more than Chuck ever did. There was something weird about that, but the prophetic author didn't dwell on it. He had bills to pay, and he supposed this was at least one way to do that.

Stephanie took those final pages with what Chuck would call trepidation. But that was probably just in his head. The back of her hand bumped against his (or maybe it was the other way around?) and Chuck stared at the spot on his hand as he brought it back to his lap. His fingers felt fiercely warm and kinda tingly.

He wondered if Steph noticed, because she rubbed at her hand as well, the motion absentminded. The writer wondered about that, at the contact and the fact that she was always somehow nicer after moments like this. The poor man tried not to read too much into those times. Instead, he turned back to his lonely computer and all the death and horrors he'd written there.

"Hey, Chuck?" Steph had dropped her hand, but she had that distant look in her eye she always got at times like this. Chuck didn't know what to make of it, but something deep within him, something he didn't even realize existed most days, had taken great care to encourage that slowly growing ember. "Do you know what's going to

happen next?"

It was a weird question to ask of an author, Chuck thought. Then again, he seemed to be the kind of author that didn't know what was in store for his characters. Last minute planner, his publisher had teased, but Chuck always wondered if it was more than that. If it was weird not to feel in control of your own story.

"No," Chuck answered honestly, because he liked to think he was at the point of friendship with Stephanie that he could be honest. Maybe not honest enough to tell her he didn't even like his own story most days. But honest enough. "I don't. Sometimes I think the story will go one way, but usually when I write it… it's completely different. Not the way I'd have taken it at all."

The writer frowned at that, scrunching up one side of his face. He wondered what it would be like to write the story he wanted to write, and not the one that came to him in flashes of bright lights and a lot of head pain.

"What do you want to happen next?"

Chuck – and something altogether not Chuck – blinked in surprise. He glanced over at his editorial assistant, not sure why the question caught him off guard as much as it did. He supposed… no one had ever asked him that before. Probably because it had never occurred to anyone to need to.

"Oh. Um. Well…" Chuck had to pause, had to actually think about that answer. Funny, that. It turned out he hadn't thought to ask himself, either. The prophet smiled almost idly. "I think something big is coming," he admitted with a slight shrug. "And, well… it sounds silly, but… I want everyone to pull through."

Steph was staring at him in that way he couldn't read again. Whatever it was, it was kinda nice, even if he was pretty sure it was more pity than anything else.

"Guess it's not very good writing if everyone makes it out unscathed, though, huh?" Chuck sighed with another shrug, this one far more self-deprecating than the previously awkward one. "Tragedy maketh money, and all that. Not that I'm making much money, of course."

He chuckled with embarrassment, completely missing the downturn to Stephanie's lips. But the thing that lived deep inside him, that saw all when it wanted to, didn't.

We're close, He thought. *Just a little more. One more push and she'll be where the Winchesters need her to be.*

Assuming Time allowed her to play on the board at all. But that wasn't His call to make, nor would he be weighing in on it. He was interfering more than he'd planned already, and Time, while surprisingly collaborative, was not particularly forgiving of interlopers.

The drawn-out moment they weren't really having (at least, not outside of Chuck's overactive imagination) ended when his Editorial Assistant's eyes shuttered and she raised a hand to her neck, rubbing at the rapidly reddening skin there. Stephanie set the pages down on the edge of a desk, unread. Chuck stared at them, dismay mounting, as she crossed the room for her purse.

"Let me guess," he started, fully expecting Steph to finish the sentence.

He could see her expression in profile as she picked up her purse and coat. There was distaste crawling over her features, shifting into something dark – something *angry* – as it went. It was a look Chuck had seen several times, now, and she always left immediately afterward. As she turned back to the writer, Stephanie at least attempted a weak smile for him.

"I have to leave," she announced, indeed finishing his assumption for him. Her purse and coat were already in hand, though she hardly looked pleased about it.

"Yeah," the writer said with a sad smile. "I figured."

He didn't know why (though he suspected the reason was rather pathetic), but he never liked when his editorial assistant had to leave suddenly.

The God within him knew why and felt a specific sense of loss as well. A missed opportunity. Hard work down the drain. And so easily, too. If He weren't trying to tip the scales in the Winchesters' favor (even though He had committed Himself, so many years ago, to never touch them again), God would be indignant. To see one of His creations – by proxy, if nothing else – crumple so easily to the darkness inside her.

Especially when she had once told Him – *Him!* – that He was wrong about that darkness.

"It is Friday," Persephone said, so abruptly that whatever Chuck had

been thinking a moment ago was gone.

He blinked out of his reverie – unsure what it had even been about – and focused on his editorial assistant, standing rigid and ready to go. Her grip on her purse was tight in a way that didn't make sense to the human. Offhandedly, Chuck wondered if she still had that deleted scene he'd given her, about the hex bag. Wondered if maybe it was in that purse she was clutching like a lifeline.

Chuck blinked again. Weird thoughts today. Maybe another headache was coming on, after all. He should find his pills. He'd, uh, kind of gotten used to Stephanie already having them on hand by the time the headache really hit.

"I will return Monday."

The writer smiled, and nodded, but for some reason he couldn't begin to explain, he didn't believe her.

-o-o-o-

"So, Mr. Miller, you were the security guard on duty that night at Milwaukee National Trust Bank?" Cole Trenton asked, sitting at Roger Miller's kitchen table with pen, notebook, and fake press credentials. "The night the Winchesters and Mr. Resnik attempted to rob the place?"

"That's right," Mr. Miller confirmed, sitting across the round dinette set. He had a cup of coffee between his hands, which he fidgeted with nervously. He shook his head, eyes taking on a watery sheen. "It was awful."

"I can only imagine," Cole said sympathetically enough. He set his own mug down on the table and picked up the notebook he brought with him, flipping it open to the first free page, about three thirds of the way through. "I've interviewed several of the civilians who were held hostage that night, but you spent the most time with the Winchesters."

Mr. Miller balked, face flushing with embarrassment. "I don't know about that. But I did escort them to the security booth and back out. Which is when they brought out the gun."

"Let's start there," Cole uncapped his pen and leaned back, projecting the picture of active interest. He had pages of eyewitness accounts of the Winchesters. He knew how they spoke, how they operated, how they held up under pressure. Now he wanted to know how they

planned. "They wanted to see the security cameras. Tell me everything that happened, everything that was said. Don't leave anything out, Mr. Miller. I'm all ears."

-o-o-o-

Sam and Dean were on their fourth ghost town in Wisconsin, hoping against all hope to stumble on Azazel's new Cold Oak. Or whatever demon he had doing his dirty work, since they were pretty sure he wasn't back topside yet. Or so they hoped, at least.

They'd decided to start with abandoned towns, assuming Azazel's backup location for the Battle Royale wouldn't be particularly different than his first. Unfortunately for the Winchesters, there were a lot of ghost towns in Wisconsin. They'd narrowed it down to about a hundred-mile radius, according to Ash's algorithm determining where the omens were popping up. But that was more than half the state, so it hadn't exactly narrowed things down, much.

There were fifteen towns in that radius, either abandoned or rumored haunted, and they were systematically crossing them off one after another. It wasn't exactly efficient – the search area was huge, and they didn't even know if they'd picked the right tree to bark up – but it was all they had until something better popped up.

Speaking of. Sam's phone rang just as they were coming out of the last, empty building. A fourth bust, not that either hunter was all that surprised. This was the very definition of a longshot.

"Hey, Ash," Sam said once he'd answered the phone. "Yeah, we're in, uh-" the hunter had to glance at his phone, switching it over to GPS, to remember which ghost town they were in. They were starting to blur together. "-Stonehaven. No, nothing here."

Dean started to wander off as Sam chatted with Ash, who was hopefully calling with something further to go on. Maybe a narrowed down search area, at the very least. Really, he'd take anything.

"What do you mean, it's not safe?"

The change in Sam's tone immediately spun Dean back around, and he was marching over to his brother. Sam's brow was furled, and he gave Dean a small headshake – he didn't know what was going on either.

"Dude, we're nowhere near the Roadhouse right now," the younger Winchester responded to whatever it was Ash was saying. "We can't

just drop this and head there."

Dean, who had a growing suspicion in his stomach that felt a lot like nausea, reached out and stole the phone from his brother's hand, much to Sam's indignation. As he pressed it to his ear, he heard the end of Ash's hushed, tense response.

"-just get here, Sam."

"What did you find?" Dean demanded, already knowing the answer.

Ash made an annoyed, sort of desperate sound, and Dean's churning gut hardened into the cement of certainty.

"Not over the phone," the MIT dropout responded in a way that made it perfectly clear he was repeating himself. "Get to the Roadhouse."

"No," Dean immediately said, shaking his head, grip on the phone turning his knuckles white. "Get out. Now, Ash. You and Ellen get the hell out of there. Head to Bobby's."

"What? Dean-"

"I'm serious," the older Winchester interrupted, practically barking the words like a command. "Get out of the Roadhouse. *Now*, Ash."

He didn't wait for the man's response, just handed the phone to his brother and started heading back to the Impala. Sam muttered a hasty, *"Just do it, Ash,"* before hanging up the phone and jogging after Dean.

"What's going on?" he asked as he caught up, tucking his gun away as Dean dug the keys out of his front pocket.

"Demons blow up the Roadhouse to stop Ash from getting us that info," Dean answered so matter-of-factly that Sam stumbled beside him in pure surprise. "They get him, but not Ellen. She brings the stuff he found to us."

Sam swallowed roughly, trying not to think of that future. It wasn't going to happen. Dean had warned them, and Ash would (hopefully) listen. "What stuff?"

"He found a hellgate in Wyoming. Samuel Colt – yeah, the guy who built the Colt – created a hundred-square-mile devil's trap out of railroads around it."

"Iron," Sam breathed out in awe. "Wait, I remember that. They get the hellgate open with the Colt. After…"

"The battle royale," Dean finished for him as Sam trailed off in realization. He opened the driver's door, but paused, elbow on the roof. He met his brother's eyes across the Impala. "It's not gonna happen, Sam. Not this time."

"But it's coming," Sam replied, not denying Dean's statement, but not as confident as his brother. "Ash calling…. It means it's started, doesn't it?"

Dean looked like he didn't want to answer. He glanced away, fisting the keys in his hand. Eventually, he managed a nod. "Yeah. I think that's exactly what it means."

As he climbed into the car, Sam scrambling in on the other side, the younger Winchester gave a weak, but determined nod. There was a confidence in his words that he didn't feel, but one he knew his brother needed. They both did. "We better call Bobby. Warn Andy."

Dean was already spinning tires and spitting dirt as he pulled away from the abandoned town at speeds only his Baby could handle. Sam pulled out his phone, grip tight enough to hide the way his hands were shaking.

-o-o-o-

Persephone stared at the demon in front of her, an unfamiliar meatsuit leaning against an unfamiliar car. He was bulky with thick, rippling muscles that were highlighted by too-tight clothes. His skin was darker than the last time she'd seen him, tanned gold in a way that didn't look natural. He was stockier, too, with dark, short-cropped hair, but she knew who he was well before his eyes flicked black instead of yellow.

Azazel was many things, but a showoff wasn't one of them. Which meant this was Tom. Joy of joys for her.

The demon spawn was leaning back, legs crossed at the ankles, swinging one hand back and forth. The gold chain swung like a pendulum from his grip, fading out of existence a few feet from his hand, but Persephone knew where it ended. Her neck was still aching from the bastard pulling on the thing.

"Hello, Princess." Tom had his usual smug grin slapped in place, but

his eyes carried a malicious glee to them that was new. It instantly set Persephone on edge. He pushed off the car, gesturing towards her reddened neck with the same hand that held the end of her reinstated leash. "See you got my message."

"See you found a new body," she snipped back, hand tightening around the strap of her purse. "Took you long enough."

"And I'm sure you behaved like a perfect little pawn while I was gone." The smug grin lessened some, replaced with annoyance, though the malice in his eyes remained as sharp as newly forged dagger. "What did you get up to, I wonder?"

It was all Persephone could do not to shift the purse against her side. The purse that held her best shot at escaping this demon; the paralytic hex bag Chuck had provided her.

"Spa Day," she supplied with a one shouldered shrug. The picture of nonchalance and absolutely zero innocence. Tom scoffed.

"Right. I hope you got your fill of mud masks and pedicures, Princess. Time to go." He gestured with his head to the car, even as he opened the door for her.

Persephone didn't move. "And where are we going?"

The grin that stretched across his face cemented the dread building in her insides. "To acquire your prince, of course."

-o-o-o-

Sarge's whining finally caught Andy's attention and he pulled the ear buds out of his head to notice the German Shepherd standing at the entrance to the panic room, tail tucked, head ducked, and eyes looking about as uncertain as Andy had ever seen them. Sarge was nothing if not stalwart most of the time.

'What's up, buddy?' he asked in his own head, signing along with the question, knowing the dog could neither hear him nor read Sign, but it hadn't stopped him from chatting to Sarge in either form yet. He uncrossed his legs from the cot they'd dragged into the iron-walled room since Andy would be spending more than just an evening hiding out down there (and gee, wasn't he just the luckiest. Nothing like an ancient army cot older than he was and iron, sigil-scrawled walls to make home sweet frickin' home).

Andy stood, stretched, and crossed the small room to crouch in front of the dog. *'You gotta go pee?'*

He made the hand signal for bathroom that Jody had taught him and Bobby – the one Sarge's previous handler had picked – and the dog whined again, turning and heading for the stairs. Andy stood, following after with only a moment's hesitation and a quick glance back at the panic room. Five minutes out of it wouldn't hurt, and it was only to go upstairs and grab Bobby so he could take Sarge for a walk.

Really, Andy could admit with very little shame in it, any excuse to get out of his little iron prison was a welcome one.

The two climbed the stairs, Andy trailing behind the much faster four-legged beast. When he got to the top of the stairs, Sarge was already waiting at the front door. Andy held up a finger – not that they'd actually taught Sarge what '*one minute*' meant, but that dog was a smart one – and ducked his head into the study.

Bobby was on the phone, back turned to the psychic and, from the sound of it, he was buried up to his elbows in a case for another hunter. Andy didn't have a convenient way to interrupt the man without using his powers, and was reluctant to do that when the old hunter seemed on edge enough already. He glanced back into the hall. Sarge was staring at him with desperate eyes and whined immediately once he had eye contact.

How long had he been asking to go out? The hunt must be a bad one, Andy figured, if Bobby hadn't noticed.

Well, he could take Sarge out. Yeah, the Winchesters and Bobby had both told him not to leave the panic room, and definitely not to leave the house, but what was five minutes going to hurt? Honestly, he could use the leg stretch. Besides, Bobby's property was warded seven ways to Sunday. No demon – Prince of Hell or otherwise – was setting foot in the salvage yard.

As for the FBI possibly watching…. Andy's gaze shifted to one of Bobby's baseball caps and a knitted scarf hanging from the same hooks as Sarge's leash. He could go incognito for the five, ten minute walk Sarge would want. Really, that wasn't much. And what were the chances the feds were watching, anyway?

Andy grabbed his disguise and Sarge's leash, opening the front door. Sarge bolted with an urgent need that left his guardian wincing in

sympathy. Andy followed after the dog as he disappeared into the night in nothing short of desperation.

It wasn't until a good ten minutes later that Bobby finally hung up the phone after shouting Carl Bates through a Banshee banishing spell after the thing had almost taken the head off his hunting buddy. Which meant a follow-up shouting bout for keeping a man alive when his neck was kind of hanging on by a thread. Bobby heaved a tired sigh. He really was getting too old for this.

It took another second for him to realize that Sarge was barking in the distance. Not inside the house, but from… the yard. Bobby straightened and spun around, dread pooling in his gut. Sarge was in the yard. The front door was open. And so was the basement door.

"Andy!" Bobby surged to his feet, but the stairs to the basement were deserted and no psychic came answering back with his telepathic powers or physical presence. The old hunter bolted for the front door, heart pounding. Sam had called just that afternoon to warn them shit was starting to go down. The kid *knew* better than to leave the panic room!

When he found Sarge, the dog was barking furiously at the far fence of his property, nothing but empty night beyond it. His leash was attached to his collar, dragging on the ground around him, but there was no sign of Andy.

-o-o-o-

The Winchesters were headed out of Wisconsin and towards South Dakota as fast as they could, pushing speed limits and the boundaries of safety, as night fell. Rain came with it, pushing the boundary of sleet as the temperature dropped with the sun. It came down in patches as they drove, forcing Dean to drive a hell of a lot slower than we wanted to.

By the time they pulled over for gas just outside of La Crosse, Wisconsin, the rain had abated but the road was scattered with puddles and it was near freezing out. Sam climbed out of the car, already heading for the restrooms on the side of the convenience store attached to the pumps. It wasn't clear if his jog was out of necessity or to keep warm.

"Make it quick!" Dean shouted over the top of the car. He'd already told the beanstalk that he wasn't allowed to leave the warded confines of the car ever, at least not until they had a panic room to transfer

him to. The look he'd gotten for that hadn't quite been a Bitchface, but it had been close.

"And if I have to pee?" the brat challenged back, though Dean could tell from the tone of his voice that he wasn't actually going to fight the man with all the future knowledge on this.

To his horror (and exasperation), Sam had spent the next ten minutes, at his brother's instruction, searching the front and back seats of the car for a bottle. He'd come up empty (to his relief). Which meant he was now heading towards the gas station restrooms, with their running water, soap, mild privacy, and ventilation.

Which wasn't much, considering the state of most gas station bathrooms, but it was definitely a step up over peeing into a water bottle with his brother riding shotgun to the whole experience.

Sam waved an arm in response to Dean's pestering, not bothering to turn around or respond. The older Winchester made a face of frustration at his back, but turned to fueling Baby. As the gas started pumping, he glanced towards where Sam had gone, checking he was out of sight before pulling out his phone. He scrolled through his contacts quickly before dialing, tapping a nervous beat out on the Impala's roof with his free hand.

"Ah, Squirrel. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure? Miss me already?"

"Shut up, Crowley," Dean growled into the receiver, checking again, almost compulsively, that Sam wasn't nearby.

"Charming as always," the King of the Crossroads drawled, and Dean could practically see his deadpan expression. "What do you want?"

Dean licked his bottom lip, nervously, then bit down on his tongue. He was the one who'd made the call, but he couldn't bring himself to ask the question he knew he had to ask.

"I'm waiting."

The older Winchester rolled his eyes, grunting as he cleared his throat. "Is there any way to make a deal without booking myself a one-way ticket to Hell?"

"Oh for the love of-" Crowley cut himself off, but Dean could hear the disbelief-fueled outrage behind the words. He winced, if only because

the demon had a point. And it was never a good situation when the *demon*was the voice of reason. "How hard is to just let the moose die, you codependent waste of plaid!"

The hunter pulled his head back, staring at the phone for a moment as his brain attempted to process that insult. As he brought it back to his ear, Dean fell back on his reliable, old friend: anger.

"Can it and answer the question."

He could all but hear the crossroad demon rolling his eyes, and the hunter checked over his shoulder again to make sure Sam wasn't headed back.

"No, there's no way to save your brother without selling your soul, and there's no way to sell your soul without going to Hell." Crowley didn't sound sorry about that, but Dean could detect something in his voice. Exasperated resignation, maybe. Like Dean starting the Apocalypse was a given and Crowley had just been humoring him by believing otherwise. "Sorry, Squirrel. Those are the rules."

The hunter ran a hand over his face. Yeah, he'd figured. But he'd had to ask. He'd had to try.

"Not sure it matters, really," the King continued, almost offhandedly. "Lilith's got something of a backup in place, as it were."

"What?" Green eyes snapped open, and both panic and hope flared in equal measures, leaving Dean nauseous with the combination. "What is it?"

"Haven't the foggiest."

Dean bit back the growl as all that nausea sunk into his gut like lead, leaving him feeling sick in an entirely different way. He had no idea if Crowley was telling the truth or not, but it didn't really matter, did it?

"Whatever it is, it's in the charming state of Minnesota," Crowley continued. "The part I've been stuck with, at least. I've been stuck in this freezing state for three days, Squirrel. Why you humans *choose* to live in these places, I will never know. My talents are *wasted* like this."

Dean tuned out as Crowley continued bitching and moaning. Minnesota? The tine traveler frowned, trying to think of a time Hell had gotten up to anything there. A second Hellgate he didn't' know about, maybe? Was that Lilith's backup plan?

Dean's phone gave a beep, causing him to pull away to stare at the screen. Bobby was calling. He ignored it; he could call the old hunter back once he was done with the demon.

"You're from Scotland. Like you've got room to talk," he snapped, bantering with the demonic King coming almost as naturally as breathing. "Now find out what they're up to. We're out of time."

"Excuse me, am I wearing a sign that says, *'Dean Winchester's slave*?'" Crowley sniped right back, offence loud and clear, but there had been a moment of silence that Dean didn't pick up in his distracted frustration. An edge of tension to his voice that might have informed the man from the future he'd just slipped up. "You boys already owe me one favor. When do I get my back scratched, exactly?"

Dean's phone beeped again, and he pulled away again to see Bobby's number flashing on the screen. Shit. That couldn't be good. He ignored it again, but switched priorities to ending the apparently useless conversation with Crowley quickly.

"Gonna be hard to scratch anything if we're all dead," Dean growled back, deciding not to taunt the demon by telling him he had a nice big knife on him right now if the King felt like getting scratched.

The gas pump clicked and shut off, and Dean pulled the nozzle away from the tank. He'd just settled it back in its cradle, completely ignoring whatever Crowley was moaning and complaining about in his ear now, when Sam's phone started ringing from inside the car.

Shit. That *really* couldn't be good.

"Gotta go, find out what's going on in Minnesota." He snapped his phone shut on the crossroad demon's indignant squawk, not caring in the slightest that he'd hung up on the crossroads King. With a cuss, Dean pulled open the driver's door and crawled headfirst into the car in search of his brother's phone. By the time he found it on the passenger side floor, the call had gone to voicemail. With a growl and another swear, Dean grabbed the stupid thing and straightened up.

As he did, a flash of light caught his eye and the hunter's head whipped to the left. But it was just the headlights of a car, turning into the gas station and catching his necklace, hanging from the rear-view mirror. The man from the future stared at that amulet, the gold head and cow horns swinging gently as a result of Dean's own commotion. Even after the headlights had moved on, leaving the gold dull in the darkness of the car's interior, Dean continued to watch the thing that

had a tendency to glow in the presence of God. It certainly wasn't glowing now, but those blank eyes were staring at him, like the amulet was watching him right back.

The phone started ringing again, and Dean nearly dropped it.

"Jesus," he muttered to himself, backing out of the car and hitting the answer button on Sam's cell without looking at the caller ID. The car that had lit up his amulet was pulling up to the next row of pumps. There was a woman in the front seat and a tanned man in a too-tight, black turtleneck climbing out of the driver's side. He headed for the store attached to the gas station. The girl remained in the car, playing on her phone. Dean tracked the man's progress warily, making sure he wasn't headed for the restrooms, before barking into the phone, "What?"

"He's gone," Bobby's voice was rushed, loud and panicked, in Dean's ear. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd heard panic in his surrogate father's voice. And none of those times were good memories.

"The kid's gone," Bobby repeated, still in a rush. "He took the dog out for a walk, of all things, and he's just… god *damnit*!"

Dean closed his eyes, the hand that rested on top of the Impala curling into a fist against her cold metal. First Ash, now Andy. He knew what that meant, but he couldn't get past the overwhelming sense of failure and fear blocking his way to doing something about it.

It was coming all too fast. Falling apart in his hands, like sand or water that he had no hope of holding onto. Hell, he was pretty sure trying to hold onto it was just making him lose control that much faster.

Azazel was early. By months. *Again*.

The hunter opened his eyes beneath the dimly lit gas station roof, one of the halogens flickering obnoxiously above him while panic tried to swallow him whole from the ground up.

Sam was next, and they didn't have Cas.

Son of a bitch. It was happening. It was happening *now*, and they didn't have Cas to save their sorry asses when it all went to shit. When Sam inevitably died because Time was a bitch, and Dean sold his soul one way or another because some things just *had* to stay the same.

"Sam."

The breathless word left Dean's mouth before his brain even registered it, but once it did his gaze snapped to the side of the gas station, where the bathrooms were. Sam had been gone too long. He could hear Bobby barking at him in his ear, but the words didn't register.

"We'll find Andy," he promised into the receiver, spoken in a rush. He shut the phone on Bobby's panicked response, the old hunter realizing exactly what Dean was realizing. But he didn't have time to keep Bobby updated. He had to find Sam and get him back inside the warded Impala *right now*. They could call the old man back as soon as Sam was safe.

Dean jogged towards the restrooms, trying not to all out run and only barely managing it.

"Sam?" He pounded on the door to the men's restroom and got no response. That panic, which had been steadily building, flared into something so strong it was all-encompassing. It was all he could feel, and it was *painful*. "Sam!"

He shoved at the door with his shoulder twice before backing away and kicking it open. The door gave with a bang, bouncing off the inside wall hard enough it almost slammed closed once more. Dean shoved it back open with his arm, only to find an empty bathroom inside. He kicked the door to the women's restroom down too, revealing another empty room.

No. No, no, no no nononono.

"Sam!"

Dean sprinted around the corner of the building, headed for the front of the store. Inside, the lights were too bright and the space too quiet. There was a humming in the air that was probably the halogens, but raised the hair all over Dean's body and made his skin crawl. It was the only noise in the place.

He found the attendant first, sprawled and bloody behind the counter. Another customer lay dead in a pool of her own blood by the coolers. No Sam. No demons. Nothing.

Just like last time.

The hunter stumbled back outside, mind racing with what to do next.

He had to call Bobby. He had to find Sam. And Andy. He had to find Azazel's new Cold Oak. He had to stop it from happening all over again.

Dean drew up short in the middle of the gas station parking lot when he realized a woman he didn't know was leaning against the side of the Impala, next to the passenger door, like she belonged there. She was short as hell, curvy in a stocky away, with a head full of blonde hair.

The girl from the car that had pulled up next to them. Her male companion was nowhere to be found. Just like Sam.

"Hey!" Dean called, already reaching for the gun in his waistline. It wasn't his ivory-inlaid Colt, laying broken in pieces in whatever fucked up pocket dimension of Gabriel's they'd left behind, but it was still a weapon. He trained it on the stranger who dared mess with his family and his Baby.

The woman, who had been playing idly on a phone, scuffing a sneakered toe against the asphalt, looked up at his cry. Dean froze at her glowing, green eyes.

Azazel's girl.

-o-o-o-

The house around her was still dark as the day she'd arrived, though there was significantly more collateral damage now. And blood, sweat, and tears. The haunted silence was shattered by her foot connecting with Sam Winchester's knife, sending it skittering across the dust-strewn floor. It left a trail of freshly strewn blood in its wake.

She bent down, chest heaving with each erratic pant, and wrapped trembling fingers around the hilt. With each use, her hand shook less and less. Eventually, she knew it would no longer shake at all.

Ava Wilson straightened, sweat dripping down her forehead, clothing torn and dirtied, but knife in hand as she stared fiercely into the darkness. Once soft, green eyes were hard. Her voice, when she spoke, was equally so.

"Next."

A figure in a too-tight turtleneck stepped out of the shadows, a smug smirk in the corner of his lips. His eyes weren't yellow, like she had

expected at the end of that first day, but black as coal. She knew them well, after all this time.

"Coming right up."

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: You know, I think I'll just leave it at that. No author notes today 😈

Chapter 127: Season 2: Chapter 93

Chapter Notes

A/Ns:
Apologies for missing the update last week. The chapter started out at 20 pages, and despite my best efforts last weekend, including tag-teaming the editing with Forestpelt while in line at Disneyland (and also playing Pass-N-Play Carcassone on my partner's phone because what are theme park lines for but board games?!

) I did not successfully finish editing in time. For some reason, this chapter was a doozy of fixes. Apparently I wasn't in the zone when I wrote it

But it's better now! And…also…half the length

I, uh, might have went and adjusted the length of the next four chapters too, which were all about 20 pages While I'm sorry y'all have normal-length chapters to read now, the good news is I have a much larger stockpile! Ha…haha….ha….

Actually, that is more important than I'm making it out to be. I was getting a bit low. The muse has really been struggling/ fighting me with the season finale. Every time, man. Every time we finally get to a part I'm so excited to write, a part I have been waiting
years
to write, and the Muse panics, then hides her panic with nonchalance and disinterest

Ugh, she's such a bitch, but she's too good at her job to fire

Chapter Warnings
: Dean's getting in some late night exercise (much to his chagrin), Cas is losing her patience, Gabe's right there with her for different

reasons, Bobby's getting unwelcome visitors when he really has better things to be doing, and Sam's… well, Sam's trying out his throwing arm on unexpected foes.

Yeah, that tracks. Let's go with all that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 93

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"Where the hell is my brother!" Dean yelled the minute he realized who was leaning against his car, and what her presence at the gas station meant. Sam was missing and Yellow Eyes had sent his messenger to collect in his stead.

Azazel's girl just stared. She didn't appear to be very concerned about the gun trained on her or the hunter approaching one cautious step at a time. At least, not until he got within a dozen feet of her, then she bolted.

Dean hesitated for only a moment, caught between shooting the rapidly retreating creature or giving chase. That hesitation cost him both the shot and his best chance at catching her. With a vicious curse, the man from the future – now very damn worried it was about to repeat itself – lowered his gun and started running after the supernatural bitch who'd kidnapped his brother this time around. She was fast – really fast, considering her legs had to be a whole foot shorter than his (hell, this chick was shorter than *Jo*) – as she fled towards the street at an all-out run. Dean followed, boots splashing through pooled rainwater as the chase turned onto the wet road.

The two disappeared from sight as the street curved into the dark forest around them.

-o-o-o-

Arcs of electricity – a sea of deep-rooted ocean-blue surrounded by rivers of white – pulled Gabriel's attention away from his television set as Dean Winchester took off after some mystery demon chick. Beside

him, sparks quite literally flew off Castiel. Anywhere Gabriel's grace was in contact with her skin, Castiels's manifested itself like the sparks coming off a welder's torch. Bolts of pure energy arched from contact point to contact point until the little angel that could was all but glowing with the materialization of pure grace.

And deep within her core, those spiderweb cracks were growing.

"Hey, knock it off," Gabriel snapped at his sister, but Castiel wasn't listening. She may not have even heard him, for all that she reacted to his words. Those blue eyes, glowing as fiercely as the rest of her, were locked on the television screen.

When those cracks became fractures, the archangel straightened.

"Back off, Cassie. I'm serious." Gabriel reached out and grabbed his sister by the wrist. Energy jolted up his arm, buzzing through muscle and bone like a swarm of angry bees. Her gaze snapped to his and the ferocity in that glare actually caused him to loosen his grip.

It took a moment to shake off the shock. He'd seen Castiel endanger herself more than once now in an effort to escape her binds, but every time was just as surprising. The angel should know when she was caught. To keep fighting, to the detriment of her own health… it didn't make any sense.

When energy crackled again – Cassie's eyes still locked on his, testing more than material boundaries -- Gabe finally lost his patience.

"Enough!" he roared, archangel voice filling the room like a physical presence. The lights flickered and dimmed, Jack started barking from his donut bed beside the TV, and the littlest angel that-already-had (or "that not only could, but just did) finally stilled. Silence, tense and oppressive, reigned. "Just… *enough* . Dear Dad, are you *trying* to hurt yourself?"

Gabriel collapsed back into his Lazy Boy, annoyed. Annoyed that Castiel couldn't get this through her thick skull, annoyed she was going to break herself trying. Annoyed at the reality she was refusing to accept, annoyed at the truth. There was no fighting this. No stopping it.

What a mess. One, big mess.

The archangel knew the end of the world wasn't a joke, no matter how he chose to talk about it out loud. Deep down, fine, alright, he

knew that. It wasn't going to stop him from filtering everything through his own way of looking at the world – through jokes – but he did know how serious this all was.

Even so, Cassie was seriously killing his vibe, man.

From his slouch, he glanced over at his sister. She was still staring at him fiercely, but her energy levels were stable. She refused to look away, to be shamed for her actions. Well fine, two could play that game. So Gabriel started a staring contest. One that the other angel, of course, didn't know they were playing. Which was why he was going to win.

Except he kept getting distracted. His gaze was repeatedly pulled to her chest, where the core of her grace was fluttering and sputtering after that most recent bout of stupidity.

Guess that was the shortest staring contest ever. Sheesh. What a mess, indeed.

"No more of that, or you're going back in the closet, got it?" Gabe declared, keeping his voice firm with another hint of that archangel power he did actually possess under all the jokes. Just a hint this time, though. He shook a finger her way, the ultimate demonstration of seriousness.

Then he leaned over and pressed a hand to her chest. Castiel flinched, but was unable to pull away. Gabe wouldn't lie; that stung. But given he had just yelled at her with the big-scary-voice and threatened to lock her up in a closet… again…. Alright, fine, she was entitled to think he might rough her up a bit.

But that wasn't the plan. Instead, Gabriel infused some of his own grace into her, thinking healing thoughts as he did. Restoration and repair. The energy seeped down into her core, wrapping around it with soothing intent. It filled in all those stupid fractures that had only gotten worse since he'd first seen her.

She was supposed to be *safer* here, with him. Not making her condition worse.

Gabe pulled away, unsure which he was angrier about; the guilt he felt over the state of his sister's grace or that he was honoring a promise made to the Winchester mooks. But he was sure that thinking angry thoughts while instilling grace in his sister wouldn't help her. Besides, he wasn't healing her for the Winchesters. He *wasn't.* He

would have healed her regardless of any promise he'd made to those flanneled morons. Because he was her older brother and that's what older brothers were *supposed* to do.

He may not be much of an angel, damnit, but he had always been a good brother. The fact that he'd ended up promising Sam he would do just that was… coincidental, at best.

"I got it," Castiel said out of nowhere, voice oddly calm and muted given the little light show she'd just put on.

Gabriel chanced another glance her way, needing a moment to place that response. He stared at the littlest angel that could, trying to read the intent behind those stupidly blue eyes. Eventually he gave up, guffawing and turning his attention back to the TV.

Gabe decided to ignore her for the rest of the show. Served her right.

-o-o-o-

Bobby was loading the last duffle full of weapons – this one packed to the brim with shotguns, handguns, and damn near all the ammo he owned – into the back of his truck when the cars came screeching through the Salvage Yard. Mostly SUVs, black with government plates. Bobby bit the inside of his cheek as they came screaming to a halt in front of his house. Men in suits piled out all armed with government-issued SIG Sauer handguns and flashlights.

Feds.

Victor Henriksen climbed out of the lead car a lot more leisurely than the men around him, most of whom were already entering Bobby's house regardless of a lack of permission. Which meant a warrant.

Sarge, sitting in the front seat of the truck, was barking at them through the rolled down window. With a gesture from Bobby, the Shepherd silenced, sitting back on his haunches in the passenger seat, though a low growl could still be heard coming from the cab. Golden brown eyes watched the men traipsing about his territory with a predator's sharp gaze, just waiting for permission to retaliate. Bobby gave that attentive head an approving pet.

Agent Henriksen sauntered over to the pair, a smug smile on his lips.

"I assume you got your warrant, then?" Bobby asked, not even bothering with anger. If Agent Henkrisken had a warrant to search

his home, then there wasn't much he could do about it. And, by the grace of Time herself, almost everything illegal that he owned was in the truck he was leaning against, waiting to go help the Winchester boys.

"Right here, Mr. Singer," the agent replied, pulling a folded-up piece of paper from his suit jacket. He handed it over, Bobby digging out his phone to use as a flashlight in the dim lighting of the Salvage Yard. He scanned it with the eyes of a man who'd read his fair share of law books.

They were looking for Andy. Proof of his presence at Bobby's yard came in the form of a phone number, pinging off the nearest tower and exchanging texts regularly with two other numbers suspected to belong to fugitives. Bobby bit back his reaction. Somehow, Henriksen had figured out the boys' phone numbers, and Bobby's personal one as well. Considering none of them were registered to their real names (or even aliases they used regularly), that was quite a feat.

He wouldn't say they'd underestimated the Fed, but they'd certainly have to up their game to stay ahead of him going forward. It was nothing but sheer (terrible, rotten, awful) luck that Andy wasn't in the very house they were currently searching.

The warrant didn't extend to any of Bobby's belongings, surprisingly enough. They couldn't confiscate anything, regardless of illegality or suspicion. The judge had been very specific about that part (which probably meant he or she had been reluctant to sign the warrant to begin with. Flimsy probable cause backed by a bull-headed Agent who wouldn't take no for an answer, most likely). Though they could use anything they saw as evidence to obtain a new warrant, of course. Not that Bobby was particularly worried about that. They weren't here for him; they were here for the kid.

And they weren't going to find him, for better or worse.

(But it was worse. So, so much worse. Bobby would rather the feds were hauling Andy out of his house right now than what was probably happening who-knew-where at the hands of demons and other psychic kids. Hell, they could figure out how to break the kid out of jail, but right now they couldn't do shit to save him because they didn't know *where* he was.)

Bobby folded the warrant up and handed it back without so much as a micro-twitch in expression. "There's no one in the house, Agent.

Whoever it is you're looking for ain't here; you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Oh, I very much doubt that," Henriksen returned, smug smile firmly in place. He tucked the warrant back inside his suit jacket. "See, we've got evidence that says otherwise."

The old hunter just shrugged, leaning casually against the bed of his truck. There wasn't much reason to argue, or risk saying anything that could be used against him. Andy wasn't there; they'd figure that out for themselves soon enough. Of course, he'd have to wait for the feds to complete their search before he could head out for a search of his own. A friggin' annoyance, for sure, but not one he could do anything about at the moment.

Henriksen sauntered off to join his men, leaving a single Suit outside with Bobby, probably to make sure he didn't bolt or interfere. It only took another five minutes before Victor was charging back outside, directly for Bobby, both leisure and smirk conspicuously absent.

"Where is he?"

"Who?" Bobby parroted immediately, the picture of annoyed innocence. "I told you, Agent Henriksen, there's no one in that house. Just me and Sarge."

The dog gave a single, sharp bark beside the old man, head sticking out the passenger window, tongue out and panting from the stress he could no doubt taste in the air. Bobby reached over and scratched behind his ears, hoping the comfort would settle the good boy, though knowing it likely wouldn't.

"And this?" Henriksen held up a mobile phone – Andy's, no doubt – but Bobby just raised an oblivious brow.

"Is a cell phone, Agent. Kinda thought you'd be able to identify that without help, considering it's the whole reason – the *only* reason – you're here." Bobby tilted his head knowingly towards the agent's chest, where the warrant was tucked away.

Henriksen did not miss the slight dig at the weak probable cause that had *barely* gotten him that warrant to begin with. He lowered his hand, fingers tightening into a fist around the device.

"This is Andy Gallagher's phone," he insisted: stating, not asking. The man in front of him just shrugged.

“Afraid I can’t say who the owner is, Agent.” Bobby was careful not to lie outright, but wasn’t worried about lying by omission. The phone had to be locked, otherwise Henriksen wouldn’t be talking to him about it at all. He’d have the evidence he came for and would likely be on his own phone with a judge to have Bobby arrested for harboring a fugitive. “I got lots of phones lying around. Most if not all of ‘em have former owners of one sort or the other.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Henriksen answered dryly, recalling the row of landlines in the man’s kitchen, each labeled with a different government agency. He would most definitely be coming back with a warrant for those, and a handful of techs to figure out how Robert Singer had made his lines untraceable and untapable. But that would have to wait. For now, he would keep the conversation relevant to their current evidence, the search, and what they were allowed to be here for via that warrant. “This phone, though, was down in your little bomb shelter.”

And hadn’t that been an interesting discovery. A vault, of sorts, tucked into a corner of Robert Singer’s basement. Hand built, hardly structurally sound, in Henriksen’s opinion. It might survive a tornado given it was underground, but not much else. Oh, and lined with occult symbols. Mr. Singer was likely as unstable as the Winchesters, at this point, even if Henriksen couldn’t prove he was just as criminal.

The man only shrugged again. “Like I said, I got phones all over the place.”

Henriksen bit back his growl of annoyance and instead gestured to another agent as the majority of the men he’d brought with him exited the house. He placed the phone into an evidence bag offered by the other agent. It was one of the very few things they could take with them; anything that could belong to their fugitive. They’d found men’s clothes and shoes of various sizes, but given the array, there wasn’t much to go off of for which might belong to Mr. Gallagher. The phone, powered on but locked (with a wallpaper of Robert Singer’s German Shepherd) barely qualified under the search warrant’s strict limitations. At this point, though, Henriksen didn’t care.

Andy Gallagher had been here, of that much he was dead certain. How the two men had known the FBI was on their way, and where Gallagher was hiding now…. Well, Henriksen would find both of those things out. Just not tonight, it would seem.

“Pack it up!” he yelled, and the men started climbing into the cars. “We’ll be back, Mr. Singer. I can promise you that.”

“I can’t wait,” came Bobby’s dry reply as he watched the FBI agents leave his property. Henriksen was the last to go, eying the house, the surrounding salvage yard, and Bobby himself for a drawn-out moment. Most likely meant as an intimidation routine, though it didn’t work on the old hunter. He had plenty of other things scaring him right now than the FBI.

The moment he was sure the FBI had truly left, Bobby climbed into his truck, ran his hand down Sarge’s neck to comfort him (and maybe himself, as well), and pulled away from the house. He had no idea where Andy was, but until Dean called (and Sam, God please let Sam be with him when the boy called back), he and Sarge were heading to them.

-o-o-o-

It was dark around him when he came to, jolting awake with a gasp. The air that filled his lungs was old; dusty with disuse. Sam coughed twice, trying to clear the sensation of dust from his lungs. It only stirred up more, causing the hunter to struggle into an upright position to get away from it. He got to his feet with a groan, body stiff and angry from whatever had landed him in this place. Which appeared to be the crumbling bedroom of an old, decrepit house.

Sam spun in a circle, but there wasn’t anything apparent about wherever the hell he was. The ‘50s wallpaper was peeling, the furniture was sparse – an overturned metal bed frame and a dresser that had lost a leg and all of its drawers probably decades earlier – and the windows were dingy with dust and disuse. Sam crossed to the nearest one, noting that he was on the second floor of whatever this place was, and pushed up on the old wood frame. It did not so much as budge, let alone open.

He looked around for anything he could use to break the glass and quickly spotted the metal post of the bed frame, topped by a brass sphere. Well, it wasn’t a bat or a club like he’d hoped, but he had a decent enough throw. And his target was only going to be a foot away. Sam crossed over to the bedframe and quickly unscrewed the post topper. It was heavy in his hand, and he gave it a quick toss to judge weight and balance. Then he threw it as hard as he could at the glass.

It bounced off with a dull clink, clattering to the ground with several more bounces and more noise. Sam stared at the window, first in surprise and then the kind of annoyance one has once they realize they should not have been surprised to begin with.

Wherever he was, it was escape-proofed. Really, he should have been expecting that.

A creak sounded behind him, and Sam spun to the open doorway, the door itself half off its hinges and stuck open. He could just barely make out a hallway beyond, empty as far as he could see. He knew better – knew to trust his instincts – and quickly moved to the wall beside the door, scooping the metal topper up from the floor as he went.

It would be practically useless as a weapon, but it might serve as a distraction long enough for Sam to get the upper hand in a fist fight. He gripped the ball tightly in his hand, prepared to spin into the hall and lob it at whoever was sneaking across the floorboards on the other side of the wall.

A second creak sounded, closer this time, and Sam used that as his cue. He rounded the wall in a low stance, arm wound back, eyes immediately locking onto the dark figure approaching. Whoever it was, they were keeping a hunched form along the left wall. They had bulky clothes and a baseball cap shielding their face, and Sam's hunter instincts immediately identified the person as a threat. The lurking kind.

Target located, Sam let his arm whip forward, launching the metal ball straight at the approaching threat. It hit the man in the shoulder, causing him to stumble back and spin to the side, clutching at his bicep. The only noise was the thunk of metal on flesh – which was unexpected; a hit that hard usually got a grunt, at the very least – followed by the bounce and roll of metal on hard wood. Sam was already charging, preparing to tackle the man about the waist, when he got close enough to his adversary to properly see his face in the low light.

Sam almost tripped himself in order to stop his forward momentum as Andy Gallagher brought his free hand up to his cheek, throwing out an explosive gesture.

"What the hell!"

"Andy!" Sam straightened up, arms wide from his near tackle, ending

on either of the kid's biceps – covered in a heavy jacket the younger Winchester now immediately identified as Bobby's – as he only just barely managed not to run full-on into the other man. He resisted the urge to pat Andy down for injuries. Well, other than the one he'd caused. "What are you doing here?"

'*Oh no*,' he thought in tandem, his brain supplying the answer before his surrogate little brother could. His grip on Andy's arms tightened as his chest did the same. *'The Battle Royale. It's happening.'*

"Sam!" Andy exclaimed, dropping the hand wrapped around his own bruised arm in order to free both hands to talk. Sam was forced to loosen his grip so the kid could communicate properly. *"Where the hell is 'here'?!"*

"I don't know." Sam lowered his hands, looking around the hallway. His gaze snapped back to Andy when the kid smacked him in the bicep.

"Ow, by the way ," Andy Signed, gesturing towards his arm which would surely be bruised come morning. Sam winced and raised a fist to his sternum, rubbing a circle there.

"Sorry," he said, both in Sign and aloud. Then he got his first good look at the kid and blinked. Andy looked… well, ridiculous. He was wearing that bulky jacket of Bobby's, a knitted scarf that was wrapped around his neck several times, effectively covering the lower half of his face, and a baseball cap pulled low over his forehead. "Why do you look like you're trying to rob the world's coldest bank?"

Before Andy could answer, there was a loud thud, followed by a knocking that quickly escalated into panicked pounding. The muffled yells for help from a female voice followed, and Sam and Andy both took off in the direction of the sound.

They clambered down a set of stairs that creaked in a concerning way beneath their shoes. The pounding quieted the moment they did, and Sam was afraid something had happened to the owner of that voice. But then it started up again, twice as loud as before and more desperate. As they made it to the base of the stairs, Sam realized it was coming from the closet space *under* the stairwell.

"Help! Somebody help! Get me out of here!" the woman was screaming, pounding on the door as the two men rounded the base of the stairs in a hurry. The stairwell cabinet had been nailed shut with two planks, and an old entryway table had been dragged in front of

it. Sam and Andy quickly moved the furniture to the side, pushing and pulling it across the uneven, damaged floorboards. There were marks dug into the wood floor, as though it had been slid into place in front of the small door often.

Sam decidedly didn't think about why that might be in this old, most-likely-haunted house.

Andy pried the boards off with the creak of old nails giving up their grip. Sam came around the table and yanked the closet door open as his brother tossed the last plank aside. Shock hit the younger Winchester like a body to the chest as none other than Ava Wilson tumbled out of that closet and into his arms, tears running down her cheeks.

"Ava?" Sam exclaimed, not quite able to wrap his head around the woman in his hesitant grip. She'd been missing for three months; *how* could she be here now? "Have you- have you been here this whole time?"

At the sound of her name, Ava's desperate prayers and hiccups stopped in abrupt surprise. She pulled away from her rescuer, blinking up at a familiar face. "Sam? Oh my god, it's you!"

Sam didn't get a response out before he was tackled into a second hug, this one tighter.

"How- How did you…" Ava pulled away again, staring up at the much taller man, doe-eyes watery from unshed tears. "I mean, how did I…?"

"Ava," Sam spoke calmly, trying to break through her panic. "How long have you been here?"

"What do you mean? I just woke up here, like…" she asked, glancing around them and only then noticing Andy, standing just off to the side. He offered an awkward wave paired with a sheepish smile, and she turned back to Sam Winchester. "Who's that?"

"Andy." Sam gestured to his mute little brother, then reversed the motion for Andy's sake. "Andy, Ava." Though his focus was more on the girl who'd been missing for *three months* now standing right there in front of him in a decrepit, likely-haunted house. "Ava, you've been *missing* . For three months. Have you been here that whole time?"

"Three months?" She blinked, shaking her head slightly. "That's

not… what? I haven't been- Sam, I saw you like… two days ago."

The hunter's stomach sank, realizing that for whatever reason, Ava had been taken earlier than the others. Whatever Azazel had planned for her, it was different. Or maybe…oh god, what if Azazel's plan for her had been *interrupted* by Castiel exercising him to hell? What if Ava had been missing for so long *because* of the Winchesters? Because of Sam.

At least…. At least she didn't remember that time. That was a blessing, or so Sam hoped.

"Okay… um, that was…" he took a deep breath, trying to figure out how to tell someone they had missed that much time. "We met in December, right? Okay, well it's *March* now. You've been missing for three months, Ava. My brother and I have been looking for you everywhere."

"That's-" She laughed, then sniffed and wiped at her nose when Sam didn't laugh back. Her face fell. "That's not…. Okay, Sam, that's impossible."

"I'm sorry, Ava." Sam let go of her, shoulders sagging.

"But that… that makes no sense…" Ava bit her bottom lip and Sam felt terrible. Then her already large eyes widened further. "Oh my god. Brady! My- My fiancé. If I've been missing for that long, he must be freaking out!"

"Well… uh…" Sam's eyes betrayed him, widening slightly before his mouth thinned to a line. He looked away, shaking his head. How was he supposed to tell her the man she loved had been dead for all the months she'd been missing?

"Sam?"

A soft clap of hands pulled his attention away from Ava – whose eyes had started to question his hesitation – to Andy, who was trying to get his attention. He'd unwound the scarf from his neck, though it still hung across his shoulders, and he'd taken off the baseball cap while they were talking (Sam spotted it hanging atop the baluster at the base of the stairs), making him look marginally more normal.

"We need to get out of here," Andy Signed, trying (tactfully) to tell the two acquaintances to wrap it up.

“Right,” Sam stood taller, determination straightening his spine. He gave Andy a nod. “I couldn’t break the windows upstairs. I doubt the doors will work any better. We need to find out where we are.”

‘Right,’ Andy Signed with a nod. *‘We find a name or address, any clue, I can send it to Dean.’*

Sam froze, realizing what Andy was talking about even if he only caught three quarters of the signs. He could contact Dean. Andy could *contact* Dean! They just had to get a location, somewhere for Dean to head to with the cavalry, and Andy could send an image of it to him.

He grabbed the kid by the arms once more, grinning. “Andy, I could kiss you.”

“Please don’t,” Andy signed immediately, though he had an ear-to-ear grin himself. *“I’m saving myself for the right man.”*

Sam laughed – really laughed – before turning back to Ava, who was staring at the two of them with the less-than-impressed side of incredulity.

“So… I take it you two know each other?”

-o-o-o-

They must have run a quarter mile down that stupid road – which wound its way deeper through the woods until the trees blocked out the moon (along with any hint of manmade light) – before Dean decided, *screw this.* He hadn’t gained a foot on Azazel’s girl, and he was starting to think that was friggin’ intentional. She sped up anytime he did, and slowed down when he got tired.

The bitch was toying with him. This was nothing but a damn distraction, keeping him from looking for his brother.

Dean slowed to a stop in the middle of the wet asphalt, chest heaving, and raised his gun with grim determination. The hunter clenched his jaw and drew in a steadying breath, holding it to keep his burning lungs from messing with his aim. The hunter fired twice into the night.

The shots had felt true, but if he hit Azazel’s girl it didn’t slow her down. She kept running into the darkness, until Dean couldn’t see her anymore. He looked around at the woods he stood in the middle of,

the country road unlikely to have any visitors any time soon. Just him, and the quarter mile walk back to the Impala.

Dean spun on his heel and started back to the gas station.

“Son of a bitch!”

-o-o-o-

He made it back to the Impala at a decent jog, lungs burning and legs damn sick of running. The gas station was deathly quiet and still. No one had stumbled on the crime scene yet; two bodies were still lying, untouched and growing cold inside the store. Not a living soul in sight.

“Sam!” Dean called out, already knowing it was futile. Still, he had to try. He gave it one more second, one more desperate moment of hope, before he pulled open the driver’s side door of his Baby and slid into the car.

Tired screeched as he pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. The phone was out, Bobby’s number already ringing in his ear, before he made it back to the freeway.

-o-o-o-

Green eyes followed the ’67 Impala as it drove out of the gas station and off into the night. Persephone stepped out of the trees across the street, still watching the taillights of Dean Winchester’s car fade into the distance. Another vehicle pulled up seconds later, tires splashing on the wet road as it came to a stop in front of her. She opened the passenger door and climbed in.

“What have you done with Sam?” she asked the driver before the door was closed. Tom pulled the car onto the road, following the same direction the Impala had gone.

“What did you do to Dean?” Tom asked in return, sparing her a devilish grin. Those black eyes dropped to her shoulder, where her blazer was stained red around a suspiciously bullet-sized hole in the fabric. Persephone turned away, looking out the window with a roll of her eyes.

“Nothing.”

“Well…” Tom drawled, one hand on the wheel, head tilted her way.

Smugness poured off him in waves as black as his eyes. “Ditto.”

Her lip curled into a snarl, but the demon’s grin only grew. Then he returned his eyes to the road and Persephone took the opportunity to reach into the footwell. Before she’d had to dart off for a nightly run with the oldest of the Winchesters, she’d stashed her purse beneath the seat. She withdrew it now, keeping her peripheral on the demon beside her.

“Where are we going?” Surreptitiously, Persephone opened the purse to check its contents. The hex bag she’d made – following Chuck’s written directions to the letter – was still tucked safely inside. Persephone swallowed her reaction, instead adopting a bored expression as she stuffed the purse back at her feet. “Another late night jog?”

“Appleton, Wisconsin,” Tom answered, surprisingly straightforward for once. Enough so that Persephone stared at him in surprise. But the Hellspawn kept his eyes forward. “There’s something there I want you to see.”

Persephone watched her keeper for a moment more before turning back to the window. “Lucky me.”

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns:
It’s allllll coming together, or should I say they’re all coming together, mwaaahahahah!

Chapter 128: Season 2: Chapter 94

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Whooooooheeeeeee did this one suck! This chapter was supposed to be up last weekend, but I had a horrendous time trying to edit it. I wasn't sure why until the experience repeated itself this weekend, and I finally remembered that I had a beast of a time writing it, too. Which made me remember… oh, yeah, I hate Battle Royale scenarios, they are not my jam and I do not enjoy them 💣 So apologies this is late. I might have the same problem with next chapter 👀

Chapter Warnings: We're getting into the thick of it. No direct warnings, but y'all are gonna start getting itchy trigger fingers with me. Try to hold tight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 94

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Ava followed after Sam as he started to poke – very cautiously – around the first level of the house. Andy trailed along behind, glancing about the haunted space like an exit might just be waiting around the next corner. Ava didn't particularly like him. He was too blasé about all of this. But Andy wasn't her focus right now. Sam was.

"Sam, uh… about Br- um, how long I've been… missing."

The hunter, ducking his head into what was once a parlor room, given what was (barely) left of the furniture and décor, tensed before he could help it. But he pushed past it, giving the room a once over – Andy had wandered a dozen feet away to poke at a taxidermy bear's head, which hung crooked on the foyer wall – before turning back to her. She deserved to know the truth.

"Look, Ava… I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to tell you this."

Her expression was frozen, like she knew what he had to say, but wasn't ready to hear it yet. "Tell me what?"

Before Sam could form the words, the ceiling above them creaked in that very distinct way wood does when someone walks on it. All three froze, staring up at the very real possibility another person was in the house with them. Sam glanced back down to see the fear in Ava's eyes and unease in Andy's.

The hunter raised a finger to his lips, catching their attention with the movement. They both nodded, one shakily, the other determinedly. Sam moved towards the stairs cautiously, bending down along the way to pick up the broken remnants of what was probably once a chair. It would work as a rudimentary club, need be. Andy followed behind him, moving equally stealthy as they started slowly up the stairs.

As they neared the top, which reached a landing before immediately turning into the second story hallway, another creak sounded just on the other side of the wall. Sam gestured to Andy, pressing both of them against that wall. He Signed as much as he signaled to Sam – a mix of proper ASL hand signs and old military ones – that he would round the corner first.

When Andy nodded, Sam spun himself around the wall separating the stairwell from the hallway, bat raised. Unfortunately for him, the figure in the hallway had the same thought – the same militaristic training – and they swung their respective clubs right into each other. Sam's opponent had the better choice in weapons – something made out of metal. It tore through the hunter's wooden chair leg like it was butter, enough so that Sam's arm hurt just keeping hold of the broken half. His opponent was strong.

Sam stumbled back a step, brain rushing to figure out his next move – defense – when Andy suddenly launched himself between the two of them. He was waving his arms in a classic 'stop' motion, then held one arm out towards each man, keeping them from attacking each other. Their opponent backed off in surprise, taking a step back. Light from what was once a sunlight and was now just a hole in the roof, illuminated him enough to see basic details.

He was another kid, like them. Taller than Andy or Ava, probably six foot easy, Black, shaved head and army fatigues suggesting military. He lowered his weapon hesitantly as he blinked at them, realizing similar things about them.

“You’re just-”

“Kids. Like you,” Sam supplied, though he didn’t really think of himself as a kid anymore. Not that it mattered – if he’d encountered a bunch of people in their early twenties, kidnapped by evil forces and forced to battle to the death, he would have called them kids too.

“Where…where are we?” the kid – Jake, Sam guessed warily, based on the description his brother had given him about his murderer – looked around the house, eyes wide and haunted. “Last night, when I went to sleep, I was in Afghanistan.”

“Yeah,” the hunter nodded, talking over Andy’s head. The kid had dropped his arms around the same time Jake lowered his weapon, though he made no move to step out from between them. “Wisconsin.”

Andy made a sign, and Sam nodded his way, translating for him: “South Dakota for him.”

“You know Sign Language?” Jake Tulley asked, lowering his weapon further and shoulders relaxing a hair’s width.

“Learned it along with him,” was Sam’s answer, once more gesturing to Andy with his head.

Jake glanced between them. “What, are you brothers or something?”

Andy positively beamed, raising a fist and knocking in time with the nodding of his head. Sam huffed a laugh.

“Something like that. Look, we need to figure out where we are.” He turned as he said it, addressing Ava as she climbed up to the landing of the stairs, joining them hesitantly. Andy moved out of the way as Jake took the few steps forward needed to see the fourth kid trapped there with them. “Ava, this is Jake. Jake, Ava.”

“Wait,” Jake straightened, eyes snapping to Sam’s. His body language screamed that he wanted to back away, but he kept himself still. “I never told you that. How do you know my name?”

Sam grimaced, the expression pulling into a self-deprecating smile. Andy was already Signing the same answer. “I’m psychic.”

“Psychic,” Jake repeated, skepticism clear in his voice.

“Yeah. We all have powers.” Sam glanced at Ava, but he was really talking more to Jake. He knew Ava had powers; knew she’d fall in line with what was happening more readily. Perhaps not as prepared as someone with military training, but unlike Jake, it wasn’t the crazy that was happening right now that would cause Ava to double take. “It started a little over a year ago, right? You found you could do things? Things you didn’t think were possible?”

Jake’s eyes were wide, but edged with something dangerous. He was more suspicious that Sam knew these things than the truth itself. If this was the kid destined to murder him, Sam was going to have to keep a careful eye on him. Maybe he could talk him out of anything rash, get him to see that they could all make it out alive if they worked together this time.

“I have visions. I see things before they happen,” Sam continued, trying for some even ground.

“Yeah, me too,” Ava added, offering a small, weak smile at their newcomer.

Andy started signing away, and Sam struggled to interpret before he figured out the direction his pseudo-brother was going.

“He can communicate telepathically,” the Winchester offered. “Send images to people’s minds. It doesn’t work that well on us, though. Comes with a hell of a headache.”

The kid offered an apologetic grimace and a shrug of his shoulders. Jake transferred his stare from Andy to Sam.

“What do you mean, *us* ?”

Sam sighed just under his breath, really dreading this next part.

-o-o-o

They met on the Wisconsin border. Dean had already been headed south, for Sioux Falls, and Bobby reasoned him out of driving the rest of the way there. Especially with the Feds hanging around. They didn’t have much to go on, but Ash’s algorithm had landed them in Wisconsin in the first place. They might as well continue on that hunt like it might be fruitful.

It made Dean twitchy as hell, but they didn’t have any better ideas.

“The kid’ll get you a sign,” Bobby said with more confidence than he felt, but doubled down, regardless. Andy would reach out to Dean the same way he had in Dean’s timeline. They had to believe that. “Just give ‘em time to figure out where they are.”

‘If they’re alive ,’ Dean thought, mood dark, but he didn’t voice it. It would be cruel. He glanced at Bobby, then looked away. Andy had become one of them. Family. He was terrified they would be too late to save him. To save them both.

“Where’s the next town you and Sam were looking at?”

Dean shook himself from morbid thoughts that wouldn’t find his brothers any faster. He pulled a map out of Baby’s glovebox and spread it out on the hood. The corners flapped in the frigid breeze, and Dean hoped wherever Andy and Sam were, it was indoors.

“Saint Martins.” Dean pointed to it on the map, circled in red. “South of Milwaukee.”

“Alright, then we head there,” Bobby decided firmly, carrying the decision for the both of them. He knew Dean was panicking and hiding it behind anger and pessimism. So he’d just have to be the pragmatic optimist for the both of them. “And we call everyone we know on the way. See if any of ‘em have heard anything. We’ll start with Ash.”

Dean nodded, head hung low, but he folded up the map and rounded the Impala for the driver’s side door. He paused with it open, one foot already in the car. “What about psychics?”

Bobby, who was heading for his truck parked behind the Impala, raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Psychics?”

“Yeah, Pamela and, and… Missouri. Could they help find ‘em?”

“Pamela Barnes?” Bobby clarified, surprised Dean even knew the name. She hadn’t come up in Dean’s notes on the future, though the more they went through that supposed future, the more Bobby realized the boy’s memory was spotty. Not that he could blame him. Ten years’ worth of details – some that might not have seemed important at the time – was a lot to dredge up and recall with perfect reflection.

“Yeah, best psychic in the state, right?” Dean offered half a smile, more sad than anything else, and Bobby tried not to read into that.

“Yeah,” Bobby confirmed warily as he regarded Dean, unsure what to make of his expression. “I’ll give her a call. Don’t know the other one – Missouri? You got her number?”

Dean shook his head. “Missouri Mosely. She’s the psychic dad went to after…”

Bobby nodded, knowing exactly when John went to a psychic. He’d said as much, when he’d first come to Bobby to train up. He’d just never mentioned a name. “Alright, I’ll see if someone out there does.”

The Winchester boy nodded, trying not to look as hopeless as he felt, and climbed into the Impala. Bobby followed suit, getting into his truck. He glanced over at Sarge, who met his gaze with a small whine.

“Don’t worry, boy,” Bobby said, scratching behind the Shepherd’s ears. “We’ll find ‘em. We’ll bring ‘em both home.”

-o-o-o-

Jake and Ava were not taking the news particularly well. Not that Sam had expected them to. But for once he would love to skip the whole ‘truth is out there’ spiel, followed by the panic and denial of civilians wishing they could take back the last hour of their lives and go back to ignorant bliss.

“So, we’re soldiers in a demon war to bring on the Apocalypse?”

Sam winced. “When you put it like that…”

They had relocated back downstairs, in what was probably once a respectable foyer in whatever house they’d found themselves in. Ava had already tried the front door, Andy lending a hand when it hadn’t budged.

“And, we’ve been picked?” The skepticism in Jake’s voice was again, warranted, but unhelpful in their current situation.

“Yes,” Sam sighed, really wanting to end this conversation and start looking for clues as to where they were. The faster he could get Ava and Jake on board with the idea they weren’t getting out of here without help, the sooner he and Andy could start finding that help.

“Why us?”

“I’m not sure, okay?” Sam lied through his teeth, trying for a smile but landing with a grimace. “But look, I just know-”

“Sam, I’m sorry,” Ava interrupted as she came back to the group, abandoning the door. Andy trailed after her, and she crossed her arms over her chest, either in fear or self-consciousness. “Psychics and spoon-bending, that’s one thing. But demons?”

“I know it sounds crazy,” Sam tried again, Andy nodding along in support. “But-”

“It doesn’t just sound it,” Jake muttered, cutting Sam off. It was from his expression that Sam was losing him. Glancing at Ava made it clear he was losing them both.

“Look, I don’t really care what you think, okay? I know what brought us here-”

“A yellow-eyed *demon* ,” Ava said hollowly, clearly not believing him. “You said you’ve seen him, but I haven’t.” She glanced at the other three psychic kids. “Have any of you?”

Jake shook his head, while Andy nodded emphatically, an expression on his face saying he wished he hadn’t.

“He hasn’t… been around lately,” Sam finished lamely, realizing explaining Azazel’s disappearance was only going to muddy things further, pushing them further away from acceptance. Sam considered giving up; let them believe what they wanted, while he and Andy found a way out of here. But he had to give it one more try. Their odds of escaping alive increased if they stuck together. If they didn’t turn on each other out of fear and desperation to survive. Sam cleared his throat. “My brother and I exorcised him back to Hell. But his plan is still in motion. The fact that we’re all here is proof that it's started.”

“I thought you said he was your brother,” Ava sniffed, gesturing to Andy with her head. Andy was already Signing a response.

“Oh, I was there, ” Andy confirmed, expression wide before crumpling, “ *Getting my ass handed to me.”*

When Sam didn’t immediately translate, instead looking pained himself and lowering his gaze to the floor, Jake prodded. “What did he say?”

“He said he was there,” Sam bit out, voice quiet and clipped. “I didn’t catch the rest.”

Andy sent him a knowing look, a little smile in the corner of his mouth regardless of their circumstances. *“Liar.”*

“Look, it doesn’t matter if you believe me or not,” Sam insisted, trying to get them back on track and *not* think about his surrogate little brother bleeding out on the ground from a demon who had set this trap just as surely as the Rivergrove one. Trying not to think of Dean’s notes, that only one of them would walk away from this, and it wasn’t him or Andy.

He gestured with a sweeping arm towards the front door, still locked up tight. “We’re not walking out of here. Wherever this is, it’s on supernatural lockdown. So we have to find another way, and the best way to do that is *together.* ”

Ava tensed, but when Jake glanced her way she gave a one shouldered shrug. “I’m just a secretary from Peoria. This is so above my paygrade.”

“Alright,” Jake conceded, looking back at Sam and giving a tentative nod. “How do we get out of here, then?”

“We find weapons, if there are any,” the younger Winchester breathed out, trying not to sound as relieved as he felt to have them on board. “Iron, silver, salt, if we can find it.”

“Salt is a weapon?” Jake asked with raised eyebrows. He glanced at Andy for confirmation, the kid nodding. He mimed pouring salt in a circle around him.

Sam huffed. “Brave new world, right? We need to find out where we are, too. If we can find an address, or any sort of clue, Andy can send it to my brother.”

“Dean?” Ava asked, voice tentative like she wasn’t sure she had the right name. “The guy you tried to call in Lafayette?”

“Yeah,” Sam nodded, smiling gently.

Ava shifted weight on her feet, looking both hopeful and terrified of that hope. “Where is he?”

“Hopefully close.” Sam glanced at Andy as he said it, trying to convey

the same confidence and strength he was hoping to instill in Ava. He turned back to the scared woman. “We were still looking for you, Ava. Some signs pointed to Wisconsin, so that’s where we were. If we’re lucky… Dean’s not far from here.”

If they were lucky. Which was a big if.

“Let’s split up into groups of two. No one goes anywhere alone.” Sam looked at each of the kids in turn, already feeling the weight of responsibility for them settle in his gut like lead. “Andy, go with Ava. Look for an address, anything that tells us where we are.” Ava looked put out by that, but Sam ignored it, instead meeting Andy’s gaze. “You find something, you send it to Dean. Right away.”

Andy nodded, eyes filled with more determination than fear. That was his Jedi.

Sam turned to Jake. He didn’t want Andy or Ava alone with him, not if it was the same man Dean had talked about. The one that stabbed Sam in the back, literally. Which left the younger Winchester as the one to be paired with the army man. He could hear his brother throwing a hissy fit already, but better him than the other two. At least Sam was prepared for what might happen.

“Jake, you and I will search for weapons.” The army man nodded, and Sam tried to bolster his own confidence with a deep breath. It just came out as a dreadful sigh. “Let’s get going. Stick together, and stay safe.”

-o-o-o-

Persephone stared at the iron-wrought gates of a cemetery as they drove under the arched entryway. It was dark and quiet; the gravesite was an old one rarely visited by grieving families, let alone anyone so late at night. There was no electric lightsource to mark the dirt road they drove on, which was bumpy and ill maintained. As Tom put the car in park two-thirds of their way through the plots, Persephone turned her ward-blue eyes on the demon.

"This is not Appleton, Wisconsin."

"Aren't you the observant one," Tom answered without answering, smiling at her in the same way sharks would smile, if only they were able. "This is a pitstop."

With a flourish of his hand, that delicate gold chain formed between

Persephone's neck and his hand once more. He went about tying the end of it to the steering wheel, whistling as he did so. When he pulled his hands away, the chain was fused to the leather ring with no start and no end. Persephone glared at it.

"Don't trust me, demon?" she asked with a mocking smile of her own.

"Why rely on trust when I can ensure you'll stay right here?" Tom opened the driver side door and climbed out of the car. He bent over, one arm on the top of the door, one arm on the roof, to give her another version of the same grin. "Sit tight, Princess, I'll be back in a jiffy."

Persephone stuck her tongue out at the demon as he closed the car and sauntered off into tombstones and darkness. Once he was out of sight, the woman grumpily pulled out Chuck's phone – which she had stolen on her way out of the house earlier that day – to learn what a '*pit stop*' was.

-o-o-o-

Andy and Ava ended up on the second story after a search of the first floor, divided among Sam and Jake, didn't yield any sort of information on their whereabouts or the last owner of the house. The whole of the first floor had been picked pretty clean by scavengers, bored teenagers, and squatters over the years. So, they headed upstairs, hoping to find an office of sorts for whoever lived here last.

"So how'd you lose your voice?" Ava asked casually as they searched what was once a bedroom. She was pulling dresser drawers open, but there wasn't much left except moth-eaten clothing from what had to be the fifties or sixties. So exciting.

Andy signed something she couldn't read, turning from the bedside table he was searching through.

"Not sure why I asked," Ava muttered, turning away.

Andy just shrugged and went back to the top drawer of the side table. There was an empty bottle of horse tranquilizer and a couple of old needles. He closed the drawer, careful of the exposed tips. A junky had probably camped out in the place at some point over the years. He hoped whoever it was had lived through the experience. This place gave him the creeps like only a hunt ever did. Andy was under no illusion this place was haunted. Especially given the last location Azazel had tossed a bunch of psychic kids together.

But he wasn't thinking about that.

Working extra hard to not think about demon girls in forests or impromptu vocal cord amputations, Andy gestured to Ava that he was heading to the next room. She followed behind him.

The next room had more potential. There were tables up against the wall, an old desk, some filing cabinets and lockers that looked beat up but not particularly rifled through. There were taxidermy animals up on the walls, covered in cobwebs from years left hanging in this musty place. Every surface in the room was covered in a disarray of papers and notebooks, pamphlets and books, broken photo frames, and an array of bits and bobs. Andy supposed most people looking for an abandoned house weren't interested in paperwork. This place, wherever it was, was apparently no exception. It took some digging as he and Ava split up the room, but eventually Andy found what he was looking for.

He raised his arms in triumph, staring at a stack of unopened mail that had been a desk drawer. Andy hurried over to the window for what little light the moon outside offered and held up one of the envelopes.

It was addressed to a Freeman Daggett, 121 Summerland Road, Appleton, Wisconsin.

"What is it?" Ava asked, crossing the room towards him. Andy didn't answer, knowing she wouldn't be able to understand him anyway. He was too busy staring at that address, trying to place where he'd heard of it before.

When it came to him, Andy almost dropped the letter. The Morton House. Dean had mentioned that once, on a hunt. One of the most haunted houses in America. What had he called the ghost that terrorized anyone who dared to stay the night?

A pissed off, *Silence of the Lambs* inspired, psycho ghost.

Andy swallowed past the lump in his throat. It didn't matter. They could deal with Hannibal Lecter 2.0 after he got a message out to Dean.

"Andy?"

Ava was behind him now, but Andy didn't pay her any attention. He closed his eyes, holding the envelope with both hands, and concentrated. He'd never sent an image to a target so far away before,

but he was confident he could do it. He just had to focus.

-o-o-o-

Ava stared resolutely at her companion's back. Andy, who didn't seem to pay much attention on a good day, was ignoring her now, focusing on whatever it was he'd found in the desk. Slowly, Ava pulled the knife from the inside of her jacket and she neared the other psychic kid standing by the window. Ava drew a steadying breath, reminding herself that this got easier with each kill, and she had quite a number of those under her belt now.

"Sorry about this," she whispered insincerely from right behind Andy. Ava pulled her arm back, prepared to bury the blade in his spine.

She thrust forward just as her head exploded in pain.

-o-o-o-

Dean climbed out of the Impala, rage-disguised-fear building with every stupid town he and Bobby went to that didn't have his brothers. Not that they'd made it far; this was only their second, but it didn't matter, because it wasn't the right location either. Hopelessness was building, and with it, fury.

Once they'd called her, Pamela Barnes had promised to get on a séance immediately. She'd called them back within the hour to confirm Wisconsin as their target location. Northeastern Wisconsin, to be more precise. Not that it had been. It narrowed their search radius to the same 100-mile one Dean and Sam had already been checking.

Bobby had cuffed him on the head for saying that aloud, and he'd had to grumble an apology to Pamela. It confirmed they were in the right area, which was more than they'd had before. Pamela took it like the champ she always was, shrugging off Dean's anger like it was water rolling off oil.

"This isn't working," the older Winchester griped as he and Bobby made it back to their vehicles. Sarge barked from the window, as if to agree with him.

"You got any better ideas, I'm all ears," Bobby sniped back, knowing Dean's frustration wasn't aimed at him but getting sick of it all the same. He was just as worried too, damnit, but you didn't see him whining and complaining about how unfair their shit lives were.

"Sorry, Bobby," Dean grumbled. "It's just-"

Whatever he was going to say was cut short as Bobby's cell started ringing. Dean looked towards him with a heart-breaking amount of hope and Bobby dug the phone out of his pocket. "Yeah?"

"We made it to your place," came Ellen's voice, and Bobby switched the cell to speakerphone. "Me, Ash, and Ronald."

Dean, who's hope had been dashed when he heard Ellen's voice, did raise his eyes at the inclusion of their Mandroid buddy.

"I'm getting the boys down in the panic room, then I'm headed your way." Ellen's voice booked no room for nonsense. She was in action mode now, and that did make Dean feel just a little bit better. "Soon as you tell me which way that is."

"Green Bay, Wisconsin," Bobby replied, tugging at his cap. "That's where we're headed, for now. We'll fill you in when we got something more specific."

Right in the middle of the conversation – which Dean might not have anything to add to but at least took some consolation being a part of (at this point, he'd take *anything* just to feel like they were doing *something*) – pain flashed through the time traveler's brain like a sledgehammer to his skull. Dean stumbled into the side of the Impala, clutching at his head.

"Dean?"

He gasped as another flash hit. Light blinded him from behind his eyelids, and he bent double against the front of the car as his legs threatened to give out. He couldn't focus on anything but the agony in his head, like a gripping vice trying to squeeze something in that didn't have room to fit.

"Dean!"

There was another flash, this time coalescing into a rectangular shape on the undersides of his eyelids. The edges were a deep blue, dim and hard to discern, like it was further away. The rectangle sharpened until it was less a blinding light and more a too-bright sheet of paper. No, not paper, an envelope. An envelope with an address. The squiggly lines shifted in and out of focus, but Dean tried to pour all his concentration onto those words.

Freeman Daggett

121 Summerland Road

Appleton, Wisconsin

"Dean!"

The younger hunter very nearly lost his footing, collapsing entirely onto the Impala's hood, with only Bobby's arms and his own holding him up.

"Holy shit," he mumbled once his vision cleared and he could properly feel the inside of his mouth again rather than just one big mass of cotton. And his legs, and his arms. Dean pushed off of Baby, only stumbling a little, as he got his body back under him and fully functional.

"Andy?" Bobby asked, voice so full of hope Dean almost couldn't look him in the eye. He nodded.

"Andy," he confirmed, licking his lips and closing his eyes for a second. He had to shake off the lingering spikes of pain across his eyes and temples. "I know where they are. Bobby, it's not good… but it's close."

The old hunter had his phone pressed back to his ear, ready to rattle off the destination for Ellen (who was hollering at being ignored). He thanked whatever cosmic power existed in the world that he and Dean were less than two hours away from the infamous Morton House.

-o-o-o-

Andy spun at the clatter of noise behind him, breaking his concentration. It was okay, though. He was pretty sure he'd gotten the message out.

Ava had collapsed to her knees, hands on the sides of her head. There was a wicked looking hunting knife on the ground in front of her – the clatter of which had startled Andy out of his concentration. He immediately crouched down, reaching out one hand for the woman's shoulder. She jolted at his touch, looking up at him in fear and then suspicion.

"*Sorry*," he signed, mouthing the word as well so she might better understand him. He picked up the knife from the ground, Ava

watching closely as he did. He used the arm on her shoulder to guide her back to her feet. Then, with a smile, he handed her the knife, hilt first.

"That was… you?" she asked, eyeing the blade before taking it back, knuckles white around the hilt.

Andy nodded, making the same sign again to apologize. He didn't bother telling her he couldn't control it. That much had to be obvious, and it's not like she would understand him. He gestured for the door, mouthing, "*We should go downstairs. Find Sam,"* and hoping she understood.

Whether she did or not, Ava followed after him as he left the room, massaging her temples like she had one hell of a headache. He only felt mildly guilty about that as he headed for the stairs.

-o-o-o-

Sam, alongside (and keeping a close eye on) Jake, had found scant little in terms of weapons so far. They had started on the first floor, taking the east side of the house while their other two companions took the west, before making their way to the basement. The kitchen had been picked clean – not surprising, given how long this house had been obviously abandoned – and the basement wasn't proving any more fruitful. There were army rations, so at least they wouldn't starve. Sam tucked one into the pocket of his jacket. It would probably be bland as hell, but he knew Andy was always hungry. He'd appreciate food in any form.

"There's not much down here," Jake said after they'd picked through the dark room using their single light source. Sam wished they had flashlights, having to instead make do with Jake's phone, which had no service, of course, but did have a working flashlight. The man turned that light on Sam now, making his way across the room to join the hunter over by the rations. "Who the hell lived here?"

"Someone paranoid," Sam answered satirically.

"Someone who thinks a bomb shelter's actually gonna save his ass," Jake muttered sarcastically as he turned the light in a slow circle, actually looking for a bunker. He didn't see anything obvious, but there was an old coal-burning furnace in the corner. He made his way over to it. It didn't have a door any longer, but it looked like it could be made of iron.

He grabbed the cone-shaped portion meant to hold the burning coal, and yanked. The whole thing gave easily, crumpling in his hands as he pulled it free from the vertical vent and three-foot base. Jake chucked it to the side, instead focusing on those three feet. He ripped one clean out of its bolted foundation. Glancing over his shoulder, he waved it at Sam, who had come closer once Jake started making a racket.

"Would this work?"

The hunter raised surprised eyebrows, glancing at the crumpled iron on the ground next to them. He huffed in disbelief at the mangled wreck created by very human hands. "Yeah. Yeah, that's great."

Jake handed the iron rod to Sam, then tried to prop his phone up on the ground so it lit the remaining two legs. Sam bent down, picked the phone up, and pointed it at the space Jake had been trying to light. It worked a lot better than the propped-up attempt.

"Thanks," Jake said as he ripped free another leg and handed it to Sam. The hunter couldn't help but stare at the end of it, where the metal was twisted and deformed: ripped from its anchoring in the floor.

"I'm not Superman or anything," Jake said, a little self-consciously. Sam looked back down at the man to find he was being watched. Jake shrugged, again looking self-conscious, and turned back to the last iron leg. "It's no big deal."

Sam offered something close to a smile. It was weird, being around this guy and knowing what he was- well, *might* be capable of. After everything Dean had told him – and yeah, it hadn't been particularly detailed – Sam had been expecting a monster. But the kid in front of him was… well, just that. A kid. One that was as freaked out as the rest of them, dealing with it the best he could.

"You were in Afghanistan when this started?" Sam asked conversationally, that little flame of hope once again flickering to life. If he could connect with Jake, convince him they were on the same team, maybe he could change what had happened in Dean's timeline.

"Yeah, I started getting headaches." Jake ripped free the last leg and stood. "Then there was the accident. This guy flipped his vehicle on a bad road. He got pinned underneath. I lifted it off him like it was nothing. Everybody said it was a fluke adrenaline thing."

Sam chuckled, having lived this tale in another form. "But then you

did it again, right?"

"Bench-pressed eight hundred pounds, stone-cold calm." Jake held out the last of the iron rods for Sam to take. "I never told anybody of course, it was just too crazy."

"Yeah, well, crazy's relative. Keep it," Sam nodded at the furnace leg in Jake's hand, well aware this man could kill him with it with a single swing. Then again, he was pretty sure Jake didn't need a weapon to take out a human being. Not with that kind of strength. "It works against ghosts. Interrupts them. They kinda… flicker out and it takes a few minutes for them to reappear."

Jake lifted the bar, giving it a little toss to test the weight. He looked back at Sam. "And demons?"

The hunter gave a humorless smile. "I wish it were that easy. Exorcisms are the simplest way to get rid of one, but those take time."

"And a mastery of Latin," Jake replied, equally humorlessly. He shook his head, and it was obvious from his expression that he was rethinking that earlier line about crazy. Sam offered his phone back and Jake took it, but didn't move towards the basement stairs. "By the way, I appreciate what you're doing here."

Sam raised his eyebrows, lips quirked up in a sardonic smile. "What am I doing?"

"Keeping calm. Keeping *them* calm." The man nodded his head towards the ceiling, where their other two companions were exploring the rest of the house. "Especially considering how freaked to hell you really are. I know the look."

The smile dipped downward and Sam had to look away.

This man was supposedly going to kill him, if Dean and all his future knowledge was right. If Castiel was correct about time wishing to stay the same. This man was going to take him away from his family. But he was just a man. Hell, a kid. Nothing inherently evil. No devil incarnate.

In another timeline, he had killed this man who had apparently killed him first.

"You wanna know the truth?" Sam swallowed, the movement rough and raw in his throat as he forced the words out. "The size of this

thing…. It's big. World-ending big. And I know how crazy that sounds. But I just keep thinking…"

"That we're not gonna make it out?"

Hazel-brown eyes flicked over to meet Jake's, and after a moment of analyzing the other man's gaze, Sam nodded. It felt like defeat, even just admitting it, but he couldn't deny it, either. Couldn't really keep it hidden.

"It doesn't matter if we believe it," Jake said, eyes still locked on Sam before drifting to the ceiling. "Only matters that they do."

"Yeah, I guess you're-"

Sam's words suddenly stuck in his throat like a bug caught on flypaper as pain flared throughout his head. He and Jake both hit the ground, Jake grabbing at his head while Sam balanced on his knees and elbows, riding out the pain by clutching at his skull. An envelope with an address – an address all hunters knew, like their own version of a boogeyman – flashed across his brain like a red-hot brand. It receded just as quickly as it came, leaving both men panting on the ground.

"Shit," Jake swore, still massaging his temples with his hand. The phone had fallen from his grip during whatever that had been, and the flashlight was aimed uselessly at the ceiling from its place on the hard cement. "What was that?"

"Andy." Sam got his breathing to even out before pushing back onto his calves and straightening up in the darkness. "He found an address. Sent it to my brother."

"Not just your brother," Jake grumbled, stumbling to his feet and scooping up his phone on the way. He walked the couple feet over to the hunter and offered a hand. Sam eyed it for a moment's hesitation before he grabbed hold and Jake pulled him effortlessly to his feet.

"He never figured out how to target one individual," Sam explained, at least somewhat apologetically, still rubbing at his forehead and the phantom pain there.

"Well, that sucks. Guess I know why he uses ASL now."

Sam let out a laugh, but froze as the flashlight on Jake's phone flickered. He looked around immediately, instinctually tense, and his companion picked up on the change.

"What is it?" Jake raised his makeshift weapon, spinning in a slow circle, flashlight still on the fritz.

"Ghosts cause electrical interference. Could be nothing," Sam added hopefully, but his gut was anything but.

"Or, we could have incoming."

The two of them locked eyes, Sam raising his own iron rod as well. There was a short burst of static that came from Jake's phone. Just enough of a noise to cause both men's gaze to snap to the device, and then the light went out.

Both phone and iron clattered to the ground a second later, flashlight bursting back to life. Sam was alone in the basement, his own weapon still raised.

-o-o-o-

The dashboard clock indicated nine minutes passed before Tom emerged from the darkness of the cemetery with something in his hand he had not previously had. It was not until he neared the car, tucking the object into the waistline of his too-tight jeans, that Persephone recognized the shape.

A gun. An old one, unlike the ones all over television. This one looked more like the type used in cowboy movies. She'd seen one or two, usually while channel surfing in the motel room Azazel had kept her locked in.

Tom certainly didn't look like a cowboy, she thought idly, looking away as the demon opened the driver's door and climbed into the car. Azazel must have hidden it and left instructions for his spawn to find.

Persephone knew what that gun probably was from hours reading the Winchesters' story, both published and freshly printed. A weapon that could kill anything – more than likely, herself included – and it was less than a foot from where she sat.

She kept her gaze locked on the world outside. Tom put the car into gear and pulled away from the cemetery and, presumably, towards Appleton, Wisconsin.

-o-o-o-

Sam came racing up the stairs, yelling Jake's name. He had the three

iron rods tucked into one arm and Jake's phone in the other, flashlight swinging around dizzyingly as he searched for the missing man. The noise alerted Ava and Andy, who came crashing down the stairs from the floor above.

"What's going on?" Ava asked, hitting the landing just behind Andy, who was already signing the same question.

"Jake – he just disappeared," Sam panted as he regrouped with them at the base of the stairs. "I think a ghost took him."

"*We need to find him!"* Andy signed immediately and the younger Winchester nodded.

"We need to get out of here," Ava breathed out in barely contained panic, unaware of the conversation happening between the two boys. She looked on the edge of an anxiety attack, holding her head like she was dizzy and in pain. Probably residual effects from Andy's message, Sam thought.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concerned. He reached out to place a stabilizing hand on her elbow. Ava looked up at the contact, big doe eyes filled with unshed tears.

"No, I'm not alright! We're stuck in a- in a *haunted* house, and you're telling me one of us just went missing?" She was sliding right into that panic attack, breaths coming faster. "How is any of that alright?"

"It's going to be okay," Sam tried, cupping her elbow more firmly. He raised his other hand in a calming gesture of up-and-down motion and hoped she might subconsciously sync her breathing to it. "We'll get out, Ava. But we have to find Jake first."

Those hazel-green pools widened, filled first with surprise, quickly followed by stunned disbelief. "Find- Sam, he's *gone*. A *ghost* took him! We have to get out of here before we're next!"

"We don't know he's gone." Sam settled that second hand on her other arm, physically slowing her breathing down with slow, steady circles since that first attempt clearly hadn't worked. "We have to try to find him, Ava."

As she finally began to calm, expression still dazed, Sam gave her arms one more squeeze and let go. He turned towards Andy. "That address- did you find anything else to go with it? Anything on Freeman Daggett?"

Andy's expression gave away his confusion long before his hands made the sign for '*what*?'

Sam pinched his eyes shut for a moment, running a hand through his hair in an effort to keep his own stress levels under control. "This house, it's the-"

Ava screamed. Both Sam and Andy spun to find a new man – loose suit, old-fashioned glasses, Dick-Tracy fedora – standing in the foyer not five feet away from them. He was rubbing at his chin, swaying side to side in a need for movement, clearly on edge.

"What the hell?" Sam muttered, pushing both Andy and Ava behind him warily.

"Look, buddy…. I'm sorry, that's it," the man announced out of nowhere, lowering his hand from his chin to gesture at whoever he was talking to. It wasn't the three kids; the guy wasn't quite facing them, looking off to their left. He raised his second hand, both arms out in a beseeching manner. "I'm telling you, that's all the money I got-"

Before he could finish, gunfire came out of nowhere. Literally. Sam stumbled a hasty step back, taking the others with him as the guy took three to the chest and fell back. His dying scream echoed, even after he had already disappeared.

"Oh my god," Ava breathed out, before letting out a blood-curdling scream.

Sam rounded on her, trying to interrupt the panic attack. Andy stared at the space the man had just been, signing a similar reaction to the empty room. He turned to the other two kids, stepping into Sam's field of vision even as the hunter kept working to calm Ava down.

"*A death echo?*" Andy signed, expression dumbfounded. "*Someone got shot here?"*

"No, not…" Sam shook his head, struggling to understand it himself. This was the Morton House; he'd researched it once, when he was still a wet-behind-the-ears kid who'd heard the name in passing. One of Dad's hunter friends (at least when it was convenient to John) had been talking game about it. Like an old fishing buddy with one of those 'the size of that fish, let me tell ya' stories he never stopped telling. It had piqued young Sam's curiosity just as much as it had left him rolling his eyes at certain embellishments.

Which meant adult Sam knew that no one had ever been shot in the Morton House. Not that he had ever found.

"I don't know," the younger Winchester continued, rubbing Ava's arms and telling her they were okay, they weren't in danger – to which he received one hell of a look. At least it confirmed the whip-smart girl was still with them. "This is the Morton House. The only death I know of before it became an infamous haunt was the last owner, Freeman Daggett. He had a heart attack in '64."

Andy frowned, pulling his head back in a motion so reminiscent of Dean, Sam momentarily forgot the predicament they were in. "*That makes no sense. How is it here?"*

"I don't know," Sam repeated, his own frustration – both at the situation and with himself – coming through clearly in both body language and tone. "None of this makes much sense."

Silence fell between the three of them. Ava was still working on her breathing, muttering that they had to get out of there, Sam rubbing her arms, muttering comforts, which left Andy frowning at the excessively haunted house around them. He raised his hands, cupping them in front of his chest and bringing them up with a huff of air that blew his hair off his forehead.

Sam frowned at the sign he didn't recognize. He pointed to Andy's hands and made the gesture for '*what?*', brows pulled into a questioning frown of his own.

Andy's eyebrows went up in return and, despite the darkness and horrors around them, he was grinning as he fingerspelled the word. "*B-A-L-L-S."*

Sam choked on his own spit and it took him several seconds of coughing and recovery before he could say, "You've been spending too much time with Bobby."

The kid just grinned all over again, this time with a touch of pride.

"Um… excuse me, hello?" The two turned as one back to Ava, who Sam was still holding by the arms. Her eyes were huge, face disbelieving, eyebrows of her own up in disbelief and annoyance. "Stuck in a haunted house, remember? Want to go home? Curl up on the couch with my fiancé, have bad popcorn and watch an even worse movie! Can we maybe work on that!?"

She ended almost in a shriek and both boys winced. Sam went back to rubbing her arms, as much good as it was doing any of them.

"Dean knows where we are, Ava. He's coming," Sam promised, believing it with all his soul. He knew Andy had gotten that message out, which meant his brother was on his way. "He'll get us out, we just have to survive until then."

Ava stared at him like he was crazy.

"And we have to try and save Jake," Sam added, closing his eyes even as he said it. He knew what Ava was thinking. Jake was gone, they were next, they had to prioritize themselves. Get themselves out alive.

But there was Sam, risking his own life (and potentially theirs as well) to save a man that was supposed to kill him. Who knew the intelligence in that decision, but in the end, it didn't actually matter. Sam knew he couldn't abandon an innocent kid – just another victim of Azazel's machinations – without trying to save him. And no matter what Dean said about his future, or how Ava looked at him like he'd lost his mind, Sam believed in Jake's innocence.

At least until proven guilty.

"*I* have to try," he reiterated. "You and Andy stay here, okay? Take these-" he passed them two of the iron supports Jake had ripped free from the basement furnace- "they'll protect you from any more ghosts. I'll find Jake."

Andy was already shaking his head, but Sam didn't give him time to argue. "What room did you find that envelope in?"

"*Upstairs, second door on the right,"* Andy signed immediately, but his expression and the words he was mouthing strongly protested Sam going off on his own. The younger Winchester squeezed his shoulder, offering as reassuring a smile as he could manage. Given Andy's return expression, it hadn't been at all successful.

The hunter turned back to Ava, resting his hand on her shoulder and offering as much comfort as he could, given where they were. "Andy will take care of you, alright? Stay with him."

Andy nodded firmly, though his eyes remained on Sam. A promise to a brother more than reassurance for an innocent. Ava looked less sure, staring at Sam with that same hint of incomprehension. But Sam didn't have time to explain why he had to leave her. Why he had to do this.

It was his responsibility. She would understand that even less than she had understood his insistence back in Lafayette, facing down his death from her vision.

Sam headed for the stairs, just a few feet away. They hadn't searched the house for Jake yet, but somehow he knew they weren't just going to stumble across him. Sam would check the second story anyway, to be safe, but he had a feeling they needed to treat this like a hunt. Because this was the Morton House. It may not be a leap year – another cherry on top of this nonsensical sundae – but Sam could feel evil here. And nothing like that death echo downstairs. Something a lot… deeper. Rooted in the house.

Whatever had taken Jake, they weren't going to find him easily. Which meant Sam needed research on whatever was haunting the Morton House, and he needed to find it faster than he ever had before.

He found the room Andy indicated quickly enough. It was very clearly a den of sorts. Taxidermy animals on the walls, stacks of papers and books, old filing cabinets. A mess of an abandoned life; what was left of Freeman Daggett before his unexpected heart attack. The room had some remnants of more recent activity – a spray painted pentagon (incorrectly drawn, Sam noted) and other graffiti, the furniture a bit tossed, like someone had given a half-hearted search for something interesting and given up when it wasn't an immediate treasure trove – but for the most part, the room was pretty well preserved. Not a lot of squatters or troublemakers stayed in this house – or survived – long enough to leave much of a mark beyond the first floor.

Sam started shuffling through the piles of old papers. There was a desk centered in the back half of the room so the hunter started there. Old drawers contained pens and pencils, a book on taxidermy, ripped out magazine articles on the threat of nuclear annihilation, and other odds and ends left over from an age of fear.

"An optimist," Sam muttered to himself as he tossed aside a book on surviving an atomic blast.

A stray thought had him pausing before he got to the next item, gears turning. Hadn't Jake joked about a bomb shelter? Sam looked back at the Survival Guide. Guys like that, living through the Cold War, had lived in paranoia. The army rations in the basement – more stacked on a shelf in the corner of this very room – in a house where the owner practically lived in one room. A paranoid and lonely man.

"A bunker," the hunter muttered, picking the book back up, staring at the yellow cover, a red mushroom cloud blooming across it. "A man like that would have a bomb shelter."

Sam dropped the book and spun back for the door. The first place to look for a bomb shelter would be the basement.

He immediately drew up short at a figure standing in the doorway.

"Ava," Sam said in surprise, blinking at the girl who was supposed to be downstairs. "What are you doing up here? Where's Andy?"

"He wanted to search the first floor for Jake," she said evenly, big doe eyes locked on Sam. "I told him I'd come help you."

Sam let out a relieved breath and resumed his path for the door. "You should have stayed together. It's safer that way."

Ava was still standing in the doorway, blocking his way to the hallway. After an awkward moment where he expected her to move, Sam ended up squeezing past her on one side. It was only then that she stepped aside to make more room.

"You were saying something," Ava began, rather out of nowhere, as Sam made it into the hallway. He turned back to her, brow furled. She continued, "Earlier. About Brady."

There was something in her tone that sent Sam's heart down near his feet. He knew his expression crumpled right along with it. He could see it reflected in Ava's own face, and he looked away. "Ava…"

"No, Sam." She shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest. She still had the iron rod in one hand. The other had a knife. The knife he'd given her three months ago. Sam stared at that blade a second longer than was normal, something teasing at his brain. But he didn't know what – the dim light wasn't giving much away – and Ava's voice drew his stare away from that knife and back to her face. "If you know something, you have to tell me. I *deserve* to know."

There was something in the way she said it. Something… unstable, that gave Sam pause. This wasn't the time to tell her she'd lost her fiancé. They needed to keep their heads, focus on escaping. Grief would only push Ava's panic further over the edge.

"Ava, I don't think now is a good-"

"Time?" The woman tilted her head back and laughed. With her defensive body language it came across as crazed. Her eyes matched as she lowered them back to the man in front of her. "We're being picked off one by one, here, Sam, so now seems like a pretty damn good time to me."

"Ava…" Sam resisted the urge to take a step back, confused as to where the instinct to do so was even coming from. This was Ava. A good kid scared out of her mind, sure they were going to die. The only thing he should fear from her was losing her. But his instincts were screaming something entirely different. He just didn't know what. "We're going to make it out of this."

"Are we?" She looked away, biting at her lip as her eyes filled with unshed tears. But there was something in her posture that didn't match the crushing fear in her eyes. Her body said one thing, her face another. "We might not, you know. Not all of us."

Guilt flashed through Sam's gut, for Jake and the man's unknown fate. He needed to be looking for him if there was any chance of saving the kid.

Ava misread the guilt as something else, and her expression crumpled into further despair. "What happened to Brady, Sam? Where's my fiancé?"

Sam couldn't meet her watery eyes, but knew he couldn't keep it from her any longer. "I'm sorry, Ava. When the demon broke into your house to take you…" The younger Winchester took a deep breath, closing his eyes against the memory of bloodshed. "Brady didn't make it. I'm sorry."

He expected tears. Screams, denial, a sobbing woman in his arms. But none of that happened. Something in Ava shifted, but it didn't go the direction the hunter expected. Every instinct in Sam's gut warned him – firmly now – that he was in immediate danger.

"No," Ava ground out from between clenched teeth. Her fists tightened around both weapons, knuckles turning white.

Sam's brain told him to step up, to offer a comforting hug to his friend who was suffering a major loss. His feet didn't move.

"No, he can't be…. He can't be *dead*. That would mean that all of this… *everything* I've done was for… for what?" She laughed, then. It was cold. Hard. Broken. Sam found himself taking a step back.

"Everything you've done?" the Winchester echoed, brain starting to turn sluggishly in a very, very bad direction. "Ava…?"

Watery green eyes met his, but there was no fear in them now. Sam took another step back as the iron rod she was holding clattered to the ground. Ava raised her free hand to her temple, pressing the pads of her fingers into her head like she had a headache. Those previously-doey eyes closed and her face scrunched up in pain. Her other hand, still clenching the knife, raised it to press the knuckle-wrapped handle to her head.

The blade slipped into a stream of moonlight coming in through the filthy windows, and Sam realized what it was that had been bothering him. He hadn't seen it clearly in the dark, but shining in the filtered white light, he couldn't miss it.

There was fresh blood on that knife.

"Ava? What are you-"

A presence manifested into existence behind him. He could *feel* it, like a shadow of undulating hatred against his back. Every hunter instinct that Sam possessed lit up, all screaming red alert. He straightened, breath quickening with every '*Run!'* signal that hit his brain in rapid succession.

Bracing himself, Sam turned around.

There was a man – no, a ghost – right behind him, blocking his path back to the stairs. He was tall – taller even than Sam – with a tightly buzzed hairline, janitor overalls from decades past, and a truly gruesome face, both blank and full of rage simultaneously. He was a terrifying sight and one that was far, *far* too close for comfort, even for a hunter.

The younger Winchester recognized that face from research years old, now. Freeman Daggett. The last owner of the Morton House.

-o-o-o-

Castiel stared at the television screen hanging on the wall (a relatively new design, according to Gabriel, who seemed very proud of the device) showing the now-empty hallway of the haunted house Sam Winchester was trapped in. Her eyes blazed an ethereal blue and fingers dug into the wooden arms of the chair she was strapped to.

Sam was in imminent danger. She had to escape Gabriel's captivity. She had to save Sam. She had promised Dean that she would be there to save his brother. To stop the beginning of the end. Castiel *had* to escape.

But how?

Her grace was no contest against Gabriel's. She would not be able to break his bindings on her own. And it was unlikely that she would successfully talk Gabriel into releasing her in time. Sam Winchester was out of time. He needed Castiel *now*.

So she had to escape her brother's grace without using her own. An impossible task, it may seem, but Castiel was good at puzzles. If she could not use her grace… then she would have to use Gabriel's.

The grace the archangel had imbued within her was currently tendrilled around her core, working on the most egregious damage. Eventually, it would integrate itself into her own and become hers, but right now it was still very much the Archangel's grace and would be for some time. It had been left there with the intent to heal, so that was what it was doing, all the while encouraging Castiel's grace to do the same.

But that exchange was a two-way street. In a normal healing, the injured party was a more active participant, making the healer an assistant to their recovery, not directly in charge of it. Which meant Gabriel's grace was likely to listen to her input, so long as it did not clash with its intended job: healing. Perhaps Castiel could convince the grace that the best way to heal her was to release the binds. If she was allowed access to her own grace, she would certainly heal faster.

It would not be a simple task. Castiel had never attempted subterfuge on grace before. She would only have one chance; if that energy sensed any deception, it would cease to listen. She would have to proceed slowly.

Sam might not have time for slow but, unfortunately, Castiel had no other choice.

"If Sam Winchester perishes and you do not free me to stop it," she began aloud, her gravelly voice even deeper than normal with the severity of her words. Castiel turned her head and fierce gaze to her brother, sitting beside her in his red recliner. "I will never forgive you, Gabriel."

The archangel stared in silence for a long, drawn-out moment before snorting so hard he almost spilled his soda out of the wrong orifice. He broke into laughter, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

"Oh, Cassie, your spunk is positively adorable," Gabriel announced once he had his breathing back under control, but he kept his eyes on the television screen, playing out the horrors of the Morton House.

Outwardly, he remained relaxed. Jovial. Perhaps a tad dickish. Inwardly, Gabe found himself annoyed by the promise his sister had just made, grave as the hole Sam Winchester would find himself in at the end of all of this.

The archangel shifted in his seat, irritated with his own irritation, and decided to blame Castiel for it. He picked up the remote and aimed it at the flat screen.

"Let's see what Dean's up to, shall we?"

-o-o-o-

The Impala rumbled along the smooth asphalt of the Interstate, pushing all sorts of speed limits as she roared towards the Morton House. An old tow truck followed behind (a far less loved, though no less cared for, vehicle), headlights a consistent and comforting presence in Baby's rear view mirror. Dean's eyes kept checking on those lights, as if to make sure Bobby was still with him if Sam couldn't be.

His fingers tightened on Baby's wheel, the leather creaking beneath his white-knuckled grip.

Sam would be fine, Dean told himself, over and over and over again. Even though he was racing Time, in more ways than one. Even though his brow was furled in the brooding way that meant bad shit was going down and they didn't stand a chance of surviving it. Even though he didn't believe it, himself.

Sam would somehow be fine.

If his kid brother wasn't, if Dean didn't get to Sam in time to save him – to stop it, *all* of it, from starting all over again – he wasn't sure what he'd do. He knew what he *couldn't* do. What he wasn't supposed to do. What he promised he wouldn't do.

But what else could he-

-o-o-o-

"Booooooriiiiing!" Gabriel hollered at the television screen, rolling his eyes and head in Castiel's direction. "One track record, this boy. Am I right?"

The archangel grinned winningly as he clicked the back button on the remote with such dramatic flair. The screen switched back to the Morton House and, beside him, his sister had a go at fratricide with nothing but a pair of pretty blues and an adorably optimistic amount of spunk.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Oof, that one killed me. But it's done, it's edited, and now it's out in the world. Fly free, you little bastard of a Battle Royale chapter. Fly free.

Why didn't Bobby get Andy's message: Mostly to match canon, but if you need a real reason (*cough* always *cough*), Andy was actively trying to send it only to Dean, and he partially succeeded. Those close to him still received the message, cuz the strength of it to reach so far was big, but the further away from Andy, the more direct the message got, targeting only its intended subject. Everyone in the house just got hit by the wake of the psychic bullet! By the time it got to Bobby, the wake was itty bitty and he didn't even feel it, let alone get the message. (I'm a visual person, this is how I visualized it, shhhhhhh, it totally makes sense XD)

Hope you all enjoyed, thanks so much for your patience!

Cheers,
Silence

Update - 7/24/2024: OMG, guys. I was doing a random re-read of this chunk of chapters when I was suddenly like... wait. Jake was just mentioned, but we haven't met Jake yet. I definitely haven't read the part where they meet Jake. What the heck?

Somehow... three whole sections of writing got left out of the post when I transfered it to A03 and FF.net. How many of you were like "where did Jake come from? Huh."

□♀□□♀□□♀□□♀□□♀□

So that's been fixed now. Sheesh.

Chapter 129: Season 2: Chapter 95

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Oh man, guys, I am suuuper tired right now and just barely eeked out an edit on this chapter, so I don't think a lot of chatter is going to happen. Let the chapter speak for itself, and enjoy!

Chapter Warnings: Sam's at a party (and he may not be crying, but he could if he wanted to!) Andy's being his wonderful Andy-self despite a less than wonderful situation, Daggett's playing with his toys, Ava's being a villain, and Sam's the damsel in distress (as Dean would say, he's got the hair for it)

Actual Chapter Warnings: Tertiary character death, description of corpses, Ava being a villain, Sam being a distressed damsel, and Andy being his wonderful Andy-self.

Oh, and a no good, dirty rotten cliffhanger. #SorryNotSorry!

(Let's be honest, you all have been through worse at this point)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 95

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Sam woke to darkness, or very near to it, and blasting music. Wherever he was, the only light in the room was coming from a cell phone, lying face down on the table in front of him, flashlight on and pointed toward the ceiling. Music, on the other hand, was coming from a record player somewhere in the darkness, and it was turned to max volume. A scratchy vinyl of '*It's My Party'* was playing (on repeat, he soon discovered), and the pounding in Sam's head started to match the beat.

Great.

Ignoring the headache playing bongos with his temples, Sam tried to figure out where he was. The diffused light was enough to eliminate

the others seated around the table, and Sam instantly wished it hadn't been. To his right were two corpses, their skin dried out and partially mummified, while other parts, like their eyes, had clearly been preserved. They had party hats – those ridiculous cone-shaped ones with string straps – atop their heads. Their faces were stretched into ghastly expressions – wide eyes and wider smiles – that were probably intended to mimic happiness but, in reality, were horrifically unsettling. The entire thing was unsettling.

To his left was another body, though this corpse had partially fallen forward onto the table, so Sam (thankfully) couldn't see much of that one.

'*Taxidermy*,' Sam thought, recalling the manual he'd found upstairs. Freeman Daggett had been an amateur taxidermist. His animal of choice was, apparently, humans.

The younger Winchester stared at the body closest to him on the right. His hand was propped up on the table, cup attached to long-dead fingers, probably with glue. But next to his arm, lying on the table, was a Dick Tracy style fedora and that's what had captured Sam's attention. His eyes shifted to the clothing, dusty and now-decades old, that the corpse was wearing. It was the same loose suit he'd seen on the Death Echo – the one that had been shot multiple times.

'*Oh, gross,*' Sam thought with a grimace, turning away from the taxidermied corpse as his rapid-fire brain put two and two together. Daggett had been a hospital janitor; he was someone with access to dead bodies, an interest in taxidermy, and living a lonely Cold War life of paranoia. The table was set for a party, the record player had Lesley Gore on repeat, and this house was full of Death Echoes that hadn't died here.

Daggett had thrown a birthday party and made himself some friends.

"Don't worry," a voice came from behind him, deep and gravely, and Sam fought off the shiver that chased its way down his spine. He tried to turn around, but he was tied to the chair he was seated in, and couldn't do much more than toss his head back and forth, trying to spot the ghost. "It stops hurting. So don't worry."

"Get away from me," Sam growled, rocking the chair back and forth in his efforts to loosen the ropes that bound him.

Daggett stepped into his line of sight and the hunter stiffened when he picked up a long, narrow knife from the table.

"Don't worry," Daggett repeated and Sam leaned as far away as he could manage.

"S-Sam?"

The new voice was groggy, thick with confusion as its owner came to in the middle of a nightmare. Sam straightened in surprise, head whipping forward, towards the far end of the table.

"Jake?"

He couldn't see much of the kid, since Jake's phone was on the table between them, the flashlight too bright to see past and not really illuminating its owner. But he was sure that it was Jake, probably tied up the same way he was.

Daggett started towards the other end of the table, and Sam renewed his struggles.

"Stay away from him!" he demanded, though it did him little good. The ghost crossed the length of the table and Sam could just make out Jake struggling in the chair as Daggett moved behind him with the knife. "Don't. Don't!"

"Sam, what is he-" Jake's words cut off with a gurgle of surprise, and then the awful sounds of someone choking on their own blood.

"No!" Sam fought in his chair as Jake drowned. "Jake! Jake, stay with me. Jake!"

"Don't listen," Daggett whispered as he pulled the knife free from Jake's neck, and the army kid went silent, slumping forward as much as the ropes allowed. "You'll stay with me, now. A good, long time."

"You son of a bitch," the younger Winchester seethed, even as the ghost started back his way. By the time he came back into the dim light, the knife was no longer in his hand, and Sam desperately searched for it, unsure if Daggett still had it. "Get away from me."

"This won't hurt," the ghost said as he crossed behind the hunter, out of his range of vision. Sam fought against the ropes, but there was little give even with all his struggles. "It's okay. Relax. Relax."

Sam stiffened as he felt hands as cold as ice brush his cheek and neck. Another shiver ran through him, this one feeling a lot less like the anticipation of death and more like death itself. Something thin

snapped to his chin, a light weight settling on his head, and then the ghost was moving away.

He'd put a goddamn party hat on him. Sam had to breathe through the shaking. Fear and anger were mixing in heavy doses with adrenaline and leaving him sick to his stomach.

"I was so lonely," Daggett announced in the darkness and turned his head to either side, trying to identify where the ghost was. "It was my birthday, you know. I put on quite the party. But no one came."

Slowly, brown eyes shifted back to the table and the taxidermied guests. Sam swallowed hard.

"So at midnight, I locked them in and went upstairs." The ghost came into view on his left, and Sam stiffened again, unconsciously leaning away. He was way too vulnerable tied up like this. But Daggett walked past him to the corpse that had toppled forward. He pulled the mummified man upright by his shoulders. The body was rigid and creaked in a way that Sam shut his eyes against and hoped to forget forever. "And overdosed on horse tranquilizers."

His eyes snapped back open, locking on the ghost who stared down at his only friends – friends he'd had to make – with a look of hateful sorrow. Those hollow eyes slid back to the hunter and Sam found himself pressing back in his chair.

"Now I have many friends." Daggett drew closer, sliding along the table towards him, dead eyes locked on Sam the entire time. "I have you, Sam Winchester."

Sam fought against his ropes as the ghost came right up to him, then rounded behind. A heavy hand fell on his shoulder and the hunter froze, trying to calm his breathing as Daggett moved out of sight once again. He fought yet another shiver down his spine at the anticipated touch of steel to the base of his neck. It never came.

"And you are the one to get," Daggett continued, voice near his ear and causing Sam to recoil. Then the ghost's words registered, and Sam froze for entirely different reasons.

'*The one to get?*' Wait, he'd heard that before. He'd heard that phrasing before, specifically about Azazel's Battle Royale. '*The man to get is Sam Winchester.*'

Where had he heard that before? And how the hell did the Morton

House Ghost – a hunt that predated Sam by decades – know anything about it?

-o-o-o-

Andy came to lying on his stomach on the floor of a room he didn't know and couldn't remember coming to. Or the apparent bender he'd gone on that provided the raging headache and music that he was definitely imagining. That, or whoever's house he was in had a record player and '*It's My Party'* was stuck on repeat in another room.

Maybe he was in hell, Andy thought, as he closed his eyes and focused on breathing. That seemed like the kind of thing demons would think up as a form of torture.

Andy also wondered what the hell he'd fallen asleep on that was digging so painfully into his side. Considering he was on the floor of a very dark, very disused kitchen, it could be anything, really. Knowing his luck and the searing pain, he'd fallen asleep on a freakin' knife.

Oh.

Andy pulled his hand away from his body and, even with splotches of white playing ping-pong with his vision, he could see the blood covering his fingers. Knife was a really unfortunate guess, apparently. Why couldn't he have thought of something soft, like a bunny? Or heck, he'd have taken something dull. Like a spoon.

'*No*,' Andy thought in a voice that sounded exactly like Alan Rickman as the Sheriff of Nottingham. At least in his head. "*That would hurt more, you twit.'*

He closed his eyes and focused on breathing. What had happened? How did he get himself stabbed? (Again). Or maybe shot? It didn't feel like a bullet hole, though. More like a knife wound. He'd had both before, so he could tell. And wasn't that a depressing (and, okay, also kinda badass) thought?

But if he'd been stabbed (*again*), why did his head hurt so badly?

With a groan, Andy gathered his knees beneath him. His side didn't hurt as much as he was initially terrified it would. Oh, it still hurt, that was for sure. It was all shooty and stabby, with fiery nerve endings that Andy absolutely wished he could not currently feel. But he'd also had way, way worse. Hell, given the completely reasonable amount of blood coating the hand pressed to his side, he wasn't even

bleeding out.

That was nothing. Just another regular old Tuesday (or whatever day it actually was.)

As Andy managed to straighten up on his knees, only groaning a little, he saw a smattering of red on the edge of the kitchen counter in front of him. Out of instinct more than sequential, logic-based decision-making, Andy raised his free hand to his head. There was one heck of a lump there and his hair was matted with blood.

That was probably why his head was killing him.

Speaking of, the music was gone now. Andy blinked, realizing the silence was kind of echoey inside his pounding skull. But it wasn't complete silence. If he strained – which, *ow* with a headache – he could still hear the song, really faintly.

With a curious little frown, hand still pressed to his bleeding side (again, totally nothing. What honorary Winchester hadn't been stabbed once or twice? It was most definitely a Tuesday), Andy bent back down to the floor. It pulled a bit at his torn muscle and flesh, and he kind of regretted prioritizing what was still most likely an auditory hallucination, but he pressed his ear to the dirty, ancient linoleum anyway.

"*It's my party and I'll cry if I want to. Cry if I want to. Cry if I want to."*

Man, for an illusion, it was a real crooning one. He could even hear the scratch on the record that caused a skip for every turn of the vinyl.

'*What the hell?*' Andy thought as he straightened back up on his knees again, groaning because there was no one around to tell him to stop being such a baby.

In other words, Dean. Dean wasn't around to tell him to suck it up. Oh, right. Because he and Sam had been kidnapped by a yellow-eyed demon that wasn't supposed to be walking around Earth, available for kidnappings.

But there they were. In a haunted house. With… with two other kids. There were two other kids here, too! Andy couldn't really remember their names or faces at the moment. Just blurry, half-formed recall. A jittery woman Sam had known and an army guy.

He'd been with Ava (Oh! Her name is Ava. Would you look at that.

Thank you, brain) while Sam had been… Sam had been upstairs, searching for Jake. And Andy had wanted to help, so he'd told Ava they could search the first floor together.

And that was the last thing he remembered.

It took a moment to get one foot under him, then push off without toppling enough to get the other leg to join, but then he was standing. The room wasn't spinning, which was a great sign. Just… throbbing. Yeah, that was a good description of the way Andy could feel blood pounding behind his eyes, vision kind of pulsing along with it.

He hoped Ava was okay. Although, given that Jake was missing, Sam had been upstairs, and ghosts didn't carry knives… he also kind of hoped Ava hadn't – literally – stabbed him in the back. She'd seemed so nice.

"…*If you wake up somewhere you don't know surrounded by other kids like you, you do whatever it takes to get out of there, you hear me? You defend yourself, no matter what that means, and then you run."*

Dean's voice flashed through his head, grave and serious, for the second time since the older Winchester had given him that speech. What felt like a lifetime ago, actually.

This was another Battle Royale and just like Dean had told him – just like Sam had known all along – they were going to have to fight each other to survive. Azazel would see to that. Maybe that yellow-eyed bastard had been telling that to Ava, too. Maybe she'd believed him.

He really had to stop turning his back on psychic kids. You'd think he'd have learned after that asshole, Jonathon.

Andy closed his eyes, focusing both his thoughts and breathing on the problem at hand. He began a visual search of the floor around him for the iron rod he'd had when he entered the kitchen. It was dark and there were scraps of furniture upturned, paper clippings and old trash, odds and ends kind of everywhere, so it took a couple moments for Andy to spot it. Luckily, Ava – if it had been Ava – hadn't bothered taking it with her.

If she had a knife, he supposed, she didn't need a make-shift iron club.

Andy groaned as he managed to squat down, keeping his spine as straight as possible. The wound was at his waist, a little more towards his back than his front, and Andy supposed Ava really had tried to

stab him in the back. Well, she'd missed (thankfully, or he probably wouldn't be alive, let alone doing squats). He must have turned into the blade without realizing she'd had one in her hand. Just responded to her coming up behind him.

He hissed as he scooped up the rod and made it back fully upright. Next step was to find Sam. He could send out a system-wide message again, but that meant Ava would get it too. If she was the backstabber (again, *literally*), then the last thing Andy wanted to do was alert her to his very-much-still-aliveness.

But he didn't exactly have the energy or time to search for Sam. He may not be at Rivergrove or Cold Oak levels of dying, but he had been *stabbed*. Plus, he didn't know where Ava was in the house. He really didn't want to run into her again while searching for Sam. She'd have the upper hand in a fight, given that she could be armed with a knife and he had been, again, *stabbed*.

Andy leaned some of his weight against the kitchen counter. First thing first: get the wound to stop bleeding. He still had Bobby's scarf hanging off his neck, but the knitted material probably wasn't the best idea for an open wound. It wouldn't be much of a tourniquet, either. So, *carefully*, Andy stripped out of both the scarf and Bobby's heavy jacket, which now had what was most definitely a knife slice in its side, not a bullet hole.

He winced. Bobby would understand, of course, but Andy still felt bad. He hadn't even asked if it was okay to borrow it. He hadn't planned on being gone long.

A litany of curse words hissed through his brain as he tied the coat around his waist, looped the arms, and pulled as hard as he could. He quickly added another loop, knotting the fabric just beneath his navel as fast as he could before he lost his nerve and the tautness he'd achieved.

'*Son of a bitch!*' he swore, loudly, in a voice that was an absolute dead-ringer for Dean. At least in his head.

Now that that was taken care of.

Still working through the rise in pain levels, Andy decided sending a message to Sam was the smartest next move (or so he hoped). Finding and regrouping with the younger Winchester was not only his safest bet, but their best chance for escape. Especially if Sam was in danger, which he very well might be.

But not from the kitchen. If Ava had been the one to try to kill him, alerting her to the fact that he was still alive and then staying in the last place she had seen him was probably not a great idea. If she wanted another shot, she'd have to find him first.

So Andy eased off the counter and headed, quietly as possible, for the door to the kitchen. He peaked around the frame; the dining room and foyer beyond that were both empty. He didn't know where anyone was, but the music he'd heard was most definitely new. So, for better or worse, he was heading towards it. It had been coming up from the kitchen floor, so that meant the basement. Not his first choice, by far, but it probably wasn't Ava's either, which meant the basement could actually be the safest place in this haunted house.

Said no one in the history of ever.

Andy crossed the dining room carefully, prioritizing silence over speed (and there was that whole, you know, *being stabbed* thing to consider). When he made it to the foyer, he glanced down the hall and up the stairs, but neither direction yielded Ava or Sam. So Andy crept down the hall towards the basement door and opened it as quietly as he could. It creaked and he winced at the noise, halting his movement. There was no other sound in the house as he stood there. Andy hoped that meant no one had heard (and not that someone was just better at stealth than him).

Slipping inside, he started down the stairs slowly, ever aware of his burning side, and prepared his mental image as he went. If Ava was a traitorous turncoat, he should warn Sam. But he didn't actually know if she was; he had no real memory of the attack. And if she was with Sam when they both got the message… she might attack him before he could react.

Okay, simple message then. What was a single image that could quickly and easily convey: '*Hey guys. Woke up in the kitchen by my lonesome. Been stabbed. I'm a champ tho, think I'll pull through. Thumbs up emoji. Where you at?*'

It took a minute to think of the best option, but once he was satisfied, Andy sent it into the ether with a confident nod and all his concentration focused on Sam Winchester.

-o-o-o-

When the bright red question mark flashed across the underside of his eyelids, Sam didn't immediately give it much thought. He was, after

all, busy trying to escape his bindings as a madman of a ghost walked towards him, holding the same knife he'd used to kill Jake Tully just minutes earlier.

The second time it hit him, flashing several times on a black background, Sam had his eyes open and the interruption was much more noticeably *not* his own brain supplying random thoughts in panic. Also, the question mark was clearly a spray-painted one, dripping red down the black background not unlike blood. Had the very existence of the psychic image not been proof Andy was still alive, Sam's own blood would have run cold at that.

"Andy?" the younger Winchester said aloud, more out of surprise than on purpose.

The fresh blood that was on Ava's knife upstairs had been on his mind despite his own dire situation. With Jake missing and the woman actively confronting Sam, there had been only one other person that blood could have come from. Sam had been trying his best not to worry – he had enough to deal with saving himself – but he couldn't deny his genuine fear that Andy had already been dead.

"Andy!" the younger Winchester bellowed, turning his head side-to-side and repeating the call as loud as he could.

"Shh, quiet now," Daggett whispered, rounding behind the restrained hunter. That hand landed on his shoulder once more, and Sam fought against it in earnest. "Don't struggle. This won't hurt for long."

He stiffened at the touch of a sharp point to the back of his neck. In the same moment, there was a distant crash – a big one, like a large piece of furniture being knocked over – and then the room, which had been sealed for forty plus years, was flooded with fresh (well, fresh*er*) air.

"*Sam!*"

The mental cry pinging through his skull was loud enough that Sam physically flinched, but his relief far outweighed the pain. Andy swung at the towering (and *terrifying*, good god!) ghost standing behind his surrogate brother, the iron rod still tightly clenched in his hand. Daggett disappeared with a flicker and a garbled yell, the blade clattering to the ground where he'd been standing. Andy tucked his makeshift ghost club into his elbow and squatted – as gently as possible, despite being in quite the hurry – to pick up the knife. He immediately put it to use, hacking at the ropes wrapped around Sam.

"Andy," Sam breathed out in pure relief, still panting from the close call. The ropes loosened as Andy cut through them and the hunter stood quickly, physically and mentally shaking them – and the entire experience – off. He looked at his friend with equal parts relief and thanks. "Nice timing."

The kid grinned winningly, raising both hands, fingers curling into two thumbs up. Which was when Sam noticed the layer of dark red, shining and wet in the dim light, coating the inside of one of them. His eyes dropped in an immediate once-over, quickly latching onto the red puddle on his right side, along with Bobby's jacket tied around his waist – too high and too tight to be remotely comfortable.

"You're hurt!" the younger Winchester exclaimed, reaching out for Andy's side, but the kid shook his head and pulled back a step. Instead of pushing, Sam turned around and leaned across the length of the table, careful to avoid the other 'guests' as he snagged Jake's phone. He trained the flashlight on his little brother's bloody side.

Andy didn't try to stop him from prying, but didn't relent, either. They had bigger things to worry about than stab wounds. He raised his hands to sign – the right one stained completely red from pads-to-palm, which Sam desperately tried not to think about – and asked, "*Is Ava the bad guy?"*

Well, actually he signed, '*Is Ava Stabby McStab Stab?'* He had to finger-spell out the ridiculous title since there was no sign that matched Andy's unique sense of morbid humor. Sam kind of wanted to hug him and head-slap him in the same go.

"Yeah," Sam said, voice as downhearted as his expression. His chin dipped, eyes on the floor but also far away. "I- I think she's been here the whole time. Killing… killing the other kids Azazel put here with her."

Andy looked devastated to hear it, but quickly compartmentalized, pushing it to the back of his mind and giving a firm nod. No doubt shoving aside his own memories of lives lost in a battle royale.

"*I think she has a knife,"* Andy signed, gesturing with one hand to his bloody side.

"She does," Sam confirmed, remembering the blood-soaked blade (coated in *Andy's* blood, because she'd tried to kill him before coming upstairs to confront Sam). The knife *Sam* had given her for protection. Clearly, she'd been using it for far more than that. The younger

Winchester instantly felt another flash of guilt. And anger. A lot of anger. "I never should have left you alone with her."

Not that he'd known – how could he? The last time he'd seen her, she'd been… well, *adorable*, frankly. A chaotic ditz of a charming human being, who'd driven through the night to save some random stranger from getting blown up.

What had happened to her?

Sam cursed himself for not questioning any of her story sooner. He should have known something was up with the time loss. She'd been missing for three months, but she was the only one who had missing time. Only… it wasn't actually missing, was it? She'd been stuck here the whole time, killing other psychic kids. For *months*. Sam felt another flash of guilt. He should have found her sooner. Should have saved her from this.

They'd tried. He and Dean had really tried. They'd been looking. Cold oak was the first place they'd gone, and if they'd known where to try next, they would have.

Hell, he and Dean almost had found her. They'd only been hours away.

And months too late.

Sam closed his eyes. As much as it pained him to see what Azazel had done to Ava, what he'd successfully turned her into, he couldn't let it get to him right now. It wasn't his fault; it was Azazel's. Maybe he could still get through to her. Except the loss of her fiancé was what had finally flipped the switch. Finally broke her beyond what she could hide behind a façade of innocence and fear. She'd probably been doing what she had to to survive. To get back to her life and to Brady.

As much as Sam wanted to say he'd never turn like that, never kill innocent kids for his own survival, he couldn't actually say it with surety. Because just like Dean, Sam didn't know what he would do to get his brother back if something were to happen to him. Or Andy or Bobby. And before… before he'd been dragged back into the hunting life by Azazel, there was nothing he wouldn't have done to get back to Jess.

Sam opened his eyes at a touch to his arm, finding Andy right in front of him with a sympathetic, understanding smile. The kid gave his bicep a squeeze with a blood-covered hand (and Sam could not help

but momentarily be levels of big-brother-annoyed, sure that Andy had chosen that hand on purpose) and a weak, but one hundred percent Andy smile.

"*Let's get out of here before she finds us,"* Andy signed after releasing Sam's arm. (And yes, there was a bloody handprint on his jacket, and yes, Andy absolutely had a twinkle of mischief in his eyes and a smug little smirk in the corner of his mouth).

The kid twisted the knife he was holding around, offering the hilt to Sam. He'd be better with it to begin with, adding leaps and bounds to that when factoring in a stab wound. Then Andy grabbed his iron rod from where he'd tucked it in his armpit and turned for the door.

Sam took Freeman Daggett's knife, coated in Jake's blood (and who knew how many others), but didn't immediately follow. He was staring at the blade, trying to think.

There was no way Daggett's ghost could have known what Azazel told the other psychic children. That Sam Winchester was the one to get. Not unless one of them had told *him*.

"It's not a leap year," Sam suddenly said, belatedly realizing that as the sluggish gears in his head got really turning. Daggett shouldn't be active; the Morton House was famously a dead haunt every other day of every other year. Enough activity to keep trespassers and the curious away, but the disappearances and deaths only happened at midnight on February 29th.

Daggett shouldn't even be awake right now, let alone kidnapping psychic children or knowing a demon's end game.

This wasn't just bad timing, with the ghost showing up when it did. It couldn't be. Nothing about that added up.

Sam remembered the headache Ava had complained about, the way she'd been clutching her head when he'd found them after Jake's disappearance. The way she'd gripped her head again upstairs, right after Sam's gut had warned him he was in imminent danger.

Daggett hadn't just shown up; he'd been *summoned*. Summoned and told who to go after.

Ava could *control ghosts*.

Andy was already heading through the doorway he'd burst through,

having to watch his step amongst a mess of papers and books scattered across the floor. Sam followed quickly, mind still reeling and dread pooling in his gut. He needed to tell Andy what Ava could do. And then they both needed to find a way out before she did it again.

The source of the crash he'd heard before Andy rescued him became apparent as he followed Andy's path over a toppled bookshelf, the contents of which they were now scrambling atop. It must have been hiding the entrance to Daggett's bomb shelter.

"What are you doing down here?"

The voice – cold, hard, and most definitely female – snapped Sam back to attention. He almost ran into Andy's back, the kid having frozen as he spotted the figure barely silhouetted in the darkness. Ava stood at the bottom of the basement stairs, staring at them. Sam raised Jake's phone, illuminating her. Hazel eyes that used to be so innocent were now deadened, locked on Andy.

The bloodied knife glinted in the new light, clasped tightly in her fist, and Sam moved in front of Andy, pushing his injured little brother behind him.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I don't have a lot of end chatter, either, other than to take a no good, dirty rotten bow and head to bed! Hope you all enjoyed the chapter. I know the tension is ratcheting up but it's not going to get better anytime soon, I'm afraid. Season Finale's are not for the faint of heart. Stay strong, I believe in us!

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 130: Season 2: Chapter 96

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Oooooh boy. Okay. So. This one. This one is going to hurt, guys. I procrastinated it so hardcore, even though I was sure of my choices. Even after all the decision making, and pep talking, and re-pep talking when I lost confidence, and the writing, and the finishing of the writing, and the thinking I did great and could move on, I am still, even now, procrastinating the hell out of this one.

Chapter Warnings: Things are getting real heavy as we enter the true season finale, the big one. Not everyone is gonna get to walk away and I foresee a lot of all caps in my future.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Character Death (did I mention this one is gonna hurt, y'all?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 96

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"You're supposed to be dead," Ava said, staring at Andy with a look in her eye that was hardly human, lip curled up in an ugly snarl.

Andy regarded the woman with unimpressed annoyance. He raised his hands and, after a rude gesture, signed, "*You're supposed to have better aim."*

Sam was by his side in an instant, one hand snatching onto a wrist, forcing him to stop antagonizing Lady McStabStab. Not that she could read what he'd signed, of course. But the distasteful scowl across her once beautiful face said she understood enough.

The younger Winchester had to resist the urge to push Andy behind him, both to stop him from antagonizing the murderous woman in front of them, and to protect his already injured little brother. But Andy was safer in his peripheral. They didn't know where Daggett had

gone, but Sam doubted the ghost would be gone for long. He didn't want to risk putting Andy at his back, only for the ghost to appear behind them.

Ava was blocking the only way out. Which meant they were going to have to go through her. Unless Sam could get *through* to her.

"What happened to you, Ava?" he started, keeping his hand on Andy's wrist, lowering his arm. Half of his intention was to keep Andy from signing, the other half to keep him back.

Ava stared at Sam, the man who'd told her exactly where she'd end up and had been right. After a moment, she looked away with a little sniff. She raised the hand holding the bloody knife, using the back of her fist to swipe beneath her nose. There was something so very dead in her eyes and in the smile she sent their way.

"Had you going, didn't I?" She laughed, and it was a broken sound that Sam's heart ached for. "Yeah… I've been here a long time, Sam. And not alone, either. People just keep showing up. Kids like us, batches of three or four at a time."

Sam's heart fell at the confirmation of what he'd already known. How? How could this sweet, caring woman have become a monster? "You killed them? All of them?"

Ava offered a winning grin, but it was dark. Wrong. All teeth and no actual enjoyment. "I'm the undefeated heavyweight champ."

Andy moved beside him and Sam held him back. He knew Andy's history with losing people to this Battle Royale bullshit. Sam knew how much it hurt him to be confronted by another version of the evil that Azazel cultivated in his special children. Another Jonathan, who'd killed others without care. Without any respect to the lives they had, the souls he'd destroyed. Just to win.

Sam squeezed his wrist and Andy relented, but he was seething beside the younger Winchester. Sam couldn't blame him.

"How could you?" he asked, voice soft and broken in its own way. He was mourning the loss of the woman who had come to a stranger's hotel room in the middle of the night just to save his life.

"I had no choice," she spat back, crossing her arms defensively over her chest. "It was me or them. You or me."

"It doesn't have to be," Sam bit back almost before the words were out of her mouth.

Ava just tilted her head back and laughed. When she lowered her gaze to them once more, there was nothing in her eyes that could be called human. "Oh, you haven't been here long enough, Sam. But you'll learn. Or not."

She loosened her arms with a one-shouldered shrug, raising the knife as a reminder of what was coming. Ava wasn't going to let them leave this room alive, and Sam didn't know how much longer he could stall her.

"Ava, my brother is on his way," he tried, words taking on a desperate edge. "Please, we can *all* leave here, alive. You can go home."

"Home?" she echoed with disbelief, then scoffed. Her next words were shouted. Practically shrieked. "My home was Brady! Don't you get it, Sam? All of this- I did *all of this*, so that I could go *home*. And you come here, after *months* of this fucking *hell*, and you tell me I can never go home again. Brady's gone."

Sam's eyes widened, realizing with a sinking feeling in his gut, that there was no stalling Ava. There was no talking her down, no saving her. She was gone. She'd died the same night her fiancé had, they just hadn't known it.

"He's dead," Ava bit out. There were tears in her eyes, but those once doey pools were empty of any other sign of life. She started towards them. "There's no point fighting it anymore."

Sam took a step back, stumbling slightly on the mess of spilled objects on the floor. He pulled Andy with him, keeping his surrogate little brother behind him as much as possible. He knew they were in trouble. Trapped, weaponless. He could likely take Ava in a fight, but every instinct was screaming that it wouldn't be that simple.

"Fighting what?"

She sniffed again, offering a weak and watery smile. "What we are, Sam."

The hunter stiffened at the words. Too reminiscent of Azazel's. With trepidation matching anger, he growled out, "And what are we, Ava?"

She laughed and a shiver slithered its way down his spine. Ava

lowered her head, looking up at him through lashes that had once been the picture of innocence and fragility. Now her face was one of promised blood and pain. "Powerful."

Andy jumped as the bookcase to his right suddenly up-righted itself and slammed back into place, blocking the bunker Sam had slowly been backing them into. His head snapped back to Ava, eyes wide. She was telekinetic. Andy used his other hand to grab onto Sam's wrist, the one gripping his own.

Oh, they were so screwed.

"The learning curve is so fast, it's crazy," Ava said with a laugh that was nothing short of maniacal. Sam swallowed roughly, realizing what his body had been trying to tell him. Ava wasn't just armed, she was *dangerous*. Really dangerous. She shook her head, still advancing towards them, knife catching the light with the same murderous intent as her eyes. "The switches that just flip in your brain. I can't believe I started out just having dreams. Do you know what I can do now?"

Sam took another step back, pushing Andy behind him now that there was nowhere to go. "You can control ghosts."

Andy's head whipped his way, mouth dropping open, but Sam didn't have time to explain.

Ava huffed something that could be a laugh, surprisingly callous in its nonchalance. "I shouldn't be surprised you figured it out."

She raised her hands to her head, knife still fisted in her right. Her eyes narrowed in concentration, brow furling, and Sam knew what came next.

Daggett.

"Sorry about this, Sam, but it's over."

Without waiting around to be proven right, Sam charged. He tackled Ava around the waist, taking both of them to the ground before the much smaller woman could react to his sudden movement. They hit the floor hard, a plume of dust billowing up around them from the old cement floor, particles catching in the flashes of Jake's cell phone, still gripped in Sam's hand.

Ava released a scream of frustration, trying to stab him with the knife he had given her to keep her safe. To keep her alive, should the worst

happen.

Well, it did happen. And she had kept herself alive.

Sam cried out in pain, having managed to block a much more serious hit to his side with his arm, but that meant taking a knife to the bicep. It wasn't great, but it wasn't fatal, either. His arm was on fire – a warning of torn muscles that wouldn't respond should he use his dominant hand – but he'd live.

Taking advantage of the fact that her weapon was currently buried hilt-deep in his arm, Sam rolled to the left, off of Ava, twisting his arm as he did it. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but it ripped the hilt of the blade free from her grip, and Sam wrapped his left hand around it, pulling it free of muscle and skin, as he rolled across the floor and away from his now unarmed opponent.

The only problem was that Ava, at least this new version of her, was never unarmed.

Her hands pressed against her temples, eyes squinting in concentration, and Sam braced himself for the return of Daggett. He didn't have any iron on him, he realized belatedly, having lost it when the ghost first took him. Sam went to charge, hoping to interrupt her summoning before she could complete it, when every muscle in his body seized up, rendering him immobile. The knife clattered to the ground beside him.

"*Stop!*"

That was Andy! Sam's eyes darted to the side when he found he couldn't turn his head. The boy was standing a few feet in front of the righted bookcase, hand held out in front of him, fingers splayed and entire arm shaking with effort. His eyes were locked on Ava, and Sam followed that gaze to find that she, too, had been rendered frozen. Hazel-brown eyes widened as he realized Andy was controlling them both in his efforts to stop her.

Ava glared furiously at the other psychic holding her captive. Her own hands shook where they strained to remain against her temples and blood began to drip from her nose as she fought his powers with her own, determined to summon the Morton House ghost despite this interloper. She was stronger than him. She knew it.

Her eyes slipped fully closed, and Sam's heart leapt with fear.

"Andy!" he yelled, struggling against his friend's powers if only to save him. But there was a shift in the air and Sam knew, knew with terror in his heart, that he couldn't.

Andy made a choking noise and suddenly Sam was released, staggering forward. He righted himself in time to see Daggett behind his little brother, knife in hand, buried high in Andy's back.

"No!" The scream tore from his throat and Sam ran. "Andy!"

The kid turned, half staggering, and swiped weakly with his other arm – the one still clutching the iron rod – right through the ghost. Daggett disappeared with a flicker and a rageful cry and Andy fell to his hands and knees, trying to reach over his shoulder and free the knife from his back. He fell onto his side before he managed it.

Sam was feet from him when a force tore him off his feet and he soared through the air only to slam into a wall and crumple to the floor. Ava had tossed him, he realized with a groan as he scrambled back to his feet, and she'd made a run for the knife.

His eyes locked on Andy's limp form, blood pooling beneath him, and Sam realized with a trill of terror that if he wanted to save him, he had to end this *now*.

But he was outmatched. Ava was fighting with weapons Sam didn't have a defense against. He and Andy would lose this fight if he didn't figure something out.

'*I need demon blood*.'

The errant thought was not new, and Sam slammed his eyes shut against it.

'*No*,' he repeated firmly to himself, fisting his hands on the cold cement beneath him before pushing himself back to his feet. '*I said no, and I meant it*.'

It's not like Ava needed demon blood to kick his ass, he thought bitterly. But that thought brought him up short, and Sam straightened as the truth of that hit him. Ava *didn't* need demon blood. Neither did Andy. Both of them had far surpassed their original abilities, and certainly Sam's, without the crutch that Sam had been so reliant on.

His eyes widened, possibility flooding his brain.

'*The learning curve is so fast.*' Ava's words echoed in his head as Sam turned away from Andy and to the woman standing in his way of saving his brother. '*Stop fighting what you are.*'

"And what am I?" he whispered just under his breath as the woman he had once thought of as a friend and an innocent, turned to him. The smile in the corner of her mouth was inhuman. She raised the knife, soaked to the hilt in blood.

'*Powerful.*'

Sam remembered the Baku, writhing in pain beneath his mental hand. Dripping blackness from its once-pure soul. Like Max Miller had, as Sam had tried to tear that darkness from the boy. He remembered the car he'd crushed into nothing more than a wrecking ball on the side of a road outside Sioux Falls. And the gun he'd emptied into Azazel in that cabin in Michigan. He'd had another brother dying in his arms that night.

Closing his eyes, Sam lifted his hand and splayed his fingers wide, feeling the air - the temperature, the flow, the *fill* of it all – in the room and looking for more. He didn't need demon blood to access what had always been in him. That crawl beneath his skin that had always been there. Always set him apart, made him different, made it so he didn't *belong*.

'*Demon blood don't add to you*,' Azazel had said. He'd meant it to break Sam's resolve, but the boy used it now for strength. For a power he'd always had. '*It only brings out more of what's already in there.*'

Sam opened his eyes and saw a very different world around him.

The same darkness that had slid and dripped from the Baku, from Max Miller, was wrapped tightly around Ava's soul. It writhed and pulsed and squirmed about her center, clutching tight to what had once been the woman. Sam could see it for what it was: protection. That blackness had curled around a once pure light, covering and coveting, and now it clung to her with such possessiveness that there was no breaking through. There was no freeing her from what she had become.

Ava had turned to that darkness to protect herself and now it would never let her go.

Sam reached out with his mind, grabbed onto that darkness, and threw it to the side. Ava went flying through the air with a screech,

hitting the floor and rolling several times from the force of his toss. Sam did not waste time, running straight to Andy, who had yet to move.

"Andy!" he gasped as he reached the boy's side, gently easing him up and into his lap, mindful of the blade still sticking out of his back, just below his shoulder blade. Shit, there was no way it hadn't pierced his lungs. Sam hesitated to pull it out for fear that Andy would bleed to death before he could get him help.

A hand, weak and bloody, wrapped around his, and Sam's gaze shifted to his friend's face. Andy gave him a weak smile, and that hand over his formed a loose thumbs up. Sam huffed a laugh, but he could feel the tears already building.

"You're going to be okay," he whispered, glancing around the room for anything he could use against the wound. Ava was staggering to her feet on the other side of the room. Sam would have to deal with her again shortly. She was already preparing another ghost summoning, trembling hands rising towards her head.

But in his arms, Andy was shaking his. His left arm wouldn't move properly – probably due to the whole being stabbed thing (*again*) – so he gave up Signing and mouthed, "*It's no good, Sam."*

"No, no, you're going to be fine," the younger Winchester insisted, shaking his head. But Andy knew what death felt like. It had never come with the wet rattle in his lungs before, but the rest of it was all the same: cold, numbness, acceptance. Sam, however, was still shaking his head. "I'm going to get you out of here."

Like he'd promised he would.

"*It's okay*," Andy mouthed again, lips stained with flecks of blood that confirmed a punctured lung. He raised his trembling hand to grip Sam's again. "*Get out of here. I got this."*

Sam started at the voice, loud and clear, that filled his head. The words were confident – resigned even – and tinged with an edge of black humor that could only ever be Andy Gallagher. Those blood-stained fingers curled against his own, turning Sam's hand over to deposit something in his hand.

"*Run, Sam."*

Sam stared down in unseeing confusion at the bloodied Persian sleep

coin pressed to his palm. His gaze snapped back to his fatally wounded friend, but Andy had closed his eyes, hand now limp by his side. The only sign that he still had life in him was the furl of concentration sharp across his blood-smeared brow.

Sam's head whipped up in shock as Ava suddenly screamed. Dagget, who had just reappeared in the room with them, flickered and staggered, as if he too could feel the psychic attack. And then he was gone and Ava was on her knees, clutching her head like it was going to explode and her fingers alone might keep it together.

With the surprising realization that it was *Andy* attacking her, and the coin in his hand protected him from that attack, Sam hastily set his injured friend back onto the floor, keeping him on his side so as not to jostle the knife still sticking out of his back. He pulled his arms out of his flannel shirt as quickly as he could, practically ripping the fabric off his lanky frame.

He had to stabilize that knife before he could move Andy.

Keeping his eyes locked on the struggling, screaming Ava, Sam hoisted his friend back upright so he could wrap the flannel around Andy's torso, under one arm and over the other shoulder. He crossed the arms of the shirt over the kid's chest, then fed them over and under his arms once more to the back. He tied the sleeves together, pulling as tight as he could. The boy in his arms grunted, brow furling as Sam pulled back to check on him, but he couldn't afford to be more careful. Leaning over Andy's shoulder, his head pressed to the boy's, Sam checked that the hilt of the knife stuck out between the two strips of flannel – edges already staining red – was braced, as much as could be, by the tightly crossed fabric.

God, that wasn't going to be good enough, but Sam was out of time and options.

Scooping his dying friend into his arms, one arm under his knees, the other low on his back and pressing Andy into his chest, Sam clambered to his feet. Ava wasn't screaming anymore, her voice having died out. But she was still on the ground, writhing in pain and clutching at her head. Sam had to risk moving past her, running and praying Andy would hold on, his attack lasted, and Ava stayed down.

The boy in his arms needed medical attention immediately, which meant he was the priority. If Ava died under Andy's assault, the doors would unlock, and Sam could get his friend to a hospital. Sam wished

he could take the stairs two at a time – his legs were certainly long enough – but with the weight of Andy in his arms and that knife very much on his mind, he couldn't risk it. Balancing speed with care was slowing him down, and Sam wasn't sure which was more important at this point.

He had just made it to the top stair when the door to the basement slammed shut in his face. Sam almost toppled backwards down the stairs as he reared back to keep Andy – and his own face – from getting hit.

"Where are you going, Sam?" Ava called from below, and he turned on the top step to find her at the base of the stairs. There was blood running down her nose – smeared all over her lips and chin – her hair was a frantic mess, and the look in her wide, unblinking eyes was crazed.

Sam tightened his hold on Andy, glancing down only to find him unconscious in his arms. The hunter's hands dug into the boy, pulling him close to his body, desperate for any sign of life and terrified he wouldn't find one. Andy's head lolled, limp and heavy, into his neck and Sam's own breath caught in his throat. He should have felt Andy's breath against his skin, and he didn't.

"You can't leave," Ava continued, setting a foot onto the first step but going no further. "The house is still on lockdown. It will be, as long as there's still two of us."

Hazel eyes slid shut at her words. She had no way of knowing if it was two or three, but the words still dug their barbs deep into his heart. Andy had stopped breathing, he was sure of it.

Sam tightened his hold on the boy who had become a brother to him, and turned fully to face Ava. He was prepared to fight her, probably kill her, when his eyes shifted at movement behind her. His forehead smoothed out, and he took a steadying, deep breath.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem for much longer."

Ava's once beautiful eyes narrowed at first, then widened as she sensed what Sam could clearly see. The psychic spun only to find Freeman Daggett directly behind her. And by the look on his face, he had not enjoyed being controlled.

She tumbled onto the stairs as she tried to back up. He towered over her, reaching out to grip her shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said. "This won't hurt for long."

Ava screamed just before the two disappeared together.

Sam turned and shouldered the basement door open. It gave easily. He could still hear Ava screaming, further away now and muffled by a wall and bookcase. Sam kept going and didn't look back.

The front door unlocked with a loud, echoing click as Sam approached it. He didn't bother with the knob. The door slammed open with a resounding kick, frame splintering and glass shattering. It bounced off the wall with a loud crack, the top hinge snapping off with a screech of rusted metal tearing. The younger Winchester left the Morton House and stepped into the fresh, frigid outside air, Andy tucked in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: I'm sooooooooooo sorry, please don't murder me. This one was real hard; even the no good dirty rotten author doesn't want to take credit for it.

Yell at me in the comments; I could use it. I haven't written in weeks and I honestly think this chapter is the cause. I was **fine**. I was fine, and I did fine, and I knew it had to happen, and I was okay with it happening. And then I realized I had to post it and suddenly I was not so fine. Cue epic procrastination. So line up the-all caps reviews, please. The muse needs to be yelled at: it's her fuel. That and incoherent keyboard strokes.

Nom-nom-nom

(I'm sooooo sorry, please don't kill us. We could really use the reassurance we didn't lose you all by being no-good-dirty-rotten authors)

Chapter 131: Season 2: Chapter 97

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: What's this? A **weekly** update? No, you're not hallucinating, it's real, but don't get tooo excited, because I think the schedule will have to go back to two weeks soon enough. However, I didn't feel it fair to leave you on such an awful cliffhanger for any longer than absolutely necessary.

Unfortuantely, you all are going to continue not to like me (though, on that note, thank you very much for all the comments about Andy, even if the all caps was suspiciously absent)

Chapter Warnings: Sam's been crowned Queen of the Pageant, Bobby's talking sense into a pessimistic Dean, Cas is getting on Gabe's last nerves, and Sarge is a damn good boy

Actual Chapter Warnings: I'm not done hurting people yet…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 97

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Until Sam Winchester stepped outside of the Morton House, Castiel had not dared look away from the television screen playing out events like a television show. The distraction (compulsion, she would go so far as to admit, though not without vexation) may have set her back in terms of escape, but it could not be helped. Castiel had found she could not turn away – even to break free – for fear that when she looked again, Sam Winchester would be dead.

Once Sam emerged from the house alive – Andy Gallager's soul following behind, a Reaper by his side – Castiel finally allowed her eyes to close and her focus to turn inwards. The progress on convincing Gabriel's grace to release her had been slow-going without direct attention. Nothing more than murmurs of how her freedom would aid in its goal.

Now she could focus her full attention on convincing it to free her of the restraints. The grace had been primed by her whispers, at least, and should now, in theory, listen to Castiel as she turned suggestion into direction. All that was left was to direct it to release her.

If the attempt was successful, she would have to move fast. Her escape would not go unnoticed for long. She would only have one chance to reach Sam and get him to safety before Gabriel undoubtedly caught up.

-o-o-o-

From the cemetery, they entered Wisconsin from the south around an enormous lake. Had Persephone not utilized the map on Chuck's phone, she most certainly would have mistaken the unending body of water for an ocean.

(Considering how much the Winchesters traveled and that, at least for the time being she was supposed to keep an eye on them, Persephone supposed it was past time she learned the geography of the country they spent so much time criss-crossing.)

From there, they drove north another two hours, cutting west, away from Lake Michigan. The homes and businesses around them started to thin out, replaced with woods that thickened as they ventured further inlaid. Tom started taking turns onto smaller and smaller roads, driving deeper into the forest until finally they were bumping along rough asphalt that had not been maintained in decades. There were few houses on the road and even fewer turnoffs. Tom finally took one, turning onto a road in worse shape than its predecessor. It followed a bend along the edge of the woods for fifty or so feet before crossing in front of an old, abandoned house that had been fenced off from the public.

Tom put the car into park in the middle of the road, about two dozen feet away from the house but with a clear view of the front porch. He waggled his eyebrows at his passenger, who remained unimpressed. "Here we are, Princess."

Persephone glanced around them, perhaps a little out of curiosity but largely for show. She raised her eyebrows right back at her captor. "How impressive, demon. You've brought us to nowhere."

Tom chuckled and pulled the keys out of the engine. He pointedly turned his eye to the dark, motionless house beyond like he was expecting something to happen. Persephone hated to play along with

his stupid game, but ended up matching his gaze nevertheless.

Her patience did not last long. "Are we waiting for any particular reason-"

"There he is," Tom interrupted and Persephone looked back to the house in time to see Sam Winchester exiting the front door, a body in his arms. "Right on schedule. Azazel knew he'd be the winner. Sam's his favorite, you know."

She stiffened, brow furling. Sam was supposed to be with his brother, searching for the missing psychic, Ava Wilson. Persephone knew it, because Chuck had written it and she had read it earlier that day. How had Sam ended up in an abandoned house in Appleton, Wisconsin? Clearly without his brother, as the hunter was alone. Aside from the smaller body in his arms, which was definitely not Dean Winchester.

And what, exactly, had Sam won?

"Showtime," Tom announced, looking at her with a grin that Persephone found unsettling. He twisted his hand midair, gold chain appearing in his fingers. The demon quickly fused it to the steering wheel, ensuring Persephone would stay in the car. "Be right back!"

She pulled at the chain with a feral snarl, but Tom was already climbing out of the car. Her eyes locked onto his back, where the Colt was visibly tucked into the waistline of his pants. Persephone's hand clenched into a fist at her side.

Tom shut the door and bounded off towards the house, where Sam Winchester was descending the front steps. Persephone was stuck sitting in the passenger side of the car, watching through the windshield as Azazel's hellspawn approached the younger Winchester.

-o-o-o-

Dean was definitely taking the worsening roads at faster speeds than were safe – or good for Baby – but he refused to slow down. His knuckles had been white around her wheel for half an hour now. The joints in his fingers hurt (at this point he wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to release the wheel when they finally got to the Morton House) but the pain was distracting, and he needed to be distracted.

This wasn't happening. It wasn't. He had two fucking years to *fix* this, and yet here they were. Him and Bobby speeding off towards

another Cold Oak, Sam's fate unknown. Dean shuttered his eyes against the memory of how it had ended and the accompanying terror that came from knowing it was all more than likely about to happen again.

Sam dying in his arms, Dean too late to do anything to stop it.

The shrill ringing of a phone made Dean jump, car jerking to the side. He fumbled for his cell, which was somewhere on the seat next to him, along with a map of Wisconsin, Sam's phone, and a handgun loaded with demon-trapping bullets. When he finally got his hands on the right cell, Dean flipped the thing open without glancing at the screen.

"What?" he barked, letting out some of that anger that had no other outlet than the road churning under Baby's wheels.

"What's the plan?"

Dean closed his eyes briefly against Bobby's steady voice. His headlights had been a constant reassurance in the rear-view mirror, even if Dean would never admit it aloud. But that didn't mean he wanted to talk to the older hunter at the moment.

"Save Sam."

Bobby's snort immediately told him he wasn't getting away with that. "Yeah, I figured as much. Was hoping for a little more detail, though."

The man from the future growled, using the back of the hand holding his cell to scrub at his tired, aching eyes. "Come on, Bobby. What do you want from me?"

"What do I want?" the old hunter barked back, irritation growing in his voice. He'd never been one for pity parties. "I want you to start acting like we got a chance to save your brother!"

Dean had to lower the phone to keep from swearing into Bobby's ear. He was half tempted to send the thing through the windshield instead. The old man was right, of course. He usually was. Dean was already thinking like they'd lost. The problem was, he was pretty sure they had.

Time was a bitch, one that apparently hated the Winchesters, and he had no defense against that. No weapon that could take on *time* when

it was damn set on repeating itself.

“And if we can’t?” Dean asked when he finally brought the phone back to his ear. His chest was aching fiercely and for the first time in a while he couldn’t tell if it was him or Cas doing it. Dean kept his eyes on the road, stubbornly ignoring the fact that his vision was growing blurry.

There was an angry silence on the other end of the phone, and the time traveling hunter was pretty sure he’d crossed a line. Wouldn’t be the first time (or the last). “You wanna find that out yerself, or should we just give up right now, you *idjit* ?”

Well, that one certainly hadn’t been meant as a term of endearment.

“I’m here, ain’t I?” Dean barked back, pushing down on the gas a little more, like he was trying to prove something to Bobby that he’d already disproven to himself. He swiped angrily at his eyes, refusing to acknowledge the water gathering there.

“Are you? Cuz you sure as shit aren’t acting like it.”

Dean glared into the rear-view mirror and the headlights there, blood rising. “God damnit, Bobby, back off! I’m trying.”

“Well try harder!” his surrogate father roared into the phone. “Now. What’s the damn plan, Dean?”

Green eyes shut against his surrogate father’s anger, which Dean knew wasn’t undeserved. The problem was, he didn’t *have* a plan. He’d had two years to come up with one, and so far everything he’d tried had failed spectacularly, because *here they were* .

“I don’t know, Bobby,” Dean croaked, finally letting that despair overwhelm his anger. His fear. He felt deflated, like a leaking balloon, tired to the bone. “I don’t know how to save him.”

“Start by acting like he ain’t dead yet.” The older hunter wasn’t yelling anymore, though he wasn’t exactly pulling punches yet, either. “Yer brother’s got more information than he did last time and you know he won’t take anything lying down. So you don’t either, you hear me?”

That was true, Dean reasoned, sniffing. Sam was going to fight tooth and nail to get out of this, to get back to his family. He was doing his baby brother a serious disservice thinking that didn’t mean a damn

thing. Dean struck the steering wheel with his palm, mentally berating himself for letting the tidal wave of emotion pull him under.

"Yeah. Yeah, alright. I hear you." He used the back of his hand to wipe at his face again, this time swiping beneath his nose. He shoved back the despair, the waterworks, and all the shit he'd deal with later. After they saved Sam. "So… then, uh, Sam saves himself and we're the getaway car."

Bobby huffed down the line. Not exactly a stellar plan, but at least the kid was back with him.

"This is the Morton House, boy," the hunter barked, though there was little bite to it this time. "It ain't gonna be that easy and you know it. So talk. What do you know about the place?"

Dean made a strangled noise into the phone, recalling the hunt he'd dragged Sammy into back when he was so certain he was dead that he'd started courting Death every chance he got. But Bobby was right (again). Dean knew that house and all its haunts, which meant that just like they would have had at Cold Oak, they had an advantage to press here, too.

So, with no shortness of testiness (but maybe also a little grateful for the distraction), Dean started talking through everything he knew about the house and all the ghosts they were very rapidly approaching.

-o-o-o-

Coming out of the dark house, Sam was momentarily disoriented by the world outside, quiet and serene, free from the blood and horrors behind him. It was night, but the almost full moon meant there was more light than had been inside. Sam pulled Andy's body tighter to his chest.

The boy hadn't been breathing for at least four minutes now and Sam could feel blood soaking through to the forearm that supported Andy's torso. His hands curled into fists around his surrogate little brother, now certain that Andy was gone. Even if he could resuscitate him, the Morton House was twenty miles from the nearest hospital.

He wasn't leaving him, though, no matter what. Sam adjusted the body in his arms and started down the front steps of the abandoned property.

The hunter drew up short as he reached the bottom only to find an unfamiliar man waiting for him a dozen feet away. He was leaning against the open gate of the chain-link fence that surrounded the property, muscular arms crossed over a bulky chest covered in a cheesy black turtleneck. His face stretched into a grin of too-white teeth and his eyes slipped black as he stepped forward.

Sam's grip tightened around Andy protectively, but there was nowhere he could back away to. The hunter stood his ground.

"Sam Winchester," the demon announced, his smile widening. All Sam saw was teeth and danger. The hell spawn spread his arms out wide. "Congratulations. You won."

"Won what?" the hunter snarled, deciding then and there that he wasn't going to stand and listen to this demon – no doubt Azazel's stand-in – who was responsible for the death of the man in his arms, along with all the innocent kids in the house. Sam pushed onward, crossing the overgrown yard that stood between him and the demon, pointedly ignoring him. He kept his eyes forward.

"Azazel's final elimination round, of course. Hell's own Miss America Pageant. And you walked out with the crown!" The demon fell in line beside him as he walked, like they were buddies discussing last night's game. Sam tightened his grip on Andy, arms practically shaking with rage, but he kept moving. There was a road beyond the chain-link fence and roads led to civilization.

"You know, you were always Dad's favorite," the demon continued conversationally, confirming himself as one of Azazel's children. Well, his demon children, at least. Meg had been one, Sam recalled, loathe now to know there were more just like her. He started walking a little faster, but his pick-up in pace was effortlessly matched. "He was still rooting for you, even after you sent him to Hell."

"I don't care," Sam growled out before biting his tongue. He started a mantra in his head, repeating over and over again that he would not engage with this demon. He was getting Andy out of there; that was his priority.

When he got to the road Sam glanced both ways, spotting a vehicle on the asphalt a couple dozen feet away. The hunter turned and headed for it without much deliberation. He could hotwire it, so long as the engine still worked. If it had been sitting out in the elements, unused for too much time, it likely wouldn't start. Although, strangely

enough, the vehicle didn't look like it had been there all that long.

Maybe the demon had driven here, in which case Sam would be exorcizing him and then stealing his (probably stolen) car.

"Oh, but you should," the annoying demon answered what had most definitely been a rhetorical comment, still following alongside the hunter. From the corner of his eye, Sam finally realized what about the man's wide smile bothered him. It didn't match his words, which were congratulatory. But his grin was predatory in a way that raised the hair on the back of Sam's neck. Unlike the majority of demons he'd dealt with so far, this one wasn't very good at subterfuge. He couldn't hide the intention in that grin. Sam looked away, but vowed to keep the demon in his peripheral from that point on. "He has plans for you, Sammy. Big plans."

"It's Sam."

There was an odd echo as he said it that caused both men to pause. Sam looked around, wondering if he'd misheard someone calling his name. Maybe someone else had survived?

The hunter hastily spun, eyes tracing the silhouette of the Morton House, backlit by the full moon. But there was no one in the dark night but hunter and demon, and the noise did not repeat. The road was empty, the woods around them quiet.

Beside him, the hell spawn was looking around as well, so Sam at least knew he wasn't crazy (not that confirmation via demon was exactly reassuring). But eventually those black eyes came back to him, eyebrows up and expression far too close to a *'you heard it too, huh?'* form of comradery for Sam's comfort. The hunter turned sharply away and resumed his march for that car.

"As I was saying…" the stupid demon picked right back up where he'd left off, both verbally and physically. Sam's teeth ached under the pressure of his grinding jaw. But he couldn't talk back through clenched teeth, now could he? "Big plans, Sammy. And you're at the center of them all."

When he got within a dozen feet of the car, Sam hesitated at a shadow in the passenger seat, which was starting to take shape. It looked like there was someone in the vehicle, which immediately set off warning bells, but it was too dark to be sure. The hunter slowed, uncertain of his next move.

Before he could decide what to do (was the person friendly? Somehow, out here in the middle of nowhere, parked next to a haunted-house-murder-pageant, Sam doubted it) a set of headlights came around the bend behind the parked car, heading their way. Sam's eyes snapped to the approaching car. It was coming down the road, fast. The hunter couldn't really see much past the twin lights, but he could hear the rumble of a familiar engine, and immediately knew who was driving.

Relief flooded him enough that his knees very nearly gave out beneath him.

Brakes squealed, the vehicle screaming to a halt behind the parked car. He heard the door fly open.

"Sam!"

-o-o-o-

The moment her bonds were released – that foreign grace in her core successfully reaching out to them with annulling intent – there was a single, drawn-in breath of freedom as Castiel's grace flooded her body. She was free from the confines of the chair and her brother's grace.

Castiel launched herself from the chair and straight into the ether.

She had the address of the haunted house, courtesy of Gabriel's television show. She had seen Andy Gallagher find the envelope addressed to Freeman Daggett and memorized the words listed below the home-owner's name.

The angel touched down just outside the house, only to stumble as prayer after prayer hit her in quick succession. With her grace bound, any human entreatments had not reached her during captivity. And Dean had been praying *a lot* .

'Cas, I know Gabriel's got you but, damnit, Sam's missing.'

'Cas, they've taken him. We need you.'

'Cas, damnit, I know you can't get here, but I… fuck, I don't know what to do!'

'Cas, please. I-I…. We need you. God, we need you, Cas. Damnit!'

The onslaught of desperation and begging coming from a man who rarely displayed either was overwhelming. It took Castiel precious seconds to gather herself.

She turned in a circle once she realized Sam was no longer on the front steps. Her focus had been turned inward to free herself, which had taken an unknown amount of time. Though, Castiel doubted it had been more than a few minutes. The stretch of wild lawn was empty, but humans traveled. Sam was unlikely to remain in the vicinity now that he was free.

The angel started across the lawn, heading for the fence and road beyond. Roads led to people, so that was the best and most logical course of action for Sam to take. All Castiel had to do was catch up to the young human and send him away from this place. Preferably to Bobby Singer's, but any location would do, so long as he was hidden from Heaven, Hell, and Gabriel.

As she got to the edge of the asphalt, a recognizable figure became visible down the road, walking away from her. Sam. Hope flooded her, but there was a second figure standing at his side: shorter, bulkier, and in no way Dean. Even from so far away, the angel could sense the hell rot that curled around the man.

Castiel's gut clenched with fear and she spread her wings, preparing to launch towards what was surely a demon at Sam Winchester's side.

A weight slammed into her from the side, tackling her back onto the Morton property and into the lawn of overgrown grass and wild bushes.

-o-o-o-

"Dean!" Sam cried out, immediately shifting Andy in his arms and taking another hasty step forward.

He stumbled towards his brother, eyes wide in relief and disbelief. He was pretty sure his whole body was shaking. It sure felt like it was. He could just barely make out a familiar silhouette behind the lights, now backlit by a second set of approaching lights that came to a stop behind the first. That car had an older engine and a heavier tire tread that ate up the rough asphalt: a truck, then, which meant Bobby.

"Right on time," Sam heard the demon breathe out and immediately tensed. The creature was no longer by his side but very much behind his unprotected back. Those hairs on Sam's neck which had been

previously protesting in a mild manner were now screaming not-good things. "Sorry about this, Sammy-boy."

The younger Winchester started to turn, to back away, to put more distance between him and the demon, and less distance between him and his brother. "I told you, it's Sam-"

The demon moved, wrapping an arm around the hunter with the speed of a snake strike. Sam saw too late the glint of metal in that hand. Pain exploded across his back, then again and again, as the demon stabbed him in the back multiple times. Something crunched deep in his spine and Sam's legs gave out beneath him.

"You brother's gotta pay his entry fee."

He hit the uneven payment in a way that should have hurt. That did hurt, but distantly, because it was nothing compared to the fire in his back. There was a dog barking in the distance. Someone screamed his name. But Sam couldn't put the two together into anything that made sense. He couldn't breathe. Or maybe that was the fluid filling his lungs. Blood, his brain supplied unhappily.

He couldn't keep his grip on Andy and the kid's body rolled onto the ground, Sam collapsed forward onto his hands and knees. He grabbed at his surrogate brother's body, managing a shaky fistful of t-shirt. He tried to pull Andy's body closer, underneath him where it would be safe, but Sam's muscles only quivered in response. After several attempts, he had to stop trying, realizing it was as futile as his continued breathing. But he refused to release the grip he had on the kid.

There was blood spreading across his back; he could feel it rolling down his sides.

Oh god, it was happening. After everything he'd done to survive it, Sam was dying. He'd failed Andy, Jake and Ava too, and now he was about to fail Dean.

Oh god, *Dean* .

"Sam!"

That was his brother's voice. It was far away, which was really unfortunate. Sam didn't think Dean would make it in time. His vision was growing dark around the edges and each time he blinked, it took longer and longer to open his eyes again. The demon was still above

him, wiping a sharp, curved blade off on a rag. Wiping Sam's blood off on that rag.

He offered that same smile and Sam choked on a mouthful of hot, thick liquid that spilled past his lips. Definitely a punctured lung. Sometimes (more often than not, really), Sam really hated being right.

When he looked back up, the demon was gone. There was a dog (a German Shepherd. Bobby had a German Shepherd, didn't he?) next to him now, and Sam wasn't sure when it had gotten there. The dog's hackles were up and it was barking and snapping ferociously at the place the demon had been.

Sam wasn't sure if the bastard had disappeared or he'd just lost time. The dog didn't make much sense, either. Maybe he was starting to hallucinate.

The younger Winchester tilted forward, forehead coming to rest on Andy's motionless chest. He was finding it harder to support his own weight. The rough cement bit into the palm of his left hand and he couldn't feel Andy's shirt in his right anymore. He rubbed the fabric between his fingertips, trying to chase away the numbness. Thinking was becoming difficult. Breathing even more so. As well as strangely… metallic?

Ah. The blood filling his lungs. That made sense.

"No! Sam!"

He could hear Dean's pounding feet now, his voice so much closer. But his brother was still too far away. Sam knew he wouldn't make it.

"Sammy!"

-o-o-o-

Castiel had immediately tried to roll out from under her attacker, but Gabriel scrambled onto her back, pinning her arms. Bracelets of light formed beneath his wrists, trapping her grace instantaneously.

She raised her head and yelled as loudly as her human vessel was capable, "Sam!"

"Are you friggin' kidding me?" Gabriel hissed above her, releasing one

of those wrists to slap a hand over her mouth. Castiel continued to yell, but her efforts were significantly muffled. "Oh, you are *so* going back in the closet!"

A flare of light and a familiar rumble down the road drew both angels' attention. Cars meant people. That car in particular meant *Dean* .

Castiel tried to launch herself into the ether again, knowing it would be futile. She rebounded back into her vessel like a ball bouncing off a wall, momentarily knocked dizzy by the attempt. Gabriel was cursing once more when she regained her faculties.

"What is *wrong* with you?" he muttered, furious, as he managed to grab both wrists in one hand, the other keeping her from announcing their presence. "This is written in *stone* , Castiel. It *has* to happen."

Through the grass, she could just make out the two figures, silhouetted by the lights of two cars. Which meant she saw when the taller of the two – Sam – fell to his knees.

"No!" Her grace screamed past her brother's hands and the windows of the house behind them cracked from the force of an angel's true voice. She struggled anew, this time entirely with her human body, weak as such a vessel may be, when another prayer came through angel radio.

This was not an old entreaty, stored until she reconnected to the ether. This was live. Dean was praying to her right now.

'Cas. Cas, I… I found him. He's dying. Sam's dying, he's been stabbed, and I don't- God, I don't know what to do. Please, Cas. I-I don't… We need a miracle, damnit. We- we need.. we need you, Cas. **I** *need you.'*

The angel was momentarily confused to return to the physical world only to find it blurry. She did not understand why Angela Garrett's vessel was crying, but she suspected it was an automatic response to the tightness in her gut. The compression in her chest that ached fiercely. The knowledge that Sam Winchester was dying and Dean needed her.

Dean *needed* her. Cas had never heard the human so broken. She *had* to get to him. He needed her to.

'I'm sorry, Cas.'

There was something in that last prayer – defeat, resignation, an

apology she didn't understand – that told the angel to get to him. Castiel knew - she *knew* - that she had to get to Dean Winchester *now* .

She gathered all of the bound grace she could and released it in a desperate, explosive scream.

-o-o-o-

Dean ran past the parked car, uncaring where the demon had blinked off to. He only had eyes for his brother as Sam hit the ground. Dean slid to his knees in a way he knew he would be feeling later, but right then he didn't care.

Sam was sprawled stomach-down over Andy's motionless body on the broken-up asphalt, Bobby's dog barking and snapping beside them both. Sam's back was a Jackson Pollock of blood splashed across a canvas of white undershirt, so dark in the moon-lit night it was more black than red. The older Winchester didn't hesitate to scoop his kid brother into his arms, knowing somewhere in the back of his head that Sam was a dead man. Those wounds were fatal.

"Sammy." The name came out closer to a sob and Dean bit his tongue hard. He had to keep it together, damnit.

Sarge finally stopped barking, ears flattening against his head. With no target to represent the danger the animal still knew was near, he began pacing with anxious whimpers. The shepherd trotted back and forth twice in front of Dean, before finally lowering his body to the ground and army-crawling inch by inch towards Andy's unmoving body. Sarge climbed atop the boy's chest, lying the length of his still form, ears pinned back. His golden eyes glowed in the running lights of the cars as he kept guard atop the boy, growling defensively at the empty road around them.

Bobby jogged up to the group, shotgun in hand and eyes patrolling the woods to their left and the house on the distant right. The man that had stabbed Sam had disappeared in the blink of an eye, which meant demon. If that were true, Bobby didn't expect him to make another appearance. He'd gotten what he wanted: Sam dead and Dean right there, unable to save him. But Bobby wasn't stupid enough to drop his guard, either. Especially not with Dean falling apart.

The old hunter kneeled on the ground beside Andy, keeping unshed tears at bay by focusing on the tree line, shotgun braced against his side. He pressed two fingers to the kid's neck, but he already knew

the answer well before he felt cold skin and lifeless veins. His eyes closed briefly, silent tears slipping past his guard. Bobby withdrew his hand, shaking his head at Dean's wide, questioning eyes. The man, looking so much more like a shattered boy, turned his head back to the brother in his arms.

"Don't do this to me, Sammy," Dean whispered, practically begging as he followed Bobby's lead and pressed two fingers to Sam's neck. There was a pulse, but it was weak. Getting weaker. "Not you too. I can't lose you both, you don't get to do that to me, you bastard."

But he knew his brother had no say in the matter, no dog in this fight. He'd given it his best – against Time, against Azazel's plans, against the bloody Apocalypse – and it hadn't been enough. It never was, was it?

Dean curled his body over his dying brother. They'd lost. Andy was gone, Sam would be in mere minutes, Cas wouldn't be flying in for a last-minute ass-saving, and Dean was out of backup plans. From here on out, Hell – and everyone else, really – wouldn't leave Dean alone. Not until he sold his soul.

He already knew he was going to make the deal again. He wouldn't even wait for Hell to push him past his limits. Everything it would do to him, everything it would start, it didn't matter. Despite all the things he'd learned since Cas sent him back, all the years before and after that he'd had to figure out one stupid lesson, he still hadn't learned it. Because he was still going to sell the world for his brother's life. He already knew he would.

Fucking Gabriel had him dead to rights.

'If eating a bullet is what it takes… '

Sam's words floated up from his memories once more and Dean closed his eyes.

Fuck it.

Fuck Hell. Fuck Heaven, fuck their destinies, fuck ' *written in stone* ', and fuck Gabriel. Those sons of bitches down below and up above and everywhere else in between wouldn't get their apocalypse from him. Not this time.

Slowly, the older Winchester's hand slid from his brother's neck to the gun tucked into the waistband of his jeans. It wasn't the Colt, so Dean

knew it wouldn't stick, but at least Heaven would have to work for their Sword. Let fucking Zachariah and Michael scapegoat their way out of bringing him back without alerting all of Heaven and Hell that they *wanted* the Apocalypse to happen. Especially once he got to heaven and started mouthing off.

A moment of regret flashed through him, realizing Bobby was by his side. The old man would surely kill Dean himself if he managed to stop him first. Dean had no interest in doing this in front of him – a man more his father than his own dad ever had been – but he knew Hell wouldn't give them long. Especially if they realized what he was planning to do.

And, honestly, he wasn't sure how long his own resolve would last. Gabriel hadn't been entirely wrong. Dean was running on pure adrenaline and when that wore off, so would his willpower. He sent off one, final prayer to Cas, knowing the angel couldn't help them now, (knowing how pissed she'd be when she learned what he'd done) and wrapped his fingers around the handle of his gun.

He pulled the .45 from his back, prepared to flip the safety, cock the hammer, and pull the trigger before anyone – or thing – realized his suicide mission. But the sound of a car door opening in the night had Dean drawing that gun on something other than his own skull. Beside him, Bobby spun in time, shotgun up and trained on the thing that came out of the nearest car. The one Dean had parked Baby behind.

It had blonde hair, pale skin, and the shape of a human. But it was the glowing green eyes as the creature came charging towards them that really gave her away.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns:
Did I mention season finales are not for the faint of heart? [insert weak grin here] I promise, I'm almost done killing people. I think. Well, it depends on your definition of "almost" [insert second, weaker smile here]

Audio Listeners
: two things for this group! First, it has been brought to my attention that my chapter and title break lines are obnoxious via text-reader, so I'd like to change them to something easier on the ears. I'd like to check with everyone (including readers, as the visual presentation of the story is equally important to me)

This is what I'm thinking for the title section:

—----------

The Road So Far (This Time Around)
Chapter yada yada
—----------

And for in-between story sections:

--- **Chapter Break** ---

As I don't use a text-to-speech app and only tried out one to see what would and wouldn't work, please let me know if this is a decent choice. I'm unsure if all apps read similarly, or if some will try to read the dashes out loud.

Podfic: Second question to audio listeners (and everyone, really). Would anyone be interested in a podfic version of this story? I've been playing around with the idea of recording the story, but A) have no previous experience as a reader and no idea if I'm any good and B) do not want to proceed with 130 chapters unless there's some interest in the endeavor (apparently it's 90+ hours of material, because of course it is XD)

Request for Editors: On the same note as both chapter break changes and possible recording, I am in the very slow process of a whole-story edit. I'd like to go through all the mistakes everyone has been so helpful in flagging, as well as some very minor clean up (no content change, only editing. Well, except for one line that Henriksen says that's always bugged me XD But that'll just be a word-choice change). However, as you can probably imagine, getting through 130 chapters is a lot. And I won't catch them all on my own. **Vaesse** is helping me with this task, but I am hoping to throw some more people at it if there are any willing volunteers. I'd like to give each editor about 10 chapters to read through and flag errors in. So if you're up for a ten chapter read through (or more) please let me know in a comment or DM. Thanks very much!

(**Side note**): for the people who've asked about **publishing/ binding** the story into a book and to whom I promised this edit ages ago, soooo sorry but I am working on it and it should be done in a month or two (I hope))

I think that was all the notes I needed to address. See y'all soon!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 132: Season 2: Chapter 98

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Another weekly update?! Surely we have stepped into an alternate reality! Jokes aside, I will be trying to keep up weekly posts until the end of the season finale, if I'm able!

Also, I know a Sunday night/Monday morning post is weird, but I tried to edit on Saturday, got distracted, got further distracted, remembered I never finished as I was heading to bed, thought I'd sit down and knock it out only for my sleepy time cannabis to kick in right as God/Chuck was having an existential moment. Soooo, that edit didn't happen

Anyhoo! After that silly little anecdote, let's go murder more people!

Chapter Warnings: I actually don't think anyone dies in this chapter… Although, Sam is giving it his best shot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 98

Persephone stared through the windshield as Sam Winchester hit the ground a dozen feet away, dropping the body in his arms and struggling to remain upright. She blinked, unsure if she had actually seen Tom stab the hunter – Azazel's apparent favorite – in the back or if, perhaps, she'd misseen. But the image didn't change, despite several extended moments of observation.

Sam Winchester was on the ground, bleeding to death.

What in the *Hell* ?

She startled as someone ran past the car, only realizing belatedly that it was the other Winchester. Dean bolted past, unaware of her

presence inside the vehicle, to grab his brother off the ground. Persephone watched, confusion growing heavy in her gut. It was starting to feel like dread and that was not a good sign.

"Well, that was fun."

Persephone reared away from the suddenly-occupied driver's seat, glaring at Tom as he reappeared. He reached in front of her, causing the woman to draw back further (as far as she could before the gold chain still latched to the steering wheel drew taut). Tom opened the glove box, pulled out a handful of papers – napkins, Persephone realized – which he then used to wipe blood off his hands.

Sam Winchester's blood.

"You killed daddy's favorite," she announced in a bored monotone that still managed to convey disgust quite well. Persephone resettled in her seat, annoyed the demon had gotten such a reaction out of her (undoubtedly his intention). "Congratulations. He'll be so proud."

"He will be," Tom agreed with a pleased smile. He threw the bloodied napkins at her feet and Persephone stared at the mess with distaste.

"You do realize I cannot bind to a dead man, yes?" Persephone scowled at the demon, unimpressed. She leaned back against the door and crossed her arms, purposefully stringing the chain across the width of the car. With several flicks of her wrist, gold jingled obnoxiously in front of the demon. "I believe that was your father's whole reason for bringing me along."

"Azazel didn't want you here at all," Tom sniped back, rolling his eyes. Some of that mirth was turning to annoyance. It bothered him, letting this woman lessen his success with her ignorance and arrogance. He waved his hand, disappearing the chain and bracelet from around her wrist.

Persephone rubbed at the skin there, still glaring at him.

"Bringing you here was *my* call." He presented her with a prideful grin. Stupid creature, always so pompous. He really couldn't wait to be rid of her. "And don't worry, Princess, you're still *needed* . Prince Charming over there won't stay dead for long."

Persephone's eyes widened and she turned back to the road. Dean Winchester had gathered Sam into his arms. He was bent over him in mourning. The conclusion of what would happen next was not hard

to predict.

So. That was their plan. They needed Sam to cross the veil. Well, if that was Hell's move, then it was finally time to make hers.

Persephone let her now free arm drop to her side, where she had lodged her purse between seat and the door earlier that night. She slipped her hand inside, keeping her eyes on the scene unfolding outside of the car as her fingers wrapped around the hex bag she'd been carrying around for weeks now. Persephone curled her fingers around it, hiding it in her palm, before withdrawing her arm. Gingerly, she settled her hands in her lap, eyes still locked on the pair of brothers just beyond the windshield. Tom didn't even look her way, watching the same drama she was.

Persephone took a slow, deep breath, and then moved.

Chapter Break

Chuck Shurley withdrew his hands from the keyboard, pulling away from his writing as surely as he pulled away from himself. God was left staring at the screen. He let the lines of text blur out of focus, into nothing more than black squiggles. Nonsensical symbols that didn't spell anything, let alone the end of the world.

This was it.

Whatever he wrote next would come to be. And not because he willed it. No, Chuck had long since stepped back. He wasn't writing this story anymore. He already had, six millennia ago. (In stone, He might add.)

Now he was only an observer. A transcriber.

One that was stalling.

There was a reason, it turned out, that God had chosen to be a prophet on Earth during the End Times. He had, to put it simply, a pathetic amount of self-restraint. He couldn't help it, he needed to know what was to come. He was – and always had been – an all-knowing being. Turning that off hadn't been as easy as flipping a switch. Even if that was essentially what he had done. Woken up one

day and decided this was it. This was the day he stopped looking into the future, stopped checking where the story was going, and let it write itself.

And he'd thought, after twenty-four hours untethered from the cosmos, *'Well, that was easy. I'm doing great.'*

As it turned out, going cold turkey hadn't been the wisest choice. He really wasn't used to not knowing and, as it just so happened, suspense was a bitch.

For an all-knowing being who could alter events to shape the known reality to whatever he wanted it to be… he really didn't like not being in control of the story. Not even getting to know if it was going somewhere good. It was so *frustrating* .

So he'd made himself a prophet, allowed to observe but nothing more. No looking beyond what prophetic visions provided, no interfering.

And then Dean Winchester traveled back in time to avert the Apocalypse.

(Which wasn't remotely like putting an addict's poison of choice right in front of them and then saying *"Don't touch, kay?"* Nothing at all like that. Chuck was doing *fine* .)

Such a task was possible, God knew. The timeline Dean had come from confirmed as much. Confirmed what he'd always hoped; that humans were capable of writing their story, and soon the angels would be too. Even if their version of events got a little… messy.

But he also knew that averting an Apocalypse was very much like swimming upstream (if that stream was a thousand-foot waterfall and gravity was a couple dozen times stronger than usual). The Winchesters alone didn't stand a chance. Not without help. Not without a significant change.

In Dean's timeline, that change had come in the form of one little angel. An angel that had accepted growth and change – things not built into his original blueprints – when all his brethen were only just realizing the possibility.

But this time, due to all the changes Dean had made….

Well. Despite it being cosmically ironic and equally infuriating, there

was every opportunity for *Persephone*, of all creatures, to be that change this time around.

(As a writer, Chuck was very familiar with circular plots. He did not like being *in* one.)

And as much as he had said he would not interfere… he also did not want the world to end in a bigger mess than was strictly necessary. Which meant prepping Persephone to be that change, in as helpful a way for the Winchesters as was possible.

Because, as he'd told Dean last year, something that big likely meant altering the timeline beyond recognition. And anything drastic enough to break Time away from its chosen course….

Well, something like that could be for the better… or it could make everything so, so much worse.

So God and Chuck had primed the girl the best they could for the moment when she would have a choice to make. A choice that could change everything.

Chuck had given her a hex bag specifically capable of breaking Azazel's control over her. God had spent months fanning the embers of her old self, the remnants of a spell that had once been crafted from good intentions.

(Before God had learned where such roads usually led.)

(Straight to a tomb inside a sacked city.)

(Like he'd said: ironic.)

Which was all to say, God had been interfering when he'd promised himself he wouldn't. Then again, Persephone wasn't even supposed to be a part of this story. So Chuck figured he was allowed to cheat a bit on that one. It wasn't interfering; it was balancing the playing field.

Still, with all that he had been doing to tip the scales the Winchesters' way, God was well aware it might not be enough. Persephone had spent those six thousand years with nothing to do but stew in her anger. An emotion she'd already had in spades. Just like her father.

God had seen it six thousand years ago and he saw it now, in the woman who had shown up on his doorstep in an uncomfortable looking blouse and even more uncomfortable looking heels.

Chapter Break

May 2006

Chuck Shurley's House

"Okay, that's enough." God snapped His fingers and Persephone went limp against the back of his couch. No longer Chuck, He scooted forward on the coffee table until His knees bumped hers, but His expression remained deadly serious. "Why are you here?"

He was furious. Persephone was never supposed to get out of Gomorrah. He'd had his angels ward it specifically against any possible escape or outside interference. Only an angel could free her from that tomb, which meant she should never have gotten free.

So *what* was she doing sitting in His living room?

"Following Sam Winchester."

Chuck's eyebrows went up and, for a moment, he forgot to be God. He was genuinely surprised for a second time that morning, which simply didn't happen to all-knowing beings very often, you know. "Wait, *this* is Hell's backup plan? Dean's changing things left and right, and *you* are their answer?"

He laughed and looked away in amazement before He started to actually think it over. Persephone didn't respond, either not having an answer or His control over her recognized rhetoric and gave her a pass. God leaned back, putting His arm across the back of the sofa. "Well, that could backfire spectacularly. For either party ."

He did kind of want to see where this could go…. God leaned forward, bracing His elbows on His knees.

"Tell me," He said, eyeing the potential homewrecker sitting on His couch, green eyes unfocused and cloudy. "What are *you* going to do, *Persephone* ?"

Although her body remained boneless, sunk into the back of the couch with no resistance, the tips of her fingers twitched. Her nails slowly dug into her business slacks until her fingers were claws pressing into

her thighs. The green of her eyes started to glow.

The silence stretched and He nudged her knee with His own. "Answer the question."

"I will protect my charge."

God's eyebrows rose. Well then. Good to know there was still a little guardian left in there after all these years.

"Do you know Azazel's plans?"

"No." There was no hint of deception in her response. Not that He expected Persephone to be able to lie at the moment. She might be actively fighting His control, but she was little more than an ant in comparison to Him.

Well, He supposed, if humans were ants in one of the most common and overused analogies out there, maybe she deserved a little more recognition.

A fire ant, then.

Her upper lip twitched and God got the distinct impression of a snarl on Persephone's blank face. "He is hell spawn. Whatever his plan, it will be unpleasant."

God snorted before He could help Himself.

"Understatement of the millennia," He muttered before clearing his throat. Adopting a more serious expression, He continued, "They plan to raise Lucifer."

Her knuckles turned white, fingers curling into full fists against her slacks. "They will fail."

"Actually," God drew out, shrugging one shoulder regrettably, "I don't think they will."

Persephone didn't answer, but the skin between her eyes was pinched. He watched her closely.

"So, the real question is…" God placed His hands atop her knees and the cloudiness in her eyes cleared up a little. She met His gaze, a question there she couldn't voice past his powers. "What will you do, Persephone?"

The silence stretched. Her chest rose and fell with each breath, gaining enough speed to suggest tension. God tried not to let the storyteller in Him read into that.

“Protect my charge.”

The smile was slow to spread across His face. Fancy that. Looked like Hell’s little backup plan had a decent chance of backfiring after all.

“Even if Sam says yes?” Those glowing eyes blinked slowly. She was trying to process information she didn’t have yet. “He is Lucifer’s true vessel.”

Persephone looked pained, straining against His powers as she was. The glow of her eyes grew, and God got the distinct impression of anger buried in those depths. Anger he had seen once before. He’d had doubts then, too, and there’d been nothing to dissuade them but time and distance.

While Persephone had no loyalty to Hell, she was no longer the guardian she had once been. She was bitter, filled with rage and thoughts of vengeance. God supposed (with maybe something vaguely approaching contrition) that several thousand years in a hole in the ground might do that to anyone.

(He was well acquainted with the concept of reaping what one sowed by now, so really, He shouldn’t be surprised it had landed right back in His lap.)

It was what lay under the justified anger that worried Him. She was her father’s child, and that was the literal core of the problem. A problem He had once gambled was not solvable, even after she had insisted He was wrong.

Well… now she’d have her chance to prove it. So long as God was willing to gamble the end of the world on it.

“What will you do then, Persephone?”

She met his gaze, her eyes aflame as she realized just who she was talking to. But under God's will, there was nothing she could do but answer the question.

“I will protect my charge.”

Chapter Break

Present

Outside the Morton House

The moment she got the hex bag with its extra-long drawstring wrapped around Tom's neck, paralyzing the demon (who jerked into an unnatural rigidity like a puppet with strings drawn taut), Persephone threw open the car door. She flung herself out of the vehicle – speed was going to be somewhat essential if she were to succeed here – before freezing halfway around the door with a sudden thought.

She turned back, ducking inside the car once more. From his frozen position in the driver's seat, Tom made a low-pitched sound of rage, locked behind sealed lips. He was trying to throw his body against the paralytic spell with little success, looking more like a wriggling fish on dry land.

Or a worm on a hook , Persephone thought with no small amount of vindictive joy.

With one knee on the passenger seat, she leaned across the car and grabbed his shoulder, hauling him forward against the steering wheel. The demon went like an overstuffed doll. The gun he had acquired at the cemetery was still tucked against the small of his back. Persephone pulled it from his waistline.

"Silly me," she said aloud, voice dripping with monotoned sarcasm. Tom made another disgruntled noise and she smirked at him with every ounce of smugness that she'd endured from months of being stuck in his presence. The rage was clear in Tom's eyes and Persephone delighted in it. She waved the Colt in his line of sight. "Almost forgot this."

She pulled back out of the car once more, leaving behind the demon's muffled screams. Gun in hand, Persephone rounded the door once more, shoving it closed with a satisfying slam. Tucking the weapon into the small of her back, she took off towards the huddle of men a dozen feet ahead.

Chapter Break

Both Bobby and Dean had their guns trained on Azazel's girl in a second flat. She skidded to a stop a half dozen feet from them, arms up and empty hands spread wide in a gesture of peace neither hunter believed for a second.

"I can heal him."

Dean blinked, brain bluescreening and needing to reboot to process that statement. Of all the things he'd expected (and, really, he hadn't known what to expect), that had not even remotely been on the list.

"Who the hell are you?" Bobby barked, shotgun braced against his shoulder. He was apparently more prepared to handle this baffling situation. It probably helped that Bobby didn't have history with this girl. He hadn't spent thirty minutes earlier that very night chasing her off into the darkness, convinced she was the one who had somehow taken Sam.

No, Bobby didn't have a clue who she was, but Dean did. Which was why the next words out of his mouth would most definitely be *'Fuck off, bitch .'* Or he could forgo talk entirely and speak with his gun.

"How?"

Bobby's head whipped around as Dean's mouth moved without his permission. The sharp warning of, *"Dean!"* was not remiss. The man from the future wanted to tell him, *'I know! '* but he couldn't look away from the woman offering what was surely, *surely,* a miracle too good to be true.

"It doesn't matter how," she said in clear, enunciated words despite an accent that Dean immediately recognized from the phone call that had sent them to Rivergrove. She stayed where she was, arms still raised (possibly because of the dual guns still trained on her). "What matters is that I can do it. But only so long as he is alive to heal."

Both hunters stared at her, one with an itchy trigger finger and grief backing it, the other wondering what the hell was happening and what it could mean for the End Game. Was it a miracle? Unlikely. A trap? Much, much more likely.

"What will it cost?"

This time, Bobby's whole body turned his way, though the gun remained trained on their mystery guest. His eyes were fierce, filled with anger and heartbreak in equal measure. "Don't you even think about it, boy."

"Nothing," the blonde replied easily – too easily – and Dean had his answer.

Trap .

"Bullshit." He raised his gun more confidently, intent clear, and the woman faltered, realizing her misstep.

Before she could respond, there was an inhuman scream, deep and reverberating. All three – hunters and mystery creatures alike – spun at the noise. It had come from one of the cars.

"…That'll work," the woman announced out of nowhere and when she turned back to the men there was a hint of a smirk on her lips. She reached behind her back, having lowered her arms somewhat during the distraction, and both hunters immediately retrained on her. She paused, staring at their guns, but ultimately resumed the motion at a much slower, deliberate pace. Her other hand was back up, fingers spread wide once again, asking them to trust her.

Dean knew they should just shoot her. He knew it. But hope was a powerful thing. A dangerous, powerful thing.

When the woman pulled her arm back to the front there was a gun gripped loosely in her hand. Dean's eyes widened at the Colt. She held it out to him, grip on the barrel, butt towards the hunter: a clear message that she had no intent to use it on them.

When Dean met her eyes, they were unnaturally bright, though they remained blue this time as she stared at the older Winchester.

"Kill that demon when he tries to stop me."

"Where did you get that?" Bobby asked, eyes equally wide as he stared at the gun that could kill anything (well, almost anything). And she was just handing it over.

"Do we have a deal?" the woman asked, ignoring the older hunter's question. In fact, she was ignoring Bobby's presence entirely. Her eyes were locked on Dean. When the hunter hesitated, she added, "I'm not asking you to trust me, Dean. I'm asking you to let me save

your brother."

His eyes dropped to Sam, limp in his arms, chest barely moving anymore, skin taking on a gray, lifeless hue. His brother had minutes left, at most.

There was no way this wasn't a trick. Dean didn't believe in miracles, unless they came with blue eyes and a tan trench coat. But a desperate part of him, the bit that had never been able to let Sam go, was pretty sure he couldn't make things worse.

Both he and Sam would live with no demon deal and no selling his soul? That was a deal too good to pass up.

'And too good to be true ,' Dean thought bitterly, even as he reached for the gun, knowing it had to be a trap. Knowing it was a bad, bad, bad, bad, *bad* idea.

" *Dean* !" Bobby hissed, but the man from the future ignored his surrogate father. His eyes were locked on the creature holding the Colt even as his fingers curled around it's familiar grip.

"Do it."

Persephone nodded, just once, and then all hell broke loose.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Mwuaaahahaha!

Chapter 133: Season 2: Chapter 99

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Alright, thank you everyone for waiting an extra day for this post! If you want the fairly entertaining, panic-inducing, midnight-to-four-am-emergency-meeting-with-the-muse, plot-hole reason why, see the end notes! (At the end. I do recommend reading the chapter first because there are spoilers down there and it's definitely not a time-sensitive tale 😂)

Chapter Warnings: Violence, violence, we take a break to finger paint, and then more violence! And then we should take ourselves a study break, because libraries are calm, peaceful, and boring.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Things get quite brutal and gory for a moment in this one. Trigger warnings for a pretty visceral description of bodily harm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 99

Gabriel was so annoyed. Not that the Beginning of the End was supposed to be *fun* . Far from it. But his stubborn, mule-headed, willful, obstinate, infuriating sister was making it particularly *unfun.*

"What is wrong with you?" the archangel hissed from above his squirming sibling. She was really putting her all into breaking free, risking injury and so, so much more. Admirable as that may be from perhaps a human point of view, Gabe simply could not wrap his head around it. It just didn't make sense. "This is written in *stone* , Castiel. It *has* to happen."

She had to know that; she was an *angel* . They had all known it, ever since Dad turned on the lights around here.

'No!' her true voice ripped past the physical barriers of her vessel and

Gabriel actually lost his grip on her, both wrist and mouth, in surprise. Beneath him, Castiel seemed just as taken aback by the outburst. Gabriel could see her grace – subdued eddies of bright yellow wibbling with strain and losing color – and he just… couldn't understand. She was risking permanent damage. For *them* .

Gabe quickly clamped his hand back over her wrist, strengthening the grace he formed in a bracelet around her slim arm. He covered her mouth again, but this time pushed his grace past her lips, sealing her true form within. It was an inelegant gag, but the archangel couldn't risk her interfering. These were the events meant to come. They had no business trying to change them.

The littlest angel (that could, indeed) stilled beneath him and Gabriel let out a breath of… shit, he didn't even know anymore. Relief? Frustration? Anxiety, confusion, annoyance, respite? His gaze lifted cautiously from his sister to the action happening fifty feet away.

Gabriel froze, eyes narrowing at the new female presence among the boys. She wasn't part of the script.

The newcomer was warded and, from so far away, Gabriel couldn't quite see past the charm. It was strong magic, clouding even the senses of an archangel, and that alone nagged at him. There was something familiar about what lay beneath, though. Whoever she was, Gabriel knew her. That alone wasn't odd – Gabriel knew *lots* of people. Even people who might show up in the middle of Hell's pre-Apocalypse finalist games.

What was odd was how familiar whatever-she-was felt to his grace, and yet how completely unfamiliar she appeared to him, both above and below the warding. Gabriel didn't know *her* , but he definitely knew someone just like her.

"Wait a minute…"

When it clicked, Gabriel froze completely, straightening up slowly atop his sister, unaware that as he did so, he withdrew both physical and angelic restraints. His brown eyes widened.

"That's not-"

Beneath him, Castiel *exploded* in sound. Gabriel nearly fell off her in surprise before scrambling to clamp his hand back over her mouth. Not that it would do them much good. She wasn't screaming in any human form. Her entire grace was crying out, and it was damn near

enough to knock the archangel back.

He felt more than heard the crack of old wounds splitting open. Then every window in the house behind them shattered simultaneously, and Gabe instinctually curled his body over his sister's as glass rained down.

Chapter Break

The windshield on the car closest to them exploded, accompanied by the sound of more tempered glass cracking and very much untempered house windows exploding in the distance.

Bobby recoiled at the noise, spinning towards the violent and new, possible danger. Dean surged to his feet, vaulting over Sammy to put himself between whatever was happening and his brother, Colt already up and trained on the source of the noise. Persephone, immediately suspecting the cause, darted between the two off humans, away from the vehicles. As she did, the driver side door of the nearest car blew off, crashing into the trees a dozen feet away with a cacophony of crunched metal and snapping branches.

Bobby switched between training his shotgun on the car, then the unknown creature darting past him, then back to the car. Dean immediately turned to the source of the noise and chaos and kept his focus there, ignoring the girl completely as she ran past him for his brother. He'd made a deal and he planned to hold up his end.

A fifth person joined the soiree, hauling himself out of the vehicle like his limbs weren't quite working. Dean immediately recognized the guy from the gas station: hulking muscles and a too-tight turtleneck. His eyes slid to black as he stalked towards them.

"Persephone!" he screamed, the full wrath of Hell turning human vocal cords animalistic. "I will kill you myself!"

"You can try!" she yelled back, chin up and smirk cocky, from her crouched position at Sam's feet.

The demon snarled, Bobby's shotgun went off, and the real battle began.

Chapter Break

Castiel collapsed after her little screaming fit and Gabriel – startled enough by the tantrum and further distracted by the damage it may have done to his sister – made the mistake of releasing his hold on her.

The littlest angel that absolutely could (and was never, never, *ever* leaving the closet again, Dad dammit) launched herself forward with a flare of wings that very nearly knocked Gabriel on his ass. As it was, he only just barely avoided a mouth full of metaphysical feathers.

With a vicious curse, Gabe threw himself after her, just managing to wrap his hand around her ankle. The weight of his body and grace acted like an unexpected anchor. Cassie crashed into the ground with all the force of her flight and Gabriel was *so done* .

“Enough!” he roared, no longer heeding whether or not they were heard or seen by the group down the road.

This whole thing was already bordering on an unrecoverable clusterfuck; Dean hadn’t summoned a crossroads demon, Persephone was here in some destiny-defying feat, and now a fight was breaking out that *wasn’t supposed to happen* with a gun the Winchesters *weren’t* supposed to have.

And Gabriel had no compunction blaming his sister for all it.

Despite managing to keep her from interfering (by the skin of his teeth, he might add), nothing was going to plan. A plan written in *stone* , Dad dammit. It wasn’t *changeable.* By the very definition!

This was all Castiel’s fault. Gabriel didn’t know how, but he was sure of it. She’d jinxed the whole thing just *talking* about it being avoidable.

The archangel scrambled back atop his reckless, infuriating, suicidal sister and this time took no chances. He affixed his grace in binds around both wrists, neck, and chest. Before she could think up anything else dangerous, suicidal, and *so fucking stupid* , Gabriel pulled them both into the ether.

Chapter Break

Bobby's first shot provided Dean with the temporary (very temporary) cover he needed to tuck his own handgun into his waistline and flip open the Colt's chamber. Two bullets. Dean closed his eyes briefly. Two was not great, not for hunting a demon (they had a nasty habit of disappearing into thin air right as you fired at 'em), but it was better than nothing. He shut the chamber and spun it, lining up the first bullet.

Shotgun shells weren't doing much to deter the demon, though he did look sufficiently annoyed at the damage his hulked up meatsuit was taking. Bobby cracked his shotgun open, having spent all five shells and needing to reload, as Dean stepped up to cover him. He squared his shoulders, aimed, and drew the hammer back.

Tom's eyes locked on the gun in the hunter's hand. The demon's upper lip drew back in a snarl. It looked very much like he'd been expecting the Colt to make an appearance.

The gun flew from Dean's grip with a flick of the demon's wrist before he could completely depress the trigger. Dean damn near dislocated his finger trying to keep a hold of the weapon, to no avail.

The Colt sailed into the woods but Dean, a quick draw armed with ten extra years experience and a whole lot of rage, pulled his handgun from his waist and fired.

Chapter Break

When Tom had finally broken free of the paralyzing hex bag with a scream of rage and an explosion of power strong enough to rip the door off the car he'd been imprisoned in, Persephone did not waste time. She ducked between the two hunters who should (if what she'd read about them was accurate and not Chuck embellishing) be able to handle one little non-Prince-of-Hell-level demon. But she didn't wait around to find out.

She skidded low to the ground, circling Sam Winchester's unconscious body to grab at his ankles with every intention of pulling the injured hunter further away from the battle. A low, dangerous growl stopped her. Persephone froze, hands stretched out over Sam's jeans but not making contact, as she met the golden eyes of a dog perched atop the other boy's body. His upper lip was drawn back in a snarl, the bridge of his snout furled into menacing wrinkles, mouth full of sharp teeth that were very purposefully on display. His head was ducked low, ears back, sharp eyes locked on hers. Every inch of his body language screamed the same warning that vibrated from low in his throat.

Persephone swallowed slowly, keeping her hands visible and intentions clear. It took precious seconds she worried she might not have – the gunshots and grunts of a fight happening a dozen feet away were a constant reminder – before the dog relented. He did not relax, ears still flat to his skull and eyes watching her like a hawk, but he stopped growling and his snout slowly unfurled. Persephone would take what was given; with a nod to the animal, she wrapped her hands around Sam's ankles and pulled him away from the battle.

She got him off the main section of road, dragging him into the leaves and grasses that made up the shoulder. With a quick glance up, Persephone took in the battle (a perfunctory check that neither hunter had gotten himself killed yet), but paid it no more attention after that. She had a job to do and very little time to do it. Hopefully she had moved them far enough out of the way so as not to become collateral damage, but the fate of the fight itself was out of her hands.

Sam's wasn't, however. Not yet.

Persephone straddled the boy's hips without hesitation, grabbing the hem of his bloodied t-shirt and pushing it up to his chin, revealing his torso. Sam's chest was too pale, visually cold in an unsettling way, and the rise and fall of his chest was so slow and shallow as to be almost nonexistent.

He had less time than she'd thought.

Chapter Break

The bullet tore through Tom's gut, the demon caring far less about

dodging some average bullet. Until he waved his hand, intent on tossing the hunter along with his gun this time, and nothing happened.

Tom froze, first in shock, and then with the realization that it wasn't a choice. He *couldn't move* . With a roar of fury and something that felt a lot like fear, the demon tried to move his feet, to step forward (backward, sideways, *anything*) only to find himself immobilized to the spot.

"What did you do to me!" he screamed, waving his hand again and again, trying to toss Dean Winchester into the nearest tree and hopefully snap his stupid neck.

The hunter smirked, holding up his weapon – a normal, boring gun – with a little wave. "Devil's trap carved into a bullet. Like it?"

Tom's eyes widened in what was very much fear now, bordering on panic. His gaze matched the hunter's turn for turn, both snapping to where the Colt had landed in the woods.

Dean bolted for it. The demon plunged his hand into the open hole in his stomach, desperately clawing at the edges. He had to get to that bullet before the hunter got to the Colt.

Tom could hear Dean crashing through the undergrowth, searching for the gun. He ripped at torn skin, pulling until the slippery gash was wide enough to shove his hand fully inside his meatsuit.

Out of nowhere, Tom's body spasmed. It took a stunned moment of confusion to realize that no, it wasn't the meatsuit. *He* had spasmed, inside the human. When it happened again, from waist to head, so hard his hand very nearly slipped free from its search, Tom's eyes snapped up.

The other hunter – the old one – had his shotgun trained on him, but that wasn't all he was doing. The demon snarled when he realized that under his breath, the man was speaking Latin.

Tom dug frantically, shoving aside organs in search of the bullet. The tip of a finger brushed something hard and foreign, and he pushed his hand in further. Tom heard the old hunter shout a warning but didn't bother listening. He was up to his wrist in his meatsuit's guts when he finally curled his fingers around the devil-trap bullet.

Which was when he locked eyes with Dean Winchester. The hunter

stood between two trees, body turned to the side, arm raised and Colt in hand, deadly glare fixed on the demon.

Tom was staring down the barrel.

Several things happened at once. Two guns went off, as both humans fired simultaneously, one to kill and one to keep the demon from freeing himself. Tom ripped the bullet from his stomach, dropping it to the ground with the same movement that he hurled power at the Colt.

The demon was shoved a half step to the side by the shotgun blast he took on his right. The gun flew from Dean's grip but not before the bullet, spun wide by his power -- but not wide enough -- embedded in Tom's left bicep. The demon was spun back by the impact, howling in rage as the hits ambushed him. The bullet from the Colt wasn't close to anything vital, but it *hurt* . His arm lit up with flashes of orange beneath his skin, and each burst came with a flare of agony.

Slowly, as it became obvious the bullet wasn't going to kill him, the demon turned back to both hunters, eyes sliding black with rage.

They glanced at each other.

"Balls," the older one breathed out from under his mustache at the same time Dean swore, "Son of a bitch" and Tom threw power at them in a fury.

Chapter Break

Ignoring the cacophony of gunfire and screaming happening only a few feet away, Persephone slid her hand beneath Sam Winchester, between the blood-soaked dirt and the small of his back. She curled her fingers, cupping the lukewarm wetness dribbling out of his back. When she withdrew her hand, in her palm was a pool of dark, almost black blood.

She immediately dipped her fingers into it and began drawing on Sam's chest, quick as she could. A large circle spanning his torso, then divided into three sections. Sam's name went in the top left, her own on the right, and an offer of protection for the bottom, just above the boy's navel. At the top of the circle, Persephone added a blessing; it

was a request for approval from a god she no longer believed in but, seeing as she had never formed the Bond without it, she wasn't going to risk excluding it now for the sake of her own pettiness.

Persephone had just completed the written portion of the ritual, shaking blood from her coated hand, when a force wrapped around her abdomen and *pulled* . She grunted as she was ripped off of Sam, flying through the air and tumbling across the ground half a dozen feet away. The trunk of a tree eventually stopped her roll and Persephone whipped her head up, *pissed.* Her falsely blonde hair was now a tangle of leaves and blue eyes flashed green in anger.

Tom smirked at her from the road, hand still raised. The demon then sent Dean Winchester – who was just climbing back to his feet from what she assumed was a previous journey through air – flying towards the very same tree.

Persephone flattened herself to the ground to avoid being taken out by the tomahawking hunter. He hit the tree with a solid thunk. She might have sympathized with the man, had he finished his job first. As it was, he had not; Tom was still breathing and, very soon, Sam Winchester would not be.

Dean crashed to the ground beside her with a grunt. Bobby's voice, raised in an exorcism, drew Tom's attention away from them and Dean struggled back to his hands and knees. He momentarily locked eyes with Persephone, propped up on her forearms and blowing strands of hair out of her face. The look she gave him would later be described by Chuck, several hundred miles away and in the middle of one hell of a migraine, as a bitchface all her own.

"Are you planning on holding up your end of this deal anytime soon?" she asked anything-but-sweetly. A leaf fell free of the tangle of blonde and drifted down to the ground below. It really framed her glare.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm working on it," Dean shot back, but his expression could almost be called guilty as his gaze slid to his brother. The hunter hauled himself to his feet quickly after that, pulling a knife from his boot that was most definitely not a gun that could kill anything.

(So things were going great, then, and Chuck had absolutely embellished.)

He took off into the fray once more and Persephone shuffled back on hand and knee to Sam to finish the damn ritual.

Chapter Break

Bobby landed on the hood of the car *hard* , but considered himself lucky he hadn't landed on the blown-out windshield. That would have hurt a hell of a lot more. And been a hell of a lot harder to climb out of. As it was, it would be a minute before Bobby was ready to roll off the hood, currently sprawled across it on his back, shotgun clutched to his heaving chest.

He was getting too damn old for this.

Across the road, Dean was now engaged in a knife fight; one he knew he wasn't winning. Any hits he managed to land were nothing more than scratches to a demon, and he wasn't proud to admit not that many were landing. His attempts at an exorcism between swings had resulted in his opponent punching him – apparently trying to break his damn jaw with that meaty meatsuit – anytime he got too close.

Dean needed a new plan. He needed the Colt.

The black-eyed bastard had been playing keep-away with it and Dean's gun full of devil-trap bullets. Between flinging the hunters into every tree, car, and patch of asphalt available, and flinging both handguns to-and-fro anytime they got anywhere near one of them (across the road, under the car, into the undergrowth, mix-and-match and repeat), they weren't getting very far with that whole 'kill the demon' thing.

Dean glanced quickly over his shoulder, where his brother was lying, half naked, on the ground. He was covered in bloody symbols that Dean refused to think about in that moment (regret and worry were for after Sammy survived this). Persephone was straddling the younger Winchester, much to Dean's chagrin, finger painting away on his chest. The hunter's blood boiled when she smeared his brother's blood messily over his lips, and he turned away.

It was time to end this, before he found the Colt only to use the last bullet on the thing atop his brother.

They had to get that gun, he thought, eyeing the old Patterson lying just off the side of the road. It was only half a dozen feet from Bobby, who was sprawled on the hood of the first car. Dean eyed the

distance with a flicker of hope. If he could just distract the demon long enough…

A cry of pain startled the hunter out of his scheming. Tom had gotten too close to Andy and, to inform him of his error, Sarge currently had incredibly powerful jaws wrapped around the demon's shin. Tom screamed, more in rage than pain, though the pain was definitely there, and attempted to shake his leg loose while balancing on the other. But Sarge was a stubborn old bastard, just like his owner. He hung on all the tighter, growling low in his throat and tossing his head side to side, no doubt trying to rip the demon's leg clean off. From the sounds the hell-spawn was making, he was doing a pretty good job at it.

Tom raised a hand, eyes murderous and face red, and Dean knew what came next. He was damn sick of his Team getting flung this way and that across this stupid road in this stupid place, and that included the stupid dog. So, Dean did what he always did when he was out of ideas.

He started a fist fight.

The older Winchester charged Tom with a roar, tackling him about the waist and taking them both to the ground before he could attack the German Shepherd. Sarge released the demon right on cue, as if he knew exactly what the human was doing. He alternated between fierce barking (no doubt letting the demon know exactly what he thought of him) and nipping at the body any time Tom came out of their scuffle and rolled too close to the dog.

Sarge was definitely growing on him, Dean realized as he punched Tom across the face, enjoying the way the demon's head bounced off the rough asphalt beneath him. Bonus points, he thought, for the way the dog kept snapping at the demon's fingers anytime the black-eyed bastard raised an arm to fling them. Or move the Colt before Bobby could get to it.

Speaking of.

"Bobby!"

The old hunter rolled off the hood of the car with a groan, weapon up and ready to fire even as his legs took a few experimental steps to find balance. But Dean didn't need the help of a shotgun, Bobby realized as he watched his kid roll across the asphalt with a demon. He needed something else.

Bobby immediately looked around, spotting the Colt in seconds. He dove towards the gun, fingers grappling with the hilt. As soon as he had it in hand, Bobby popped the cylinder out, eying the five empty chambers. One bullet left. Balls.

Movement drew his eye, and Bobby found himself closing the cylinder with a flick of his wrist and leveling the gun on instinct. He blinked at the creature who had agreed to save Sam's life (for reasons still unknown, and which Bobby very much doubted were altruistic, but what was done was done). She was atop the younger Winchester, bent over, lips seals to his. Their mouths were painted red in what could only be blood.

"What the hell-" Bobby had every urge to shoot her. Every damn right to shoot her. That was his *kid* the bitch was defiling. There wasn't a spell, ritual, or cautionary tale he could think of – and he could think of *plenty* – where sealing a deal with a *kiss* or *blood* ever resulted in anything *good*.

His finger twitched on the trigger.

"Bobby!"

The old hunter swung the Colt at Dean's cry. His other kid was grappling with the demon and losing. To be specific, he was getting the shit kicked out of him.

Bobby cocked the gun. The noise was enough to draw the demon's attention and Dean used the distraction to kick away from him, shoving the demon into the clear and open road while the hunter rolled out of harm's way. An easy shot.

The son of a bitch's eyes turned black, his chest heaved, his face was red with rage, as he squared up to face Bobby head on. A wind started to pick up between the trees as the old hunter aimed between those inhuman eyes.

He pulled the trigger.

Chapter Break

Man, law books were boring.

Sam didn't think *Law* was boring. He'd picked pre-law because he found the legal system a fascinating puzzle of pieces you first had to find before you could put together. Plus it was a respectable career that didn't involve blood and guts or guns and danger.

But God, were law *books* boring.

Sam leaned back in his chair, spine popping in several places. He had to bite back a pleased groan as he added arms to the stretch and his stiff muscles started to sing.

The future lawyer was in the quiet section of Stanford's main library – the place with shushing icons and reminders on every wall, pillar, shelf, and tabletop -- and they took that rule *literally* . 'They' being both the students and staff in attendance at the Cecil H. Green Library (nobody actually called it that, it was just the Green Library to students). He'd learned the hard way after dragging Brady there for a study session. Sam had come to find out that day that he had a really funny roommate and an absolutely terrible study buddy.

Lucky for him, he'd found himself a much better one.

Jess glanced up from her laptop, meeting his eyes over the top of the screen. She was sitting across the table from him (and how she managed to sit cross-legged on the small library chairs and not fall off, he'd never know) with headphones securely covering her ears and fingers clacking away at the keyboard. She raised her eyebrows in question, but Sam just shook his head with a smile that was probably one part charming, nine parts besotted. He could see the amused smile in her eyes (or what was more likely amused judgment in the form of a smile) before she tucked back into her assignment.

Sam let his head loll back, eyes drifting to the ceiling of the library, and then over to the shelves of books surrounding them. He jolted in surprise, nearly tipping his chair over backwards, when he spotted a familiar woman standing in one of the aisles, staring directly at him.

It was Azazel's girl.

She looked like she had in his vision, the one in Gomorrah. Olive skin, a headful of wild, dark hair, and eyes so green they bordered on unnatural. Only now she looked odd – out of place – in a pair of dark jeans and a black button-up blouse (or was it that she looked totally normal for this place, and that was the odd part?)

"Sam Winchester."

Sam scrambled out of the chair, glancing quickly at Jess, ready to tell her to run, but he drew up short. She was still staring at her laptop, typing away. She hadn't even looked up at his mad dash upright.

"Jess?" he called, glancing between her and Azazel's girl. The mystery woman hadn't moved towards them at all, just remained standing between the two shelves, eyes locked on him.

Jess didn't respond or even look up as he waved a hand over the top of her laptop. No one in the library did. No one shot him dirty looks or shushed him for speaking. No one noticed him – or her – at all.

Shaking and fisting his hands to hide it, Sam turned to the intruder. He kept the study table between him and her. "I'm dreaming."

"In a way, yes," Azazel's girl answered, those green eyes roaming around the library for a moment of disinterested observation before returning to him. It was an intense gaze. It reminded Sam of Castiel. So did the blankness of her expression and disinterest. Only in her case, it seemed unnatural rather than supernatural. "It is difficult for the human body to maintain consciousness once the detachment process begins. Your mind chose a place of peace during the transition. It's not uncommon."

"Detachment process?" Sam glanced at Jess again, both instincts and nerves in a heightened state. But she remained oblivious to the events unfolding and Sam tried to convince himself this was a dream where she couldn't get hurt.

"Your soul, Sam."

Hazel eyes snapped back to green. Sam blinked, then drew in a breath that was a lot more like a gasp, lungs informing him he'd forgotten to breathe those last few seconds. "What?"

"Your soul is detaching from your body," Azazel's girl reiterated, and while her expression remained blank, there was a slight shift in her accented words. Sam couldn't place it, the difference too slight, but he thought she was displeased.

"I'm dying," he paraphrased, realization dawning even as the words registered.

He remembered.

And the last thing he remembered was walking out of Azazel's battle

royale. A demon had greeted him, congratulated him (and *oh god , Andy, no*) and then stabbed him in the back. Literally.

Sam's hand drifted to the small of his back, then up as high as he could go. There wasn't any wound or blood that he could feel, but he wasn't sure if that was because he'd been stabbed higher than he could reach, or this was all in his head.

"Yes."

The bluntness of her response – just another fact in a world full of 'em – shook Sam out of some of his shock, as well as his fear. If he was already dying, there wasn't much to fear, now was there? He straightened, hands fisted at his side but this time in preparation for a fight rather than hiding distress.

"Why are you here?" he asked, chin tilted up in challenge. "You're not a reaper. I recognize you from my vision. That tomb, the one in Gomorrah. You're Azazel's girl."

Her eyebrows went up in what was most definitely offense, but the somewhat amused kind. Sam got the distinct impression she'd snorted without making a single sound.

"I knew someone was watching. I didn't know it was you." Her eyebrows rose and fell, something bordering on distaste and snark sneaking through that blankness. Sam was reminded of the woman he'd met in the bar, the one that had broken his glass and cut his hand. With a small shift of weight and body language, she continued, "My *name* is Persephone. And I can stop it."

Oh, she had definitely taken offense at being called 'Azazel's girl.' Enough so that it took Sam's brain a moment to catch the actual name she'd given.

"Persephone?" he echoed, gears starting to turn. The Greek Goddess of the Dead. And, undoubtedly, what she'd actually called herself that night in the bar when Sam had heard *'Stephanie'* and the blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman had just smiled at him like he'd been on the wrong side of an inside joke. A detail that was so utterly unimportant right now (Sam blamed his spastic thoughts on the shock of everything that had – and was – happening (after all, he'd gotten himself stabbed, had a casual afternoon with Jess at the Stanford Library, Jess had been in danger, Jess had not been in danger because Jess wasn't real, *Azazel's girl* showed up in the middle of it all, and, oh yeah, he was also *dying*)). Then her next words registered and Sam

shook his head, like he could somehow toss away the confusion and see this conversation clearly. "Wait, stop it? Stop what?"

"You, dying," Persephone explained as though it was obvious, more snark sneaking through.

Although… maybe it should have been obvious. Persephone, Greek Goddess of the *Dead*. But why would Azazel have a Greek deity tagging along for the sole purpose of bringing him back when what he'd wanted – *needed* – was Sam dead in the first place?

"Does my brother have anything to do with this?" Sam asked suddenly, voice low and cautious. Maybe even a little dangerous.

"We don't have a lot of time," Persephone sidestepped. "I can heal you, but only so long as-"

"Did my brother," Sam repeated, emphasizing every word, "make a deal for you to save me?"

The woman hesitated, eyes shuttering in distaste. She clearly didn't want to answer. Her jaw clenched and worked before she released it with a frustrated sigh. "Yes."

"Then no," the younger Winchester insisted immediately, shaking his head and backing away from Azazel's girl. "No. Take it back."

"I can't.". The goddess shrugged a single shoulder, though there was tension there that betrayed the indifference she was aiming for. Before Sam could ask why, she added, "Dean is already completing his end of the deal. Now I must complete mine."

"What end?" Sam regained the ground he'd forfeited, anger sparking in his chest. Dean had *promised* , damnit. But… this wasn't a crossroads demon standing in front of him. So what *had* he agreed to?

"To kill the demon that killed you," the woman answered easily enough. His distrust must have shown, however, because Persephone looked like she was trying very hard not to roll her eyes. She took a measured breath before explaining, "Seeing as Tom wants you dead for some reason, he's going to try to stop me from healing you. Your brother agreed to stop him first."

"And that's… it?" Sam didn't know if he believed it. Knew he didn't, actually. His gut didn't really think she was lying, but this… all of it was too easy. Too convenient. There had to be a catch.

“That’s it,” she confirmed with a nod. She still hadn’t moved any closer and a small bit – the *tiniest* bit – of Sam started to maybe just believe her. “Dean kills the demon and his part is done. Yours, however, is not.”

The hunter’s head snapped back up, gut sinking. There was always a catch. He clenched his jaw, hands curling into fists at his side once more. “My part?”

“You must agree to the Bind or It will kill you as surely as bleeding out is now.”

“The bind.” Sam needed to stop echoing everything she said. He needed his brain to catch up – he felt six steps behind this conversation – and he needed to start forming full sentences comprised of his own words, not just hers. “What is the… Bind?”

Well, he supposed, it wasn't just an echo or what she'd said…

“Souls are attached to the body by…” she paused, half raising a hand, fingers and thumb pinching together as though she was trying to grasp something. “What is the word? St-strings?” Persephone didn’t sound confident in her choice. She shook her head, annoyance leaking through again. “Nukirizi. Roots. Made of energy. They are not easily broken, although death does weaken them.”

“The detachment process,” Sam muttered, brain recalling the words she’d spoken earlier that he hadn’t understood at the time. Across the length of the study table, she nodded.

“Yes, a soul will start to separate when its body dies. But these roots are very powerful; even death does not break them all.”

Which explained why ghosts were usually attached to something they’d owned or couldn’t leave specific locations they were tied to. Sam’s brain was starting to churn at a familiar pace.

“There are only a handful of things that can,” Persephone continued, and Sam’s chest hitched as he finally realized where she was going with this.

“Reapers,” Sam breathed out and the goddess nodded. He couldn’t look away from those intense eyes, still locked on him.

“There are fewer still than can remake them.”

Sam realized what she was offering and wanted to run away every bit as much as he wanted to tell her yes. Do it. Get him back to his brother before Dean got himself killed or did something even dumber.

But it couldn't be that easy. He couldn't afford to be that gullible.

“You?” Sam hazarded, chest tight with the full weight of the conversation - a discussion about *souls* - that settled down in his gut like lead.

“Yes. It is called the Bind. I will form my own connections between your soul and your body. Once they are stable, I can then heal you.”

“Your own?” Sam's words sounded numb to his own ears, but his inner thoughts were on the express train towards panic. Souls weren’t things you let anyone go poking about. He’d only needed one childhood hunt of a rampaging crocotta to understand that.

As for the roots of energy she’d mentioned, what would it mean for her to replace that energy, *his* energy, his *soul's* energy, with her own? Because that sounded way too close to possession to Sam (or something even worse). Suspicion warred with fear and the younger Winchester could feel his pulse racing beneath his skin. There was a catch here. He knew it, he just hadn't figured out what it was, yet. What she was hinting at without saying in so many words. “What does that mean?”

“It means I will be the only one able to break those connections once they are formed,” she replied, eyeing him with caution. Sam realized, with a jolt of surprise and confusion, that she was trying to judge his reactions so she could act accordingly. She needed something from him. “If I replace the bindings of your soul, no reaper can ever claim you, Sam.”

The floor of the library dropped out from under Sam’s feet and he stared at the creature offering him… what was she offering him? It couldn’t be what he was thinking.

It couldn't be.

“What happens? When- when a soul can’t be reaped?” he asked breathlessly, afraid of the answer and not even sure what it could be. But it was better than the other question, which was just too ridiculous, too far-fetched, to ask out loud.

*‘I’ll be… **immortal** ?’*

“I heal you.” She speared him with a fierce look he couldn’t identify. “I find you and heal your body. It is my part in the Bind. One I intend to honor immediately once you say yes. Assuming you live long enough to say it, that is.”

There was no mistaking the snark now.

“What are the consequences of this?” Sam found himself asking anyway, heedless of her growing impatience. He needed answers. His hands were shaking and his brain spun and spun. There had to be consequences of not being able to die. He didn’t have any interest in immortality: never had. But what she was offering could be a way out of Dean’s demon deal. In fact, Sam was sure that was why Dean had agreed to it. If Sam couldn’t die, Hell lost its best leverage; Dean would never sell his soul. He’d never be their Righteous Man.

They could do this. They could hold out, together, and avert the end of the world.

If it was real. If it didn’t come with worse consequences than a demon deal. But what were the consequences of having an unknown creature mess around with his *soul* and then provide him with some ambiguous version of immortality?

Because there were definitely consequences to that insane scenario. There had to be, she just wasn’t telling them to him..

“Sam.” Persephone’s voice dropped in volume and tone, softer and more sympathetic. Sam’s head snapped back up only to find the woman directly in front of him. *Shit* , when had she even moved? “We are out of time for talking. You need to say yes.”

“What do you get out of it?”

Persephone blinked at the blunt and breathless question. “What?”

“You said this came at no cost.” Sam continued, taking a step away from her. He crossed his arms over his chest, feeling defensive. She was being evasive and this was no small thing they were discussing. He needed *answers* , whether he was out of time or not. He wasn’t agreeing to- to… *whatever* this was without knowing *what* it was first, damnit. “That all Dean had to do was kill a demon, all I have to do is say yes and- and-“ apparently never die, “-end of deal. If that’s true, then what’s in it for you?”

She watched him, eyes wary, and he realized she was trying to figure

out what he wanted. It shouldn't be that hard, he thought. He wanted the truth.

"... Azazel didn't want me to," she finally answered and it was not what Sam had been expecting.

His sharp frown said as much, arms uncrossing in his surprise. "What?"

"He would not let me create the Bind." Persephone hesitated, mouth forming around words that she hadn't planned to say and was now questioning whether she should. After a moment – of what Sam was sure was frustration flashing across her features – she continued, "Azazel wanted a deal: my freedom for the Bind. But then he made me wait."

Staring down at the diminutive woman from his vision – the one he remembered being so full of bitter rage she'd all but burned with it – Sam got the impression Persephone would be pacing if she wasn't so close to him. Some of that anger was very much visible now, but it was backed by something else, too. He just wasn't sure what, and that worried him.

"There's no reason to delay a binding; they are usually done on *infants,* Sam, not full-grown adults. Every day you delay the Bind, you risk injury and death that could have otherwise been prevented."

"But Azazel ne- wanted me dead." Sam stumbled mid-sentence, deciding at the last second to keep what he knew of Azazel's plans to himself. Instead, he watched Persephone closely for any reaction. Did she know what Azazel's plan was? Did she know the end goal?

"Yes." Persephone shrugged, as though it was a simple thing, wanting someone dead. Just another Tuesday. "But Azazel is not here now. Your brother will kill his hell spawn, you will live, and I get to walk away from all of this, free. As a bonus, I will have messed up whatever that yellow-eyed shabarra had planned. As far as I am concerned, that is a win."

She sounded almost defensive about it, like Sam might somehow disagree.

If it was true. For all he knew, she could be an incredible actor.

"Sam." Her voice went soft again, drawing his focus away from his thoughts and back to her. She looked annoyed, but also trying to be

understanding. “No more questions. It is time. Look around you.”

The hunter did, realizing for the first time that the world around them was quite literally fading. The library was growing dark, the far shelves of books had already faded into a void of nothingness, which was slowly creeping closer. It reminded him of being in his Dad’s dream, with the Baku. Instinctually, Sam knew he couldn’t go into that darkness.

That void was surrender. An End. Death.

Sam jerked his head to Jess, fear suddenly spiking in his chest. She studied on, oblivious to the way her edges were starting to blur towards the darkness. It would take her. It would take both of them, if he stayed. The thought of losing her, of letting her just *disappear* into nothingness caused a minor panic attack that Sam had to shove back down. She wasn’t real. She *wasn’t real* .

It was a mantra he repeated in his head until he could breathe through the primal fear.

“You are dying.” He slowly turned his gaze back to the goddess standing right in front of him, once more close. Too close. But there was nowhere left to go. “And if you don’t want to stay dead, you need to agree to the Bind right now.”

Persephone reached out with one hand, splaying it across his chest, and Sam suddenly found it hard to breathe There was something *there* , between her fingers. A warmth that tingled sharply from across his chest, and another behind his navel. They were like little spheres of heat and… tranquility.

Sam looked down, shocked (and definitely wary) to his chest glowing red beneath his shirt in those three, distinct spots. Persephone’s hand was splayed out between them all, rising and falling with his rapid breaths.

Their warmth was calming, and Sam realized how badly he wanted to listen to it.

‘It’s going to be okay ,’ they said. *‘You have nothing to fear* .’

He shouldn’t listen, but oh, how he wanted to. The promise that everything would be fine – that he could relax, stand down, *breathe* again – was just on the horizon. Hazel eyes met green, his skin tingled beneath her hand, and Persephone’s eyes started to glow.

“Say yes, Sam.”

He stared down at those glowing eyes, the ones from his vision. But there wasn’t anger in them right now. She was desperate, Sam realized. Her freedom depended on his cooperation.

‘I don’t think she’s lying ,’ he thought, the words surprising him in their confidence. Because there was still no way this wasn’t a trap. There just… wasn’t.

‘Well, ’ another voice added to his thoughts and it sounded a hell of a lot like Dean, ‘ *If she is, at least we’ll have bought ourselves time to hunt the bitch down and kill her.’*

A third voice, undeniably Bobby, called them all, *‘Idjits.’*

Sam took a deep breath. Persephone was watching him, waiting on him, eyes flickering back and forth between his own. He saw the moment she spotted his answer before he vocalized it. The red glow between them grew brighter.

“Yes.”

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: Oh my god, you guys. So I was editing this chapter Saturday night, fully expecting to post that evening, soon as I was done. I was halfway through the fight, Dean having lost the Colt and falling back on his boring, normal, useless gun, when I realized OH SHIIIIIIIT. I most definitely specified several chapters ago that Dean had devil-trap bullets in that gun [insert facepalm here]

I had to rewrite the whole fight scene [insert facepalm of epic proportions here]

Soooo, that’s why you didn’t get an update last night 😬 Also, apologies for any errors. I did the full edit, then the rewrite, and an edit of just the rewrite, but I’m not entirely sure I caught everything. But it’s late now and I have to go to bed!

Extra Special Thank You: To **Artemis_101** for the brainstorm session today to fix the fight and **Forestpelt** for waking up to my frantic DM requesting she read the fixed fight at 11pm at night so I could feel better about it (and actually doing it, despite fighting sleep the whole time and telling me to (and I'm paraphrasing here because she's a nice person who doesn't swear at her friends like I do) fuck off when I insisted she go back to sleep)

Persephone: Okay, second oh my god, you guys. Fun story - this chapter and last week's were ones that I worried about for *years*. I knew pretty early on in the planning stages that I wanted to include Persephone as a character, but I was very nervous to integrate an OC so crucially into the plot. But you know what?!? I didn't even realize I was posting *that* chapter last week. It was hours before I thought about it and was stunned to find out I was no longer nervous. You all helped me feel positive and confident enough about my character that I was no longer worried about tying her into the plot.

Thank you so much for that, everyone! You are literally helping to build a writer over here

P.S.Persephone: for those still sitting there, confused or maybe a little grumbly because your love of Greek Mythology is not being respected… still don't fear Demeter is, hands down, my favorite Greek Goddess, so I wouldn't do her daughter dirty. Give me… one more chapter? And then it'll allllll make sense.

(The muse would like me to inform you that it will not make sense, a singular question will be answered with many additional questions.)

(And I would like you all to tell the Muse to shut the hell up, cuz she's the one who planned it in the first place.)

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 134: Season 2: Chapter 100

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Aaaaaaaaaand it's official. Season 2 is 100 friggin chapters long. Unbelievable.

Chapter Warnings: We have got SO MUCH GOING ON this chapter! And it's a lengthy one, oh boy. I almost cut it in two and decided eh, I won't be mean this time.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Sad. There's sad ahead, guys. And then some anger, some confusion, some reveals, a little more sad, and finally we wrap with a vocabulary lesson that just ends in made up names because Dean doesn't do vocabulary lessons. At least, not willingly.

Actual Actual Chapter Warnings: Okay, but no, really, things are gonna get sad for half a second. Hopefully with some warning it doesn't hit too hard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 100

Tom's lifeless body hit the ground – flashes of orange and white light streaking beneath his skin, illuminating his skeleton – as wind whipped up across the road, tugging at the hunters' clothes and hair with increasing strength. Sarge tucked his ears back against the sudden change in weather. He dropped his body low to the ground, army-crawling back to Andy. Bobby shielded his face from the growing hurricane force, Colt still in hand, as he tried to pinpoint the source. Dean, hunched against the increasing winds that whipped around them like a sudden cyclone, spun to his brother, who just so happened to be the source.

Azazel's girl was still straddling Sam. She had one hand spread across his chest, where the symbols she had drawn in blood were now glowing a brilliant, glittering red, and the other curled across his

forehead. And she was *kissing* him.

If Dean had been the one with the Colt, he absolutely would have shot the bitch.

The red glow between the two flared. The wind died as abruptly as it had begun and the sudden silence made time feel slow, maybe even stopped altogether. Sam and Persephone, now free of the blood that had been splattered across chest and chin, were painted instead by the light shining between them. It was nothing short of magical – real money shot right there – and Dean just about chipped a tooth with how hard he was clenching his jaw.

Then the wind was back, this time pulling inward, directly towards the two as though their stupid connection was trying to suck the whole world in. Dean stumbled forward a step at the incredible force. He watched Bobby do the same. It was strong enough that the older Winchester found himself crouching down to minimize his own body acting as a sail.

And then it was gone, the abrupt calm and silence once again shocking in contrast. Dean lifted his head, already wondering, *'What next* ?' when Sam shot upright with a huge, gasping breath.

Chapter Break

"It's time."

Andy ignored the lady next to him. It wasn't the first time she'd said it, after all. Instead, he kept staring at a heaving, *breathing*, Sam Winchester. Andy couldn't look away. Sam was okay. Sam was *okay*. Andy could have just about cried, if ghosts could cry. Could ghosts cry? Well, this ghost felt like crying. He wiped at his eyes, just in case.

"Andy."

The kid sighed and glanced sidelong at the dark haired woman standing beside him, watching Andy instead of the actual miracle happening five feet in front of them. "Five more minutes?"

There was a smile in the crook of her mouth and amusement

twinkling in her eyes even as she said, “You’ve had plenty of minutes, already.”

Andy Gallagher sighed again, louder this time, turning back to his brothers as their lives continued on. “You sure I can’t talk to them?”

Tessa, as she’d introduced herself, shook her head. The smirk only grew. She reminded Andy of this teacher he’d had once, in elementary school. “As sure as I was the last three times you asked.”

The sigh became downright dramatic, and Andy uncrossed one arm to gesture emphatically at the group. “But they’re gonna blame themselves and I-”

A hand landed softly on his shoulder and Andy reluctantly turned to the reaper who, annoyingly, had some very convincing arguments. Andy didn’t want to be convinced, right now. He just wanted to watch his family for a little longer.

“It’s not your fight anymore,” Tessa reasoned, her words kind even if the topic wasn’t so much. She’d been saying a lot of things like that since Andy had followed Sam out of the Morton House only to find her waiting for him at the bottom of the steps. That he could rest now, could finally be at peace, let go of the tension holding all of his muscles and nerves hostage like a medieval vice. Not her words, exactly, but… Andy was a good paraphraser.

“I just want to tell them it’s okay,” he said, looking back to the living. Because now, everything would be. Sam was alive and Dean was hugging him like he very nearly hadn’t been. Bobby was (mostly) unharmed from the fight, watching the brothers like a soldier who wasn’t convinced the battle had been won. And then there was Sarge, still sitting on top of him, chin flat against an unmoving chest, determined to win the Saddest Dog On The Planet award (and oh, would you look at that, ghosts could, in fact, cry). “That I’m okay.”

“Are you?”

He dragged his gaze away from his family – trying to burn them into his memory so he’d never forget – and back to the reaper. There was something cold about her, something not quite emotional enough to be human, but she was nice, nonetheless. Andy kinda liked her. Tessa was the straightforward type, and he could appreciate that in a conversation about death.

“Yeah,” he confirmed with a goofy smile. “Yeah, I’m okay with this.”

Sam was going to be alright, Dean shouldn't do anything too terribly stupid going forward, and Bobby would keep an eye on them both. Andy's part in this story could end, like Tessa had been saying. They'd be okay from here on out without him.

Meanwhile, Tracy was waiting for him, if what Dean said about the afterlife was true. Along with a whole bunch of really good memories, a solid half of which would feature the people he was now leaving behind. He couldn't stay with them, but he'd at least get to be with them upstairs.

Assuming he got into Heaven, of course. Tessa was being a tight-lipped tease about the whole process, but Andy liked to think if he was going the other way, he should have at least gotten to see a Hellhound. Dean said they were nasty buggers and Andy could admit to a morbid curiosity there.

Besides, he knew he hadn't always been good, but overall… Andy glanced over his shoulder one more time at the brothers, at Bobby and his dog, the people who would mourn him.

Overall, he liked to think he'd done good.

"Alright, let's do this," he announced, holding his hand out to Tessa like a six year old him had once done with the elementary school teacher she absolutely reminded him of. "Take me to your leader!"

The smirk was back, along with a headshake (which Andy counted as a solid win), but she reached out and took his hand. A peaceful, pure white light enveloped him and Andy closed his eyes and let it.

Chapter Break

Sam's abrupt change from lifeless to bolting upright in the timespan of a single blink dislodged Azazel's girl from atop the younger Winchester. She ended up in a half crouch, half knocked-on-her-ass kneel beside Sam as he continued heaving like he'd just run a marathon, wide brown eyes locked on her intense blue.

"Sam!"

That mop of brown hair spun at his brother's cry, and Dean was at his

side, pulling him into a fierce hug before the younger Winchester had fully recovered his breath. Or figured out what was going on.

“Dean?” he asked, confused and breathless, as he wrapped an arm around his brother in return. Over his shoulder, Sam stared in shock at the lifeless body that had housed a demon last time he’d been conscious. His gaze rose to Bobby, standing a dozen feet away, near the line of cars he vaguely remembered, though they had significantly more damage now. The older hunter gave him a relieved nod and Sam, realizing that the library dream had not been a dream at all and he had been dead or dying, nodded back, water pooling in his eyes.

Those tears, which he had kept at bay with a mix of bewilderment, lingering shock, and some willpower, tumbled down his cheeks when his eyes landed on Andy. He was still in the center of the road, lying lifelessly on his back. Sarge was crouched atop his unmoving body and Sam had no doubt the dog had protected him throughout the fight.

“Andy,” he sobbed, trying desperately to pull his grief back from the emotional ledge he was absolutely approaching.

“I know.” Dean’s arms tightened around him, his voice equally anguished and Sam was pretty sure his older brother was crying right alongside him. Dean pulled back, keeping a firm grip on Sam’s arms, as though he wasn’t convinced the kid would still be there if he let go. “I’m sorry, Sammy. I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Sam wiped at his face, gaze lingering on Andy, before he turned to Persephone, crouched on his other side with enough distance to be aware, if not respectful, of the tearful reunion. She looked different than she had in his dream. Her skin was pale, her hair blonde and her eyes blue. This was the woman from the bar. But blue or green, that intense stare was the same. It reminded Sam of Castiel, and that gave him hope.

“Can you heal him too?” he asked weakly, still wiping his cheeks.

Persephone did not move at first, just crouched there, staring at his pleading eyes full of unshed tears. Then she stood and, without a word, headed over to Andy’s body. Bobby raised the Colt as she approached, but Persephone ignored the hunter entirely.

“Bobby,” Sam called, shaking his head at his surrogate father. “Don’t.”

The older man looked reluctant as hell to lower the gun, but he trusted his kids. At least until this woman gave him even the slightest reason not to.

Persephone returned to a crouch, this time beside Andy. Sarge growled lowly at her but did not move as she reached out with an open palm, hovering as much over Andy's chest as she could with the dog sitting atop him. The three hunters waited in silence, each holding their breath, until she rose, lowering her hand. She met Sam's eyes with a slow shake of her head.

"He's gone," she confirmed. Beside her, Bobby's chin dropped to his chest and his soft swearing, muttered under his breath, drew Persephone's gaze to the older hunter.

"But… you brought me back," Sam tried again, struggling to his feet. Dean helped him up, but Sam waved him off once he had his footing. "Can't you bring him back, too? I-I can make a deal."

"Sam, no," Dean immediately hissed, already shaking his head, but it was more warning than outright disapproval. Not like he had a lot of room to talk, after all.

A muscle in Persephone's jaw twitched, but that was the only visible reaction she let slip. "It doesn't work that way."

Sammy looked so damn heartbroken but accepting, that Dean had to look away lest that dust that had gotten in his eyes (during the battle, obviously) cause any more of a physical reaction than he'd already had. The younger Winchester, head hanging, moved over to Andy's body, falling to his knees beside him. He reached out, bracing a hand on the boy's shoulder. His eyes slid closed as he prayed over his friend's- no, his brother's body.

Azazel's girl stepped back, removing herself from what was clearly a moment of mourning. Unwittingly, she had retreated closer to the older Winchester, who was regarding her with no small amount of distrust.

"So how does it work, huh?" Dean growled, keeping his voice low enough to stay between the two of them. Persephone wasn't so much next to him as she was closer to him than she was to Sam. Which made it the perfect time for a quiet little chat just between the two of them. "What the hell did you do to my brother?"

Sam might be grieving – and make no mistake, Dean would later,

when he had time – but he wasn't much for prayer and remembrance. He was more the type to grab the nearest weapon and murderize the person responsible for his grief, then bring them back so he could murderize them again. Having already done that, at least to the extent that he could, it was time for the next best thing: answers.

Persephone's eyes slid to him, eyebrows raising in a way that Dean could only read as incredibly unimpressed. That, or bored.

Yeah? Well, screw her.

"I saved him," the mystery lady responded with an even, detached tone. But it didn't matter; Dean could hear the condescension. "As I promised I would."

Dean squared up; he turned fully towards her, shoulders back and chin raised. At his sides, his fingers curled into loose fists. Unlike Azazel's girl, he didn't hold back his anger. "And the *kiss* ?"

Her eyebrows twitched downward, not so much a frown as the thought of one. "What of it?"

What of it? The hunter scoffed. He leaned in towards her, going for threatening. She didn't seem to notice. "You know who seals a deal with a kiss? *Demons*."

He almost added, *'Christo,'* at the end, just to see, even though he was already pretty sure she wasn't one. For one, Chest Cas was being oddly quiet, and he was never quiet this close to demons. As he was thinking of tacking it on just out of principle, Persephone frowned. For a brief moment, she looked genuinely confused. Then she just looked offended.

"I am not a demon," she replied clearly, enunciating each word with enough distaste (along with some bafflement as to why he would think she was one in the first place) that Dean chose to believe her. For now.

"Then what are you?"

"Persephone."

Both human and creature turned as one at Sam's voice, joining the conversation that was supposed to be quiet enough to leave him out of it (which had been unlikely to begin with. Any conversation that involved Dean Winchester and some amount of anger-slash-distrust-

slash-confusion was not going to stay *quiet.*) The younger Winchester was back on his feet, though he had yet to leave Andy's side. He regarded his brother and his savior with a mix of wariness and awe, respectively.

A muscle in Dean's jaw started to twitch and he could already feel the toothache coming back.

"The Greek goddess of the dead," Sam clarified, like Dean didn't know his lore. Which, okay, fine, he *didn't*, but that wasn't the point.

The point was to hear it from Persephone because he was pretty sure Sam was wrong. But as Dean stared pointedly at the woman, she remained silent. Her eyes stayed locked on Sam and Dean did not know what it was about this chick, but he did *not* like her. And he trusted his gut when it came to this stuff.

"That true?" he challenged loudly, still staring directly at her. Her gaze slid his way and oh, yeah, he really, *really* didn't like this woman.

"Is there a reason it wouldn't be?" she countered, conveniently not answering the question.

Sam, sensing the growing tension, took a step towards them. "Guys-"

"Sam," Dean interrupted before his kid brother could bring out the puppy eyes that were absolutely not appropriate for this setting. "Help Bobby get Andy in the truck."

The younger Winchester faltered, eyes drawn back to their fallen brother. Sam looked torn, both in action and emotion, as loss shadowed his face once again. But he turned back to his older brother, shoulders drawn back despite the grief that flooded his lanky frame.

"Dean-"

" *Now*, Sammy," the man from the future barked, pulling out John Winchester's command voice. Sam's entire manner hardened at that, and Dean knew he'd have to make some apologies later. But right now….

"Come on, Sam," Bobby muttered, coming up beside the taller hunter. "Let's take care of our own."

The younger Winchester practically deflated at that, grief winning the

battle. He spared one warning look at Dean – the one that said *'At least don't kill her, alright?'* – but turned towards the task of caring for his other brother. As Sam moved Sarge from his guard post with a soft hand, Bobby gestured to the older Winchester and Dean, having a feeling about what he wanted, took the several steps forward to meet him halfway.

"Chamber's empty," Bobby mumbled just under his breath as he passed his kid the Colt, keeping the gun between their bodies and out of sight. "But she don't know that."

Dean grinned at his surrogate father figure. "You're awesome, Bobby."

"I'll keep Sam distracted," the older hunter sidestepped the praise. "Can't promise how long that'll work."

Already, the younger Winchester was glancing over his shoulder at the three of them, eyes continuously sliding from his family over to Persephone in a way Dean did not like. It screamed curiosity, which, in Sam's hands, screamed trouble.

Bobby moved back over to Sam and Andy, settling a hand on the younger Winchester's shoulder and giving it a squeeze before the two got to work. Dean watched them lift Andy from the ground and begin the slow shuffle down the line of cars.

He stowed any and all feelings currently vying for his attention and instead turned back to their current (and therefore biggest) problem. Persephone was watching him: one part wary, two parts unimpressed.

"You going to give me a gun talk, now?" she asked, apropos of nothing.

Dean pulled his head back, momentarily taken aback. His nose wrinkled in confusion, and if Persephone did not already vehemently dislike this hunter, she might have found it cute. Luckily, she absolutely did not because she vehemently disliked this hunter.

"A what?"

"I don't imagine you'd kill me with a shovel when you have a gun right there," she explained, gesturing her head to the Colt, wrapped securely in his right hand.

"You don't kill the person with the shovel," Dean corrected

automatically, before he realized how insane it was to be interrupting their current situation for a lesson on idioms. "You dig the grave you're going to put them into- why am I explaining this to you? What the hell are you?"

Persephone raised her eyebrows at him, though whether it was from the explanation, the rapid abandonment of said explanation, or the repeated question that had now been answered… at least twice, she believed. She was, however, oddly enjoying needling the man in front of her. She decided to stick with that.

"Not something that can be killed – or buried – with a shovel."

Oh, Dean was so done with this. He raised the Colt, leveling it her way, though he didn't draw back the hammer just yet. "How about a gun, then?"

Her eyes dropped to the weapon in his hand and stayed there for long enough that Dean seriously considered cocking it just to remind her of the situation – the *perilous* situation – that should warrant some urgency. The bare minimum of it, at least.

"That gun?" she finally asked, eyes sliding back up to the Winchester. "I honestly don't know. It would take quite some time to dig a grave with it, but I don't see how that would-"

Dean cocked the hammer.

"Yes, probably," Persephone conceded, changing tactics about as quickly as Dean had. She raised her hands in a slow, exasperated manner, until they were at shoulder level, palms turned out. Dean took it as the surrender it was and ignored the attitude.

"Good. So, now you're going to tell me what the hell you actually are, and I'll decide whether or not I'm going to 'probably' kill you." Dean kept the gun steady, done playing
games.

"Sam already told you. My name is Persephone," the woman answered, sass dropped for now and tone more serious. Her answer wasn't, though, and Dean scoffed, growing increasingly irritated but not surprised.

"Not what I asked."

Persephone regarded the hunter like a cat might a canary. Oh yeah,

Dean was definitely shooting her. Whether or not they figured out what she actually was, Dean was definitely shooting her. Then he'd figure out what would make the act a lot more permanent and use that.

That, or he was going to make more bullets for the Colt. Which had very recently been added to his to-do list, anyway.

But until then, shooting her with normal bullets would be cathartic.

"You don't know the Greek Pantheon?" she challenged, eyebrows raised once more. "As your brother said, I'm-"

"Yeah, I know. Since when do Greek goddesses, of the dead or otherwise," he pinned on derisively (he *knew* things. Even if those things were announced by Sam minutes earlier), "cast spells in *Enochian* ?"

Dean had seen the symbols she'd painted on his brother's chest (in the kid's *blood*, he might add, not at all green around the gills just thinking about it) and they sure as hell hadn't been Greek. The man from the future had first been shocked, then confused, and then furious to realize what they were written in (other than *his brother's blood*, thank you very much!)

Blue eyes (which didn't hold a candle to Cas's, by the way. Not that Dean was thinking about that, because he *wasn't*) widened in the first genuine expression he had seen out of this woman. Her arms, still raised in surrender, dropped to her sides. He'd stunned her snarky ass into silence. Well, good.

"So I'll ask again," Dean repeated, lifting the Colt ever so slightly for the very purpose of getting that gaze to shift to the gun that could 'probably' kill her. Which was total bullshit, in his opinion. He didn't know what she was, but she was no archangel. He thought. Was pretty sure. "What the hell are you?"

"Surprised," came the immediate response and Dean was pretty sure his forehead pulled a Sam and smoothed out completely.

But Persephone was surprised. Bewildered, actually. Even if Dean was psychic, as Chuck's writing indicated (though she had her doubts about that. She couldn't place what about it felt false, but there was something in the prophet's words that didn't seem right), his powers gave him the ability to predict the future, not read thoughts or languages. All of Chuck's writings on the matter indicated Dean

Winchester's view was limited to the very near future.

She had no clue how that could have taught him the angelic language.

The mysterious 'Cas' that had shown up enigmatically in the prophet's works was looking more and more like an angel. One that she would be avoiding *emphatically* from now on.

"Lady, I won't ask a third time." Dean brought her attention back to the current situation. It was obvious from the way his hand continuously flexed and tensed on the handle of the gun that he very much wanted to shoot her. She wondered why he hadn't.

(To be honest, if he could have shot her, he probably would have.)

"It would be the fourth."

(Would beating someone to death with the Colt kill them? That should count, right? It was the gun that could kill anything. Surely that logic extended beyond just the bullets?)

"You an angel?" Dean bit out through clenched teeth, deciding to change tactics yet again. Despite staring down the barrel of her own death, this woman didn't seem particularly motivated to speak truthfully. Or on-topic. And without bullets, Dean didn't have many other methods of persuasion at his disposal.

" *No*."

The force and derision with which she'd immediately snapped that answer left Dean inclined, at least in part, to believe her. As well as curious as to what the hell Heaven had done to piss her off. It was clearly something, because whatever she was, she did not like angels.

"And we've already covered you're not a demon."

"Do my eyes look black to you?" she spat.

"You were working with 'em," Dean countered, even though he knew plenty of reasons – had even resorted to several of them himself – for teaming up with a demon. Not that any of them had ever been a good enough reason to justify what it cost in the end.

"By necessity only. I am not some… *hell spawn*." Persephone's lip curled into a snarl. Irritation was now obvious in every line of her

body.

Well, look at that, Dean thought. Lady was an equalist. She apparently hated everyone on the playing field equally.

Her gaze shifted past Dean, to where Sam had gone, like she could change the topic by physically finding a different one. “Is there a reason we are not having this conversation with your brother? I already explained all this to him.”

“Yeah: I don’t trust you,” Dean answered immediately. That was an easy one. “You were working with Azazel, and Azazel wants my brother dead. So you don’t get to be anywhere near him.”

“I stopped that from happening!” she argued back, growing annoyed with this human’s circular dispute that was taking both of them absolutely nowhere. “Clearly, I’m not working with him.”

“And yet he’s the one that dug you up. You tricked Sam in that bar to get his blood-- oh yeah, I know all about that – and you were the one that called us and told us to go to Rivergrove. Which was a *demon* trap.”

Persephone actually quieted on that last one, looking away in what Dean would call guilt if he thought the creature was capable of it. “I didn’t know what was going to happen there.”

She’d read about it, later, through Chuck’s writing, and had been… admittedly horrified. She had never heard the term ‘Zombie’ before, and several YouTube clips later, she had never wanted to hear it again. That yellow-eyed bastardization-of-nature had proven to be a real monster. She should not have been as surprised as she was.

“Azazel was blackmailing me,” she added angrily, knowing that ignorance was a poor excuse, but the truth was only a single step up from it. Especially since, even if she had known what was waiting for the Winchesters in Oregon, she likely would have made the call regardless. That was the joy of blackmail; it didn’t leave you with much choice. “But sure, call it ‘working together,’ if you want.”

“Oh, I will,” the man from the future bit out, though he had the most annoying sensation that he was somehow losing an argument he had started and should have all the high ground in. “Because I don’t trust you.”

Persephone returned to being completely unimpressed with him.

“You said that already.”

“Well, I’m saying it again!” Dean bit back more words. How was this woman *this* annoying? It was like dealing with Crowley, only somehow *worse*. Dean hadn’t thought that was possible before now. And she’d gotten him off topic, *again*. He corrected his aim, which had definitely gone lax between all the yelling (physically and verbally), and trained the Colt on her once more. “Last chance. You cast spells in Enochian and seal deals with a kiss, but you’re not an angel or a demon. So what. The hell. Are you.”

The woman glared at the hunter, then the gun in his hand. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, looking sullenly off to the side and contemplating which sounded worse: telling Dean Winchester the truth or dying. Unfortunately, she’d told Chuck she would return on Monday, so it would be professionally irresponsible to choose death. Persephone sighed. It was the sound of someone utterly inconvenienced.

“I’m one of the Golmagenim.”

Dean stared. If he had been expecting a big revelation that meant something to him… that wasn’t it. “Never heard of ‘em.”

“Unsurprising,” Persephone started and, given her continued put upon attitude, Dean took it as an insult to his intelligence. He had a devastating retort ready on the tip of his tongue when she continued, “You’d need something a lot older than Google.”

Huh. She sounded genuine about that. The sentiment, not the Google comment. Every monster on Earth had been around longer than Google. Except Internet Trolls.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’ve got you here to explain it to me, then.” Dean glanced over his shoulder at the cars a couple dozen feet away. Bobby’s truck was last in the line. It was hard to see past two sets of headlights, but Dean could see the silhouette of his brother next to what he assumed was Bobby. The old man was making good on his promise of a distraction, whatever it was. Though Dean didn’t know how much longer any distraction could last, realistically. He turned back to Azazel’s girl. “So start talking. What the hell is a Gol…” Dean faltered, realizing the word had gone in one ear and right out the other. “Gol…magma…nin…ja and whose side are you on? Or I start shooting.”

He waved the Colt for emphasis and not, in any way, to distract from

the fact that he had no idea how to pronounce what this woman was.

“Golmagen,” she corrected, emphasis on ‘goal’ and all soft vowels on the ‘mahgun’. “Golmagenim is already plural. It’s the ‘i-m’ at the end that-”

Dean lowered the Colt and used his other hand to release the hammer. Then he raised the gun once more and cocked it again, making sure to do it extra pointedly.

Persephone cleared her throat. “I’m on my own side.”

“Bullshit, everyone has a side in this.”

“I do: *my own*,” the woman ground out between clenched teeth, unsure how else to get through to this hunter that she wasn’t the threat, here. As she had demonstrated by *saving Sam’s life*.

“Look, Azazel broke me out of my own little Guantanamo Bay, alright? In exchange for my freedom, he wanted me to bind to Sam Winchester. I’ve done that.” She gestured widely with one arm in the direction Sam had taken, and Tom’s lifeless meatsuit with the other. “Now Azazel’s not here, his hell spawn is dead, and I’m free. I am, officially, on *my own side.* ”

She tossed both arms out to the side in as clear a *‘get it through your head’* gesture as Dean had ever seen. This woman absolutely knew Crowley. One way or another. She’d taken lessons from him, was his protégé or padawan or something. Dean was sure of it.

And then her words caught up with him, and he exploded: “What do you mean, *bind* to my brother?!”

Whatever Persephone replied with, it wasn’t English. Or Enochian. But Dean was certain it was rude. Especially with the way her hands curled into claws and she shook them in front of her like she was hoping to crush someone’s skull.

She dropped her arms with a world-weary noise of resignation and abruptly switched back to English. “You know what, go ahead and shoot me.”

“Dean?”

Creature and hunter turned as one. Sam was standing next to what remained of Tom’s shattered car. He eyed the two of them warily (

both of them, this time, which Dean found much more appropriate) before holding out his hand.

"I need your phone."

Dean pulled his head back, the hand not holding a gun on Persephone was tossed out in equal exasperation. "What's wrong with yours?"

Now Sam was the one looking entirely unimpressed with him, and Dean found himself switching between his brother and Persephone, eying them each like maybe one of them had coordinated the expression.

Sam hadn't moved, but Dean got the distinct impression of Soccer-Mom Samantha putting her hands on her hips. "If I had my phone on me, don't you think I'd have called you five hours ago when I woke up trapped in the *Morton* house?"

Alright, fair. That was a fair hit.

Sam's phone was in the Impala. Dean knew that because shortly after hanging up on Bobby at that gas station and then running a friggin' mile after Miss God Damn Magma-Ninja, he'd tried to call Sam once he was back in the car. Only to remember that it had been Sam's phone he'd been talking to Bobby on when it started ringing from his jacket pocket.

Dean dug his hand into his jeans and pulled out his cell. He tossed it to Sam, who caught and flipped it open in one move.

"Yeah, I was worried it'd be the same," Sam said, not dialing but instead staring at the device with resignation. Dean was frowning even as his brother held up his phone to reveal a black and shattered screen.

"What the hell?" the older Winchester said, dropping the arm holding the Colt and making his way over to Sam. He took the phone from his brother with his free hand, repeatedly pressing and holding the power button. Nothing happened. "It didn't get hit in the fight… at least I don't think it did."

"Bobby's is the same," Sam explained, and Dean's eyes snapped up to his. The younger Winchester shrugged. "We don't know what caused it. I'm assuming the same thing that did that."

He thumbed over his shoulder at the completely shattered windshield

– as in, no longer there and instead scattered across the front seats and floor – of the car Dean had come to a stop behind after his frantic drive here. The car the demon had come out of.

"The demon," Dean growled, eyes snapping to the empty meatsuit lying a dozen feet away. Sam followed his gaze while Dean started planning how to bring that bastard back from the dead so he could murderize him again and then dance on his grave.

His Baby better be okay, damnit.

He'd never seen an every-day-demon do that kind of damage before, but he remembered how the driver's side door of the car had blown off like debris from a bomb blast. The demon had exited immediately afterward. And Azazel's girl said that demon was one of Yellow Eyes' children, like Meg had been.

Dean glanced back over his shoulder at Persephone, who was regarding the two of them with a forced neutrality that betrayed her interest; she was clearly listening. Catching his stare, however, she remained utterly unhelpful and completely silent. Dean was coming to expect as much, though it was no less annoying. He turned back to Sam, pressing the Colt into his brother's hands. "Stay here. Watch her."

Sam's brow rose up and he looked down at the gun, over to Persephone, then back to his brother. "Why do I need to watch her? And why do I need a gun to do that?"

"Because we don't know shit about her," Dean growled, dropping his voice to keep the conversation between them. "Just make sure she doesn't leave. I want answers and she's crap at giving them."

Sam held the gun in a way that made it very clear he had little intention of using it and instead was about to use it as Exhibit A in the case of Sam vs. Why Dean is Always Wrong. Dean could already tell he was preparing his opening introductions, and it began with a Bitchface (#9).

"Did you try *asking* her?"

Dean's glare was a bitchface all its own and he bodily shoved past his brother. "Just do it, will you?"

He headed past the first car, realizing it wasn't just the windshield that had taken a hit. The driver's window was completely gone as

well, the passenger's shattered but still intact, and the rear window was badly cracked.

Then he saw her.

"No, no, no, no, no!" he muttered frantically, running the rest of the way to his Lady, who had a large, deep cracking running the length of her windshield, from top left to bottom right. He ran his hands along her hood before assessing the damaged glass with gentle probes. "Oh, Baby. What did they do to you?"

He was going to resurrect that black-eyed bastard and *roast him on a spit.*

"Sorry. I would have warned you, but I thought you already knew," Sam said cautiously from his side, staring at the windshield of the Impala with an acceptable amount of sympathy. The Colt was still in his hand, though it was down by his side, being completely useless.

Dean stared at his brother then leaned around his gargantuan frame to see the empty road beyond. He couldn't see past the first car to where Persephone had last been standing, but she sure as shit wasn't within 'watching' distance.

"What the hell, Sam!" He went to swipe the gun back from his brother, but the jerk of a beanstalk took one big step back and Dean missed.

"She saved my life, Dean," the younger Winchester insisted, tone admonishing and a stern look on his face that Dean did not think appropriate in the slightest. He was not the one who should be getting a lecture here. He was not the one playing *keep away* with their magical-kill-anything gun. "She's not our prisoner. I asked her to stay, but if she wants to leave, that's her choice."

"God damnit, Sammy," Dean swore, physically torn between stomping back to the front of the cars where Azazel's girl was surely *not*, or giving up on that endeavor since it would obviously be a waste of time, no matter how cathartic stomping would be right now. Ultimately, he tugged open the driver's door, putting it pointedly between himself and his traitorous kid brother, before sliding into the front seat.

Dean leaned across to the passenger side and opened the glove compartment. Four phones tumbled out and the older Winchester scooped up the first one his hand found. Flipping it open revealed a

shattered screen and the phone refused to power on no matter how hard Dean pressed the power button.

“Son of a bitch.”

He dug out two more, not even bothering with the last one when they yielded the same shattered, useless result as the first.

“What the hell is this?” he growled, throwing the phones back into the compartment and slamming it shut.

“Thought you said it was a demon,” Sam replied, having leaned down into the doorway so he could see the results of the phones as Dean went through them. Considering Bobby and Dean’s phones were both toast, he wasn’t entirely surprised to find these ones were as well, though he had been hoping otherwise.

“Never seen a demon do anything like that before,” he muttered, straightening back up.

It looked more like what an angel could do. Dean swung his legs out of the car, his brother taking a step back to give him more space, sticking close enough that his arm remained propped on top of the open door. From the driver’s seat, Dean cast a subtle look at the abandoned road around them, the stretches of tall grass and woods stretching into the distance. If an angel had been tossing power around out here in the middle of nowhere, they’d have noticed him for sure. So it must have been the demon.

“Dean’s phone the same?” Bobby’s voice came from the back of the Impala, and both Winchesters turned to see him walking up her side. He stopped next to Sam, eyebrows raised in question beneath his ballcap.

Dean was still staring down the length of the car, where Bobby had come from. His truck, where they’d put Andy. The thought of their kid brother, lifeless on the cold metal, had Dean turning away. He focused his eyes on the ground between his feet until he could trust them not to lose it.

“Yeah, same as yours,” Sam answered and Dean was thankful, even if he couldn’t admit it. “Dad’s too. And all our spares.”

“Balls.” Bobby huffed, pulling his cap off his head and running a hand through his hair. He resettled it and put his hands on his hips. “We oughta get going then.”

When both boys looked at him, Dean raising his eyes from the ground and Sam tilting his head in confusion, Bobby continued, “Ellen said she was on her way here and we got no way of telling her to turn around. Either we sit here on our asses till she shows up, or….”

Dean grimaced immediately at the thought of staying here any longer than they had to. They needed to get back to Bobby’s. Regroup. Figure out what the hell had just happened, and what it all meant Apocalypse-wise. Give Andy a proper funeral.

His eyes dropped straight back to the ground and damnit, they didn’t have time for this right now.

Bobby looked between his boys, one barely on his feet after the closest call any of them had had yet – a devil’s miracle if they’d ever seen one – and the other one so keyed up with emotional energy he didn’t want to acknowledge that he was going to pass out or start vibrating where he sat.

“We’ll find a payphone soon as we get to a town,” Bobby decided, using a tone that suggested it was a decision, not a suggestion. He got no pushback from either kid. “Call Ellen, meet up with her wherever she is.”

Dean nodded, climbing to his feet. Sam stepped back, arm sliding off the top of the door.

“What about Persephone?” the younger Winchester asked, head turned back down the road, where he’d left the goddess. He looked down at the Colt in his hand before tucking it into his waistband. Dean groaned.

“Seriously? She’s a threat, Sammy,” he hissed, gesturing with one hand to the gun his brother should be keeping at the ready. Sam just regarded him with another Bitchface (#7 this time), reading his brother easily.

“It’s not even loaded,” the beanstalk countered brattily, shoulders back and spine straight with moral superiority. At the older Winchester’s pulled-back expression (a Dean bitchface if ever there was one), Sam managed not to roll his eyes, but the desire slipped out in a fed-up, little brother sneer anyway. “I know the weight of a loaded gun, Dean, even a Paterson from the dawn of time. And she’s not a threat, she saved my life!”

“In exchange for a deal,” Dean argued back, conveniently leaving out

the part where the woman had, actually, offered to do it for free first. He still didn't trust that, despite her actually holding up her end. Nothing in this life came for free. "Besides, she's *new*, and new is bad. Ruby saved your life once too. It's how she first got in your head!"

Sam's mouth snapped shut at that, putting an abrupt end to the multiple arguments he had prepared in her defense. Because… well, Dean could be right. At the very least, Sam couldn't prove he was wrong. They didn't know anything about Persephone, even if she had saved his life.

"Alright," he conceded, looking away from his brother and nodding. "You're right. We don't know much about her."

"Not enough to trust her, that's for sure," Bobby put in his two cents, watching his boys with wary eyes.

"But not enough to kill her, either," Sam argued one last time, unable to help himself. (He wasn't wrong about that. Of that much, he *was* sure.) He raised his hands in a gesture of peace when both men immediately opened their mouths to argue. "I'm not saying we trust her or keep her around. But she did save my life. So we're letting her go."

The silence after that statement stretched until Dean finally swore and looked away, body physically tense with the urge to stomp his feet like a toddler who didn't get his way. He turned back to his brother, glaring at him and raising a finger in warning.

"Fine, we let her go. But *only* because she saved your life," he added petulantly.

"And because we have no way of killing her," Bobby added most helpfully (more like muttered under his breath a little *too* loudly). Dean nodded, regardless, because he wasn't technically wrong.

"And Andy?"

Both Bobby and Dean turned sharply to the younger Winchester at that. His name alone was enough to reignite the loss, having been temporarily boxed up and hidden away so they could deal with the next crisis. The men both looked away, heads down, and neither said anything for a moment of grief and anger.

"We can't take him…" Sam swallowed back his next thought and tried

a different route. “He deserves a funeral.”

“A real funeral,” Dean corrected waspishly. His glare was a challenge. “A *hunter’s* funeral.”

Sam was more than a little hurt that his own brother could have thought he meant anything else, but didn’t voice it. Tensions were high right now; they were all a little on edge, rubbed raw by loss. Sam didn’t feel right, himself – too calm, too functional for such a chaotic situation – and was pretty sure he’d just come back from the dead.

“We ain’t burning him *here*,” Bobby offered up, also in a less than amiable tone. His face was ruddy-red at the very idea of laying the kid to rest in this damned place.

Sam didn’t take it personally, only took a deep breath and nodded. He didn’t disagree, afterall. This was *not* Andy’s final resting place. If Sam had any say in the matter, there wouldn't be even a memory of the Morton House attached to Andy’s cremation.

“But we can’t take him across state lines,” Sam continued, adamant in a way that felt wrong in this place. Like he was arguing for the wrong side of things. When Dean looked confused and Bobby dubious, Sam tried to explain; “Bobby’s place is a long way to drive with a… with… uh, Andy in the… back.”

Dean was back to looking at the ground, the image of his kid brother on cold metal once more in his head, now beneath a flapping tarp. He felt sick to his stomach. Eventually he had to close his eyes against it just to make it go away and anger flooded his body like a hornet’s nest. It buzzed along his skin and left a flush of heat in its wake.

Suddenly he was angry at everything. This place, this fucking timeline that demanded prices they shouldn’t have to pay. Dean was angry with his anger. Angry with his grief. Angry with himself for being so taken by surprise by it.

They lost people all the time. Or, at least, they did where he came from. You said your goodbyes, you dealt, and you moved on. You had to if you wanted to survive.

But this time had softened him. Had made him vulnerable to the kind of loss he’d shut himself away from years ago.

Dean sniffed and looked back at his brother. He had to harden

himself to this, right here, right now. There was a lot of loss coming if Time refused to let them have this, and he wouldn't survive it all if he let it hit each of 'em hit this hard. He had to get over this and deal with the problems at hand. He could cry over the kid later.

"We find a motel," he decided, checking with Bobby for agreement. "Phone or motel, whichever comes first, then we bunk down for the night. Get Ellen to come to us, and tomorrow we'll… tomorrow we give the kid a proper funeral. Somewhere *not* here."

Both Bobby and Sam agreed with that plan, nodding their consent tiredly.

"We have to take care of the Morton House," Sam said abruptly, head lifting as the thought occurred to him. He looked back the way they'd come – the way he and Andy had come – to the silhouette of a house against the treeline and a midnight sky.

Dean frowned, following his brother's gaze. It took a moment for him to realize what Sam was really getting at.

There were more bodies in there. Dean's eyes shuttered and he looked away. Of course. There had been other kids, not just Sam and Andy, and they were dead now, too. The older Winchester closed his eyes, reminded once more of what he'd failed to save his brother from. Again.

Sam was still staring at the house, looking like he didn't want to leave them, now that he remembered they were in there. That it wasn't just Andy they'd lost (that Sam couldn't save).

Bobby cleared his throat.

"We'll come back tomorrow. In the daylight, after Andy's funeral," the older hunter announced firmly. He could see the state of his kids; Bobby knew it wasn't an option for tonight. They didn't have it in them right now. His eyes drifted over to his truck against his will, and he snapped his gaze away from the kid lying in his truck bed. Truth be told, he didn't have it in him right now, either. "Take care of the bodies and finish the hunt. Or burn it to the ground."

Personally, Dean was all for that second option.

A motel was a good choice, he decided, nodding to the other two. Sam looked exhausted, and Dean wasn't feeling so fresh himself. They could rest, regroup, and tomorrow give Andy the funeral he deserved.

That he'd *earned*. Then, after Sam gave them a play-by-play so they knew exactly what to expect, they could come back and watch the Morton House burn.

That plan was plenty fine by Dean, who was good with the idea of getting the hell out of here as soon as possible. Sam nodded his agreement as well, the events of the night clearly catching up to him. The kid looked beat.

For plenty good reason, Dean thought around another lump in his throat.

"Come on," he announced, slapping Sam on the bicep with as much big-brother energy as he could muster. "Let's go get rid of your Goal-Magma girl. The non-violent, *lame* way."

He closed Baby's door and headed back up the line of cars. Sam followed after him.

"My what?"

"Don't worry about it," Dean muttered, deciding that was a conversation for another day. Probably the day after he figured out just what the hell a goal magma girl even was.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:
Say whaaaaaaaaaaat? So much happening!! Sam survived, Dean's distrusting, Bobby's got his back, no one seems to have noticed a friggin' pair of angels lost their shit a hundred feet away (poor Cas), and Persephone's a what?!

The Legacy that is Andy Gallagher:
I know a lot of you were clinging to the last rays of hope that he might be brought back, but this is the physical end of his journey for now. When I set out to write him, I knew he was a character with a lot of unfulfilled potential, but I also knew the Battle Royale was as far as he could go in this story. Still, it sucked writing this chapter (the death itself wasn't hard, but this one

made me cry. Friggin' Sam and his stupid puppy eyes and grief) so know that you're not alone in missing him. I have no regrets writing him so damn likable, but sheesh. Probably should have planned that out a little better to save us all some pain

Anyhoo, I have always valued character death in a story if it serves a purpose. Without stakes, a story doesn't carry tension and my favorite stories have always been the ones that jerk your heartstrings and emotions around real good (sorry, everybody). There's something cathartic about being able to feel so much for someone fictional. Just like a good TV show So, I'm definitely #SorryNotSorry for this one, but I felt the pain too.

(Ooh, ooh, there is a small ray of sunshine though!
Forestpelt
, who was not happy about the death either and has been stuck knowing it was coming for months, poked and prodded me towards a future plot idea that gives us Andy one last time)

Persephone is a What?! Just like Dean, you will need something more powerful than Google considering it is a creature of my own creation Her name really is Persephone, though (in her words, the one who named her thinks he's funny) and we have some great things planned!

A little history on Golmagenim: We will get to know more about what they are in future chapters (slowly, of course, because this is me we're talking about). Until then, I will say I came up with them years before I decided to write this story. I enjoy creating characters and creatures for all the shows and stories I watch/ read (it's like a hobby), but Persephone has always been among my favorites. So when I realized I could include her in this story, I was really excited (and incredibly nervous) I have dropped crumbs throughout the story as to what a Golmagen might be, and I am looking forward to theories if you have any! One reviewer got reeeeeal close a long time ago now. I hope you all are as excited as I am about this twist (okay, I may still be a liiiiiiittle nervous. Not much, though, and that's a big improvement compared to just one year ago)

Another Special Thanks to:
Forestpelt and Artemis_101 for giving this chapter a good edit for me. I've been struggling with a tension headache for four days now (ugh!) and couldn't get the edit done on my own. The eye strain is real So thank you both for helping me out so I

could get this chapter up!

Hope everyone enjoyed! Please take a moment to comment if you can.

Update: 05/29/24 Sorry for the two week radio silence and disappearance! Turns out the Muse definitely thinks we've done the season finale and it's time for a well-deserved vacation . I suppose it's not her fault the show didn't end the season after the climatic death of Sam. Nope, they had to add a whole nother episode (which, as we all know, means no less than three chapters for us). Unfortunately with the Muse on unapproved leave, I am very, very low on my chapter stockpile. To add insult to injury (cuz why not, alliteration is such fun!) I had a medication mixup which has since been solved but holy crap am I still feeling side effects (mood related, anxiety-riddled, Muse-murdering side effects). So it may be a minute before I can update again. We'll get back to it soon Thanks for hanging in there with me!

Chapter 135: Season 2: Chapter 101

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Hey everyone! So sorry for dropping off the face of the earth for a bit. I had a medication mix up that resulted in an emotional roller coaster (I felt just like I did as a teenager 😒 It was terrifying 😱) I'm almost fully recovered and have resumed writing; the Muse absolutely fled when a) she decided we were done with the season finale, who cared about the final episode of season 2, we did the thing, now peace out! And b) she always flees anytime the roller coaster comes back around 😒.

Anyhoo, I have almost fully recovered and the muse is back with me. Only problem now is I have had a family emergency, so I'm at my moms' helping with recovery, support, and morale. Everyone is okay, though there's a lot of stress and more emotional roller-coastering, so I'm pretty wiped out most days. Writing may not happen this week, which means updates will be sporadic until life settles back down. Apologies, but more than anything, thank you for your understanding and patience!

Re-read Recommendation: Due to how long it's been since I last posted and the rapid-fire events of the season finale, I recommend re-reading last chapter if you have the time! If not: Persephone healed Sam, Dean called her out as definitely-not-the-Greek-goddess-of-the-dead, Cas tried to intervene but was whisked back to the apartment by an angry Gabe, Andy (sadly) did not survive the battle royale, and Tom (happily) didn't either.

Chapter Warnings: Let's see, what are we up to this chapter? Well… Persephone is apparently Irish when it comes to goodbyes, the Winchesters have a chat about promises, Dean tries not to keep secrets but Time (*cough* your author *cough*) is a bitch, so we spend lots of quarters making lots of phone calls. And when someone doesn't pick up like they should, our boys decide sleep is for the weak: a long distance drive on almost no sleep is totally for the strong.

Oh. And there's a talking dog.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Cliffhanger ahead

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 101

"And she's gone," Dean announced to a noticeably empty road lit by the headlights of the Impala and Bobby's truck. He looked at Sam with an unamused smile that was way too homicidal to be anything but a grimace. "Who here's surprised by that? Anyone?"

Sam wasn't, though he didn't rise to his insufferable brother's bait. He was too tired to even glare back.

"It was her choice, Dean," he replied wearily. The younger Winchester was a little disappointed, he could admit (at least to himself), but not surprised. Particularly not when his version of asking her to stay had been a softly-spoken, *'I'm gonna… follow my brother. We'll be back in a minute,'* followed by a less than subtle glance towards the woods behind her and maybe even the slightest of nods towards said treeline that might have, perhaps, been his 'a-okay' to not be around when they got back.

So, no, not surprised. Just a little… disappointed.

"We needed answers, Sam," Dean countered angrily, though his anger wasn't aimed at Sam so much as Sam happened to be there while Dean was being angry. "And she was the only one who could give them."

"Maybe you should have asked for the specifics before making the deal?"

It was a low blow, one that made Dean physically wince, but Sam didn't regret it. Well, mostly.

"You were dying!" The older Winchester's cheeks were turning red, though from guilt at being called out or anger (at feeling guilty for being called out) was anyone's guess.

"And you promised," Sam replied without missing a beat. There wasn't much heat to it, though. Less of an accusation and more of a statement.

His brother froze before deflating like a balloon losing all its hot air.

“Yeah, I did,” Dean muttered, and he sounded so damn angry with himself that Sam realized he’d already forgiven him. “But that’s my fuckup to manage, alright? We don’t even know what she did to you and that’s not-”

“Yeah, we do,” Sam interrupted before his brother could rally a return of that righteous rage, misplaced as it was. At his brother’s wide-eyed, stunned expression, Sam sighed. He was exhausted and wanted to sleep off the whole nightmare. “She told me, Dean. I had to consent to the Bind before she could do it.”

“She did?” Dean echoed, sounding unsure and wary. “What… what did she do?”

“You two done yapping yet?” Bobby hollered from the front of his truck, where he had the driver’s door open. “Or would you like to spend another hour in this hellhole, braiding each other’s hair?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re coming, Bobby!” Dean shouted back, the two Winchesters exchanging a knowing look. “We’re not done talking about this.”

“Of course we’re not,” Sam sighed in response, but he put his hands in his pockets, already resigned to finishing their conversation once they were in the Impala and back on the road.

Dean surveyed their surroundings one last time, looking at the woods around them with suspicion, before he turned his back on the whole place.

“Good riddance,” he growled as he stalked back to the Impala. “If we never see her again, it’s for the better.”

Sam couldn’t bring himself to agree, at least not about Persephone, but didn’t voice his opinion on the matter. That was a conversation for another day; it could get in line.

Chapter Break

For the second time that night, Persephone emerged from the trees

onto an empty road and watched the Impala drive off into the night. Eyes locked on the rapidly disappearing car, she reached behind her back, stretching fingers upwards towards four circles of red spreading across her deep blue blazer.

Persephone withdrew her hand from the wounds identical to Sam Winchester's, staring at the blood coating her fingertips. She licked the tip of one pad, expression a myriad of distaste and consideration. Alongside the foul flavor she had already tasted in Sam Winchester's blood once before, there was now a familiar one as well.

The Bind had taken.

No hell spawn would successfully kill the boy again. Or anything else, for that matter. Whatever Azazel had planned for the Winchesters, it would no longer succeed.

Persephone turned her back to the country road and contemplated what remained of the car Tom had driven here. Despite the shattered windows, the engine was likely to work, given the other vehicles had driven away successfully after taking similar damage. Which meant she would need keys.

She marched towards the demon's empty meatsuit, sprawled in the middle of the road. Time to rifle through a dead man's pockets.

Lucky her.

Chapter Break

They drove in silence for the first twenty minutes. Sam was too tired to talk, consistently on the edge of nightmarish sleep with his head against the passenger window, where he would jerk back awake seconds later. It was like his brain knew what awaited him in the darkness and refused to let him succumb to it.

With every jolt back awake, Dean would glance at him from the driver's seat. But he hadn't asked (yet) and Sam kind of hoped he wouldn't. Not that he was ever that lucky – or Dean that willing to let shit go. But he could always hope.

Signs of civilization were beginning to crop up along the road when

Dean finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry," he said, apropos of nothing, and the unexpected choice of words was enough to wake Sam's exhausted brain up a bit. He turned wide eyes to his brother, eyebrows up. Dean kept his eyes on the road. "For making a deal when I promised I wouldn't."

Sam looked away from his brother and considered his words.

"You promised not to sell your soul and start the end of the world," he said eventually, after a long enough pause for Dean to get twitchy. The older Winchester's head turned his way, equally surprised, and Sam offered a weak, half-smile at the olive branch between them. "You didn't do that."

Dean seemed a little shell-shocked to have gotten out of a lecture so easily and Sam relished in the stunned silence. He was too tired to argue right now, anyway. Dean let a few seconds pass – like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop – before he glanced cautiously at Sam and asked, "You gonna tell me what I did do?"

"Made a deal with an unknown creature so she could save me in an unknown way that will definitely come back to bite us in the ass?"

Sam could practically hear his brother's teeth clench tighter and tighter with guilt as he went on. He certainly saw the same tension in Dean's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

When he spoke, it was obvious how restrained the older man was trying to be. Regardless, the words still came out as a growl, but Sam could see Dean trying. "You wanna make all that a little more known, or you gonna keep rubbing it in?"

"Honestly?" Sam raised his eyebrows at Dean, who shot him one quick glare after another as he drove. "After all your, *'I'm from the future, I know best*' preaching for the last year? I kind of want to keep rubbing it in."

The younger Winchester enjoyed the scandalous look his brother shot him. "I do not *preach*!"

"You totally preach," Sam countered with a laugh that felt good. Too good, really. It felt like ages since he'd had any reason to smile. He relaxed into the familiar comfort of the Impala's backrest, trying to keep the tension from returning with thoughts of why, exactly, that was. Of the precious cargo Bobby carried in the truck following

behind. Sam kept his gaze on the windshield, his mirth quieting. "She said the connections that bind my soul to my body were deteriorating, and she could replace them."

Dean's attempts to watch his brother and drive the car were reminiscent of someone at a tennis match. But when Sam left it at that without adding more, he finally huffed out, "That's it?"

"Isn't that enough?" Sam countered, feeling fidgety but too tired to actually fidget. "She replaced the bindings of my soul with her own. That seems kind of… monumental, don't you think?"

As a man sitting with a sliver of angel grace wrapped up in his soul and a head full of knowledge about the lengths two people would go to save each other… no, not really. But Dean didn't want to say that aloud. If only to keep from jinxing their luck that this hadn't already bitten them in the ass.

He thought, instead, of what Persephone had called herself. A Golmag…men.

"And that's… that's everything?" Dean hedged, wondering if she had told his brother the truth about what she was (whatever the hell that was).

"Yeah, pretty much," Sam answered easily enough, rolling his shoulders in a lazy shrug. "She said I had to agree to the Bind or it would kill me and, uh… apparently she's the only thing that can do that, now."

Dean frowned, not following, but well aware that something important had just been said by the way Sam's voice dropped in volume and increased in speed.

"Do what, now?"

It was the younger Winchester's turn to clench his jaw and tapped a finger against his thigh. Not that Dean saw either thing. "She's the, uh… the only thing that can kill me now?"

His older brother managed not to swerve the car, but it was kind of a close thing. His head snapped to the side, staring at Sam with comically wide eyes that should really be on the road.

"What the hell does that mean?"

“Road, Dean. Watch the road!” Sam gripped the door handle as Dean looked back, only to realize they’d been drifting off the asphalt and into the shoulder, which was just a foot of extra cement before it dropped into a drainage ditch that ran parallel to the road. The Impala rocked as Dean swerved her back between the lines. The older Winchester kept his eyes on the road a little more after that, but it was obvious he was expecting an answer. Sam sighed.

“Look, I don’t really know. There wasn’t exactly time for details. But apparently not a lot of things in the universe can make those soul connections, and once she did…” Sam shrugged a little helplessly. “Now she’s the only one that can sever them. So if I die… I guess my soul just sits there, stuck in my body until she finds me and heals me again.”

At Dean’s horrified look, which started off with a slow head turn, then became a rapid snap back-and-forth between his brother (who he’d apparently sold into some sort of eternal death-slavery) and the road, Sam rubbed at his forehead and the headache there that was growing in intensity.

“It’s apparently her part of the Bind,” he tried to add reassuringly, though Dean looked less than reassured. “She’s obligated to fulfill it.”

“Why does that not make me feel any better?” Dean growled lowly, focusing his attention on the road now. He wrung his fingers over the steering wheel, trying to find courage in Baby’s familiar leather. He needed to tell Sam the truth. At least, what he knew about it. “Look, there’s something you need to know. The symbols she was drawing on your chest-”

“She drew symbols on my chest?” Sam looked surprised to hear it. He remembered that red light that had glowed between them in his dream, emanating from his torso. Sam had thought they looked like symbols, but he hadn’t been able to see them clearly enough.

“Yeah, man. In your own blood, by the way,” Dean added, a dark look flitting across his face and Sam was once again glad he’d let Persephone leave. “They were-”

A horn honked behind them and Dean’s gaze snapped to the rear-view mirror, words cut off and forgotten. Bobby honked again, flashing his high beams before triggering his right turn signal. Both Winchester boys looked to the right, where they were passing a gas station. It looked closed – the very beginnings of dawn only just now starting to

show on the horizon – but there was a payphone outside the building.

Dean swore, remembering rather suddenly why they'd been driving back towards civilization in the first place, and abruptly swung the wheel to the right. The impala careened into the gas station parking lot at a not-necessarily-safe speed, but it worked well enough. Bobby followed behind in a much more controlled, anticipated turn.

Chapter Break

Blue eyes were locked on him in a fierce, unwavering glare even as he dragged his sister's chair across the linoleum and back to the damn closet next to his front door. He yanked it open, immune to her dumb eyes, and tossed both angel and chair inside.

As four legs teetered then balanced and Castiel continued to glare, this time with jackets crowding either side of her stupid face. She was wrapped in a spanking new straightjacket, a gag (Gabriel thought he'd get at least *some* kind of reaction out of her when he'd pulled out the BDSM version, but his sister was apparently the biggest fun sucker to ever suck fun from the world, so he'd went with boring, old duct tape in the end), and steel chains, reinforced with inactive grace (and none of it coming in contact with her skin. He had learned his lesson, thank you very much). Despite all of that, she was still fuming.

Castiel didn't have any right to be fuming. He should be the one fuming!

"It's written in Dad damn *stone*, Castiel. Get that through your thick head!" He *was* fuming, Gabriel acknowledged, realizing his fingers were white-knuckled around the edge of the closet door. He focused his gaze back on his sister, trying to ignore the bubbling emotions, which felt close to overflowing. He frowned at Castiel so strongly that his whole forehead hurt. He ignored that too. "The Earth is toast. All of it, everything we love, it's *gone* in two years' time."

Unbidden, Gabriel's breath caught in his chest as the words left his mouth, as if he hadn't fully realized the reality of them, himself, until just then.

It didn't matter which side actually won; half the Earth would get torched in the battle and what was left would be eliminated by the

victor. Either of them; Lucifer would wipe it all out of spite and Michael would bring all the humans to Heaven before terminating whatever was left. Everything on Earth that wasn't human or angel was as good as dead. Gabe's Pagan buddies (at least the ones he liked), Jack, Jörmungandr, the twins. *Kali.*

Gabriel's chest ached particularly hard for her. What they'd had had ended years ago now, but damn, it had been *good.*

He'd always kinda thought they'd find it again, one day.

"You need to forget about them," Gabriel said in warning, only it came out more like a whisper, a secret filled with mourning shared between just them. Castiel was watching him with very different eyes now, but Gabe refused to acknowledge it, looking away. "They're dead, Cassie. They always were."

Muffled words came through the tape across her mouth, and Gabriel gave her a look. He wasn't stupid. But the sounds repeated, steady and calm, and while she didn't look entirely happy, she didn't look like she wanted to piss him off, either. At least, not on purpose.

Gabe reached forward and tore the tape off.

"So are we," the littlest angel that could said imploringly. Gabriel blinked at her. "We're dead too, unless we pick a side and fight for it."

"Uh… obviously Heaven's, duh," Gabe dismissed with an eye roll. If Hell won, they were *all* dead. When he settled his gold eyes back on his sister, his face smoothed into something more serious. "But I'm not fighting. And neither are you. Not in that state."

Internally, Gabriel winced at the reminder – emotional and visual – of the damage Castiel had once again done to herself. But he wasn't exactly in the charitable, healing mood. Not at the moment. She'd live, anyway, and Gabe would reassess when he wasn't fuming.

"I'm not on board with this damn prize fight – I never have been – but it *is* going to happen, Cassie. We can ride it out here, but once it's done, you and me are going home. Whether we want to or not."

Because there'd be nowhere left to go. Which was more than he'd meant to say aloud, but if you'll graciously recall, he's *fuming* and entitled to it, so fuck off.

Jesus, one week with a single sibling and he was already awash with *feelings.*

“Not if we-”

“Enough,” Gabriel cut his sister off with a shake of his head. He waved his hand and the tape snapped back into place, sealing her words inside. The glare was back. “I’m done talking about this with you.”

He shut the door (not quite a slam, but maybe still a bit of a temper tantrum move) and turned away. Castiel was *ruining* everything. Gabriel fisted his hands at his sides and stalked off into the apartment. Jack (who had apparently shifted back into a dog sometime while they were gone) was yipping at his heels, so the archangel scooped the pup into his arms and buried his face in the dog’s neck.

“Hey, good boy,” he mumbled against Jack’s fur, rubbing his nose in the softness. “Did you have a better day than daddy?”

“Considering no captives escaped during *my* watch and I can lord that over you for at least the next week?” Jack asked right back, pulling his long muzzle away from his father’s chest to give the angel a devastating side-eye crafted from centuries of opportunity.

“I’ll lock you in the closet with her,” Gabriel warned, nonplussed by the dog speaking perfectly clear English in his arms. He tucked Jack under his arm and headed for the Lazy Boy.

It was time for some mindless television and a *lot* of sinfully sweet alcohol.

“I had a most excellent day,” Jack amended, sniffing along Gabriel’s shoulder at all the grass-grass-beer-bottle-ooh-was-that-a-mouse-grass-grass-cigarette-butt now embedded in his jacket. His dad must have gone for a tussle in someone’s yard. Jack was a little jealous he hadn’t gotten to go with. “I licked my butt. A *lot.* It was great.”

“All the while in my favorite chair, no doubt.”

With a dramatic eye roll, the archangel collapsed into his favorite chair (which did have a suspicious damp spot, but Gabriel was pretending it didn't exist). Jack settled on his lap, little paws stretched to the edges of Gabe’s knees, eager eyes already locked on the TV. The dog didn’t bother with a response (the *‘of course’* was

obvious and had been pretty much ever since sofas had been invented). Gabe stared in thought at the kid he'd made so many millennia ago (although he'd been a bit bigger at the time) even as the screen buzzed with life and a picture replaced its black surface.

Gabriel's eyes locked on Persephone, digging through the pockets of the dead demon sprawled in the middle of the road, before climbing to her feet and heading for a car. The Golmagen got in the vehicle, turned over the engine, and reversed (roughly) down the road away from the Morton House.

The archangel raised the remote but paused without pressing anything. Gold eyes dropped down to Jack again and he stared at the dog with a look of contemplation that bordered on sorrow. Gabriel took a deep breath and changed the channel.

Chapter Break

They called Ellen first. She should only be an hour or two out, at most, and she could meet them at the motel Sam was already searching for in the phonebook attached to the booth. Dean waited against the side of the Impala, leaning against his Baby with arms crossed over his chest and bruises starting to deepen beneath his eyes.

Not that any of them looked (or felt) much better.

Bobby hung up the receiver without a word uttered and Sam looked up, surprised. The old hunter shook his head, confusion and the beginnings of concern pulling at his brow. He glanced at Dean, who caught the look and immediately pushed off the car, crossing over to them in three strides. Bobby was already picking the phone up and inserting another couple quarters.

"Voicemail," he explained, though the look on his face suggested more cause for concern than just Ellen missing a phone call. Not that Dean blamed him. Shitshow that the day had turned into, of course they weren't done yet. "Let's try Ash."

The ex-MIT mullet-rocking tech genius didn't own a cell phone (because of course he didn't. Government can track you on those things, don't you know), so Bobby punched in his own landline.

Sam leaned in slightly as the tinny sound of ringing filled the booth. Payphones didn't have speaker options, so Dean had to make do watching the two as they shared the receiver between them. Which just kept ringing and ringing.

After well past when the sound should have switched over to voicemail, Bobby hung up once more. He pulled another two coins from his pocket and tried again.

"Bobby…"

But the old hunter ignored Sam, slipping the quarters into the slot and dialing once more. He tried the Police landline next, and the FBI one after that. The phone just kept ringing.

"Bobby," Sam tried again, sharing a look of concern with his brother that was returned. Dean was now leaning against the opening of the phone booth, thinking thoughts he didn't want to share about explosions and burned corpses. He swallowed roughly as Sam reached out and stopped Bobby from trying a fourth time. "I don't think any of the other lines are going to work either."

"Maybe the phones are down," Dean offered, aiming for confidence and hope, but missing by a mile if the look Bobby speared him with was any hint. Not that Dean had really believed the words himself. Their luck was never that good.

"Or the power," Sam offered, equally trying to be helpful and hopeful but falling short as well.

"And Ellen?" Bobby snapped, like he was already toeing the cliff's edge and couldn't handle another push. Sam looked to his brother for help, eyes. He'd not seen their surrogate father ever approach 'losing it' before. Sam had never really thought what that might look like, and he definitely didn't like what he was seeing now.

Not that Dean had seen it much, either, even with more years under his belt. Bobby was a rock – their rock – and always was.

"She could have left her cell with Ash," Dean tried again, digging through his brain for a safe reason why Ellen might not be able to answer her cell. Of course, the thought wasn't much comfort when followed up with *'And why isn't Ash answering?'* but it was the best he could think of.

Truth was, his gut had tied itself into knots somewhere around the

second phone call that had rung and rung, and those knots hadn't loosened since. The man from the future knew, even against all odds and everything he'd done to try and change the past (the present?), what that likely meant.

Death, fire, and the smell of burnt flesh.

"You said demons were after Ash." It wasn't a question, and Dean didn't bother answering, just nodded. Bobby adjusted his ball cap against his forehead and then pushed past his eldest, exiting the phone booth. "We're going."

Neither Winchester argued, despite their exhaustion, and followed the old hunter back towards their vehicles. Ash and Ronald could be in trouble and Ellen was missing. Of course they were going home.

Sam did, however, hesitate on the way back to the Impala. He looked over at Bobby, climbing into his truck. His hazel eyes shifted to the bed of the truck and the blue tarp stretched taut across it, hiding what rested below.

"What about Andy?" he asked, keeping his voice low enough Bobby wouldn't hear. He looked at Dean from across the roof of the Impala. "Dean, we can't drive all the way to South Dakota with a body."

Dean didn't answer immediately, his jaw clenched so tightly that the lower half of his face was turning white from blood loss. He switched to chewing on the inside of his cheek before giving a firm nod - coming to his own conclusion, then - and climbed into the Impala. Sam scrambled to follow suit.

"He's getting a proper funeral," was all Dean said as he started the engine. "Soon as we get back to the Salvage Yard and sort this out."

Sam didn't protest. After all, he didn't disagree with what Dean had actually said: Andy was worth the risk.

Chapter Break

Sam offered to ride with Bobby (an effort to provide the man with some company and comfort that was disguised as an offer to trade off drivers), but was turned down. Bobby opened his truck door, gave

Sarge a shove to the passenger's side in order to climb in (but didn't argue when the dog settled in the middle seat instead, pressed against the old man's side), and shut the door on both brothers.

Sam looked at Dean with a level of helplessness his older brother hated, but couldn't do much about.

"They're going to be okay," Dean said through Bobby's rolled down window. He did his best to believe it, for Bobby if not for himself. Ellen would be okay. She had to be. She'd made it out last time.

Of course, that was before Dean had gone and changed things.

Bobby answered by pulling out, Dean taking a step back as the truck took off. He gave Sam a shrug – what else could they do? – and headed for the Impala. They had a long drive ahead of them, filled with hours of uncertainty and no answers.

"You should get some rest," Dean said to Sam as they climbed into the car. He started her up and pulled out after Bobby's truck, which was already a block down the road. Dean wasn't worried about getting separated. They knew the way home.

Sam mumbled something in agreement, all but sagging into the passenger seat, turned inwards a bit so he could wedge his body into the corner of the seat and door. He let his head fall against the cool glass, eyes slipping closed, and tried not to think about anything at all.

"Do you think we did it?" he asked quietly after several moments of silence in which Dean had definitely thought he was asleep. The micro-twitch the car gave side-to-side was enough for Sam to know his brother hadn't been expecting noise that he didn't make himself.

"Did what?"

Sam opened his eyes to the slowly lightening sky revealing an overcast, gray spring morning. "Stopped the Apocalypse."

Dean turned to look at Sam, his brother lifting his head off the glass to meet his eyes. The older Winchester opened his mouth, but nothing came out, and he had to turn away in order to drive. He licked his lips, brain churning, looking for an answer he didn't have.

"I don't know," he admitted, wincing at the slight crack in his voice. He swallowed roughly and reminded himself he had to harden back up if he was gonna make it through this. If the answer to Sam's

question ended up being ' *no.*' "But you apparently can't die, and I didn't sell my soul, so… yeah. Maybe."

It was a hell of a hopeful 'maybe', but it was the first real goalpost they'd crossed since Dean arrived in this timeline.

Chapter Break

It was a long drive to Sioux Falls, filled mostly with the soft snores of first Sam, then Dean once the younger Winchester managed to talk him into swapping. They both offered to trade off with Bobby when they caught up to him at a gas station, all of them taking a minute to refuel cars and bodies alike. The old man declined with a single look and both Winchesters backed off, leaving him to it.

When they finally got to the Salvage Yard, it was immediately apparent something was wrong. There was a cop car parked at the front gate and crime scene tape stretched across the drive. One lone officer sat in the vehicle, looking about five minutes away from nodding off.

Dean and Sam exchanged looks as Bobby pulled his truck alongside the cop car. The officer shook himself more awake and exited the vehicle, leaning in towards Bobby's passenger window. Dean kept Baby idling behind the truck, unsure if they'd have to move fast. They were wanted men, after all, in a town that had been visited all too recently by the FBI. Sam wasn't doing much better, staring a little too intensely at the bed of the vehicle, where Andy's body was wrapped in a sheet beneath a stretched-taut tarp. Dean elbowed him as surreptitiously as possible.

They couldn't hear what was being discussed, but both hunters tensed as Bobby suddenly tore out of there, tires spinning up dirt and gravel as the truck launched itself forward, straight through the crime scene tape. The cop stumbled back from the suddenly-moving vehicle, one hand going for his gun, the other held up, fingers spread wide, as he yelled out a half-formed, shocked demand to stop the vehicle.

"What the hell?" Sam yelled even as Dean likewise swore and followed Bobby's lead. "Dean!"

"Take it up with Bobby!" Dean snapped back as he pressed the gas

pedal to the floor, Baby spinning tires in her hasty pursuit of Bobby's truck. They flew past the cop who was now yelling into the radio clipped to his shoulder.

They raced through the Salvage yard, kicking up dirt and rock, but it didn't take long to realize what that cop had told Bobby that had resulted in a high-speed race to the house.

"Oh my god," Sam breathed out, shock stunting the volume of his words to little more than a whisper.

Bobby's truck came to a dead stop, a pillow of dirt surrounding the vehicle and Dean found himself slamming on the brakes to avoid crashing abruptly into the bed.

"Son of a bitch," he swore, both Winchesters immediately throwing open their doors and rushing out of the car. In front of them, Bobby did the same.

"Bobby!" Sam yelled, but the old man didn't seem to hear him. He was staring, slack-jawed, at what used to be his home.

There was nothing left. The house was ground zero for what could only have been a bomb going off. Little of the structure remained, and what did was charred and crumbling. Debris littered the ground around them, some of it marked with crime scene tags. Wood, glass, books burnt beyond recognition, pieces of identifiable furniture. The cars closest to where the house used to be were nothing but burnt out shells. The whole of the salvage yard would have looked more fitting in a war zone than outside Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Dean looked at Sam, at a complete loss for words.

Bobby's house – and likely everyone who had been in it – was just… gone.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Say whaaaaaaaaaaat? That's right. I'm a no good dirty rotten author (and so is Time)

Posting Schedule: I'm not sure what schedule I will end up sticking to for posting over the next couple weeks. It really depends on how much writing I get done, which is up in the air. For now I will be reverting back to every two weeks - also because my chapter stockpile is hella low - but I'm really hoping to have some writing time in the next couple weeks too. Not writing is just a recipe for more not-writing! [throws hands up in the air] It's no good! So I'll do what I can to keep up production, but sadly I will need your patience once more as I wander away from weekly posts.

Thanks everyone and hope you enjoyed!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 136: Season 2: Chapter 102

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes:
Welcome back everyone! Apologies for the delay. I ended up with a family emergency and traveled to my Moms' to help out. Everyone's okay, though it was a stressful and emotionally exhausting time. My moms are the type who conveniently misplace all relationship-based communication skills in stressful situations and I'm the kind of person who just wants everyone to be happy (despite knowing that is not my responsibility). So needless to say I'm a little worn thin at the moment.

(Although, that being said, I am also very proud of myself. I set and respected my boundaries, I put the load down when I needed a break, and I clearly defined what was and wasn't my work to do/job to fix. Thank you, years of therapy!)

Now, on with the story!!

Chapter Warnings:
Bobby's house is gone, the boys go looking for anything that might have survived, Jody shows up and she is not pleased about the two new strangers in her town, and things get a little… locked up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 102

Sam was the first to move. He walked up to Bobby's side, but the old hunter didn't seem to notice. He was staring at the remains of his

house. The home he'd built a life in, shared that life with Karen, and converted to a hunter's sanctuary after he lost her. Bobby couldn't begin to comprehend the loss he was looking at. All the memories, the few comforts left to an old hunter, the knowledge and artifacts. All of it, burnt to ashes.

"Bobby," Sam started, voice soft as he reached out and placed his hand on the man's shoulder.

He startled at the contact, turning wide, watery eyes towards his kid. Bobby didn't have any words. Didn't even know where to begin.

Sam nodded, both in understanding and sympathy, and then walked into the remains of the house. Following his brother's lead (Sam always had been better with this stuff), Dean walked up to Bobby's side as well and offered the same hand on his shoulder.

"I'm…" He didn't even know what to say. Sorry? For getting your house blown up, for destroying your home and everything in it, for getting their friends killed?

God, Ash. He'd thought he was safe because Dean told him he would be. Instead he'd sent him straight to his death. And Ronald, killed again at the hands of something supernatural. Because he'd wanted to be involved, and Dean didn't have enough friggin' restraint to tell him *no*.

He hadn't changed *anything*. He'd just made it *worse*.

The man from the future was resolutely *not* thinking about Ellen. She was *fine*. She hadn't been in the house. She'd been headed for the road, headed their way.

It didn't matter that they hadn't crossed paths with her on their desperate flight back to Bobby's house. That didn't mean anything. They just took different routes, was all.

Time *wanted* to stay the same, and it hadn't taken her the first time. Not here, not now. So Ellen was *fine* .

Even if Ash and Ronald weren't.

Dean hung his head, unable to look at his surrogate father or the desolation of the man's home. The home he'd shared with the love of his life. The picture of her, the only one Dean had ever found, tucked away in a box in one of the upstairs bedroom closets. The blanket

she'd quilted, the one that two little kids had huddled under together while dad was away fighting monsters. The kitchen, filled with the smell of pie – possibly the best damn pie Dean had ever had – and all the memories of the woman who had spent countless hours baking it.

Gone. Because of him. Because he thought he could change things.

Dean dropped his hand from Bobby's shoulder.

Sorry didn't even begin to cut it. The older Winchester shook his head and followed after Sam, looking for…. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. Anything salvageable. Evidence of what had happened. Hope that maybe, somehow, their friends had made it out.

Dean hadn't thought the demons would follow Ash to the Salvage Yard. It hadn't even occurred to him. The Roadhouse had been their target. Only that wasn't true, was it? It had always been Ash and his information they wanted dead and buried, not some hunters' hangout. Demons weren't going to stop because of a location change.

He should have known better.

"Damnit," he growled to himself as he walked through the remains of Bobby's den. Most of it was unrecognizable, now. Black and charred, as useless as it was lifeless. Sam looked over at him from a few feet away. He was standing in front of the door to the basement. Or, where it had once been. The two brothers shared an entirely different kind of mourning through that look.

Ellen had said Ash and Ronald were headed down to the panic room. If they'd been in there when the house went up…

Dean looked away. Well, they weren't likely to find any bodies anytime soon. Not without some heavy-duty digging equipment.

Noise to their left drew both Winchesters to Bobby, who had joined them in the remains. He bent down, picking up a book. Its cover was blackened with soot, singed and unreadable. Bobby stared at the cover for too long (too long for either brother to know what to say, or if they should say anything at all) before he gingerly cracked the book open. Ash and soot tumbled off the cover, sifting to the floor, but the inside of the book, while damaged, had survived a lot better than the outside.

Bobby tucked the tome under his arm with a silence neither brother

knew what to do with. Sam turned away, leaving the man to his grief and however he chose to process it. Instead, he focused on the rubble surrounding them, looking for anything else leftover from Bobby's life that might be salvageable.

The younger Winchester tilted his head as something caught his eye. There was a wooden box a few feet from where Sam stood, almost completely buried in the blackened remains of Bobby's belongings. The younger Winchester only noticed it because unlike everything else around them, it wasn't dark with ash and soot. The wood grain and carvings on the surface stood out among the black and char, seemingly undamaged by the fire.

Sam crossed into the den, bending down to pull a box from the debris. Bobby tracked the kid's movement, coming over to join him as Sam dusted the thing off. It wasn't very big, only six inches long and half that across. It seemed to be a simple but well-crafted box with an elongated star carved into the wood (an Aquarian star, Sam's well-read mind supplied). It had taken no damage in the explosion, which in Bobby's house meant only one thing. Sam looked up at the old hunter, who was staring at it with some surprise.

"Protection spell?" he asked, wondering if whatever was inside the box was important to the man.

"Not mine." Bobby shook his head, still staring at the box but now with growing curiosity and maybe just a touch of apprehension.

"No friggin' way."

Both men turned towards Dean, who was standing a few feet away from them, staring at the box in Sam's hand in wide-eyed astonishment. Before either could ask him what was going on, the man from the future had crossed the distance between them. He took the box right out of Sam's hands, popped open the top of it, slid the side off, and twisted aside a panel underneath with surprising ease and a whole lot of familiarity. Sam had been expecting a more complex mechanism or magic to open it, given the protection spell alone suggested great importance.

Inside was a key, which Dean pulled right out, holding up to stare at in pure amazement. Sam wasn't sure he'd ever seen his brother look so shocked in his life. Or so delighted to be so shocked. A wide grin was spreading across his face.

"No friggin' way," he repeated, only this time with less disbelief and

more unbridled hope. "Bobby, where did you-? *How* did you-?"

Bobby offered a helpless shrug, exchanging an equally confused look with Sam. "Found it in that Pinto you boys left."

Dean's brow pinched sharply. "Pinto?"

"The car you stole?" Bobby offered again, an unimpressed eyebrow joining his confusion. "To go have your little chat with God?"

Oh. Dean blinked. Right. He remembered that. Or, well, *no,* he didn't, because God had apparently wiped his memory of it (the son of a bitch). But that didn't explain how the god damn bunker key – an item that shouldn't even *exist* in the timeline yet – had somehow gotten into the stolen car-

Oh.

God.

"Son of a *bitch*!" Dean swore loudly even as a hazy, vague memory surfaced. *'I'm helping as much as I can, Dean.'* He didn't recognize the voice, couldn't picture a face to go with it, but he knew who it was. His gaze shot up to the open sky above them and the time traveler angrily shouted, "Seriously?!"

"Dean." Sam finally got his brother's attention back and, exasperated, threw his arms out. "What *is* it?"

The grin on Dean's face was nothing short of 100-watt joy. Sam shared another uncertain look with Bobby, who appeared just as clueless.

"The key to the Batcave, Sammy."

Sirens broke the air around them before either Sam or Bobby could ask what the hell *that* meant. All three men turned, tension back up, as a cop car came screaming down the dirt drive towards them, two more behind it. Sarge started barking from the passenger window of Bobby's truck, and the old man headed out of the remains of his house, towards the flashing lights. The cars came to a hasty stop in a spread-out formation that blocked the men in against the remains of the house.

Sam and Dean exchanged nervous glances as several cops exited the vehicles, hands resting on their gun holsters. Dean hastily stuffed the

Bunker key back into its box and tucked it in his jacket pocket before following the older hunter out, Sam beside him.

At the front of the group was Jody Mills, waiting for the three men to exit the damage. Dean had to work extra hard not to stare at one of his closest friends, unsure how he was going to pretend he *didn't* know her. Lucky for him, her gaze was locked on Bobby, a mix of anger and relief spread across her face.

"Bobby, where the hell have you been?" she began, glaring at him even if her words lacked any real heat. "You weren't answering your phone, we thought-"

Jody cut herself off, took a deep breath, and sighed, closing her eyes briefly and letting go of whatever it was they had thought. Bobby wasn't a corpse beneath the remains of his house. Which meant he just became her prime suspect. She opened her eyes again, switching over to the two men standing on either side of the old mechanic. They were easily recognizable, and Jody swore internally.

She had *told* him. She had told Bobby Singer what would happen if she saw the Winchesters in her town. And now they show up after a damn bomb had gone off at the Salvage Yard, casualties unknown?

Her hand shifted to her holster, unsnapping the security strap. Dean Winchester – the older of the two brothers if she recalled correctly – honed in on the movement immediately, but he didn't react otherwise.

"What happened?" Bobby asked, voice hoarse. Jody hid a wince. She felt for the man, really. It was clear from his expression – and the fact that he'd gone tearing past her deputy onto an active crime scene – that he hadn't known about the explosion. It didn't clear him as a suspect (a gut impression wasn't evidence, even if Jody trusted her gut with her life), but it went a long way in relaxing Jody's stance.

Her hand, however, stayed on her gun. Those were federal fugitives standing behind Bobby Singer and she wasn't stupid.

"We don't know," she answered, keeping her tone as neutral as possible. "Gas leak, maybe. We haven't been able to start an investigation. An excavator will be here tomorrow. Do you know if anyone was inside?"

They hadn't found any bodies during their preliminary search once the Fire Department had deemed it safe to enter. But Bobby's house

had been two stories, and Jody knew there was some sort of basement, as well. They wouldn't be able to confirm or rule out casualties until they could search through and clear out all the debris.

Even as she asked it, praying for a negative from the owner of the property, her eyes scanned across the three men, over to Bobby's truck with Sarge in the front seat and the empty '67 Chevy beside it. Dread filled her stomach as Jody realized a familiar face was missing.

"Where's the kid?" Jody tensed, eyes snapping back to Bobby. Horror stretched across her face, waylaid only by the smallest hope that he just wasn't with them today. "Bobby, where's Andy?"

Sam couldn't help it. His eyes went to Bobby's truck, which was absolutely not the thing to do in front of cops. Luckily, between his grief and guilt-stricken expression, Bobby's look of heartbreak, and Dean averting his eyes completely, Jody's thoughts weren't on the truck.

But they were on the right track, even if she had the wrong cause, location, and motive.

Jody pulled her gun. All three men took a breath, raising their hands or taking a step back. Especially when the other two cops – one of whom was definitely the deputy that had tried to stop them from entering – followed suit.

"Did you two do this?" Jody asked harshly. Her eyes had a sheen of grief to them, but she kept it back valiantly. She had a job to do. One that maybe she should have done earlier. "Damn it, Bobby, I *told you* to keep them out of my town."

"Hey!" Dean's bark – loud, sharp, and commanding – drew all three guns to him and off of his brother and surrogate father. He was pissed at the accusation (pissed at a lot of things, really) and it helped him forget that he knew this woman. Helped him forget that she should but didn't know him back. He drew himself up under Jody's angry, accusatory glare. "Andy was *family*. And the people in that house were friends. They didn't deserve to go out like that. You think we would do this? You think we would *let* this happen? You don't know us."

It hurt like hell to say, but it was easier than he thought it would be. Anger made a lot of things easier for Dean.

"I know you're criminals, wanted by the FBI," Jody responded, gun

still trained on the older Winchester. "Which means you're coming with me."

Bobby took a step forward, already opening his mouth to argue (one of the cops retraining his gun on the movement) but Dean grabbed him around the arm to hold him back.

"It's fine, we'll go," he said loudly enough for the Sheriff and her deputies to hear him clearly. Then, lower, he added, "Get to the bunker. Lebanon, Kansas; look for an abandoned power plant on the east side. Take the Colt and don't let it out of your sight."

He hadn't gotten into it with Sam on the drive because the Colt had been safely on his persons at the time and his brother needed sleep, but the next thing they had to do was stop the Fossil Butte Cemetery Hellgate from opening. Hell couldn't make that happen without the Colt, so their top priority was keeping it out of demonic hands. It would be safe in the bunker and then, just maybe, Dean could mean it when he told Sam they stopped the Apocalypse.

As he spoke, Dean passed both box and Colt discretely to Bobby, keeping the objects between their bodies, his own blocking the cops from seeing them. Bobby met his eyes, angry at first, then uncertain, before finally settling on grumpy acceptance. He nodded, items tucked safely out of view in his jacket, and Dean turned back around. He faced Jody Mills, hands up.

"My brother and I will go without a fight," he announced, loud and clear, as Sam diligently stepped up too. "But Bobby had nothing to do with this, so leave him out of it."

"He's not under arrest," Jody confirmed as her two deputies stepped forward to cuff the Winchesters. She kept her gun on them the entire time. "But we will need a statement for all this. So *don't* skip town."

The last part was directed at Bobby, who just crossed his arms and harrumphed. "Don't know where you think I'd go."

Jody looked less than convinced, leveling an eyebrow his way that said as much. But she grabbed Dean's cuffed hands and hauled him towards the back of one of the deputy's cars. Sam was escorted to the other.

The brothers locked eyes over the hoods of their respective cop cars before hands on their heads guided them into the interiors.

Chapter Break

Jody left the Winchesters in the care of her deputies once they got back to the station, no doubt off to call Special Agent Henriksen. The two officers escorted the brothers to a small block of cells behind the lobby, three in total. Each brother got his own spacious nine by four prison: lucky them.

The first cell was already occupied by a man sprawled across the bench, looking (and smelling) like he was sobering up from one hell of a bender. Dean actually recognized him, having met the man once before: Digger, the town drunk (according to Bobby). Dean, being the lucky winner of the middle cell (it had a window, long but no wider than a foot, running along the top of the wall), left Digger to it and leaned instead against the bars that separated him and his brother. Sam watched, calm and quiet, as the deputies locked his cell then turned and left for the main office just on the other side of the door.

"Look, mine comes with a view," Dean mouthed off immediately, gesturing with his head while waggling eyebrows at Sam. "I musta done something extra special."

The younger Winchester sent him a brief look (annoyed-little-brother in full swing, but not quite Bitchface levels yet). He didn't respond. Instead, Sam settled on his bench, sighing as he leaned his head back against the cinder block wall.

"Don't worry, Sammy. We'll be out of here in no time."

"That so?" Both Winchesters turned at the voice, Sam rising quickly to his feet once more as Jody strolled through the door. She kept one hand on her gun holster, the other on her hip as she came to a stop in front of them. "I'd like to know how you're planning on doing that."

"Ah." Dean offered a winning smile, neck tinged a little red. He felt like a teenager who'd been caught by his mom while talking about dirty mags or cigarettes. The time traveler tried to ignore that chastised feeling and pulled out the old Winchester charm instead. "You know a magician never reveals their secrets."

"Is that what you are?" Sheriff Mills countered with a raised eyebrow. "A magician, Dean Winchester?"

“Something like that,” he offered, though it came out more muttered and self-deprecating than he’d intended. Jody had that effect on him. He hadn’t had a mom for much of his life, but he imagined this is what it felt to let one down.

“And are we talking real magic or David Copperfield?” Both Winchesters tensed at that, straightening to attention in a way they didn't usually bother with around law enforcement. Jody tilted her head, hands still on her hips, and looked unimpressed. “Just want to know if I should be prepping for witches or a Tyrannosaurus Rex?”

Sam glanced nervously at Dean, who honestly had no clue how to respond to that. Jody had always been a witty one, but he honestly couldn’t tell if she was being serious or blowing off their so-called ‘beliefs’. No doubt Henriksen had given her the run-down last time he was in town.

“Hang on a minute,” he said instead, pushing off the bars and taking a few steps towards the front of the cell. Jody didn’t back away or tell him to back off, so he decided that was probably a good sign. He rested his handcuffed wrists on the door, leaning into them with as calm, non-aggressive body language as possible. “Are you on the level?”

Sheriff Mills just stared back at him, unwavering, giving nothing away. When she finally let out a world-weary sigh, it lifted up the hairs that framed her face, too short to stay tucked into her ponytail. “Andy might have said a few things.”

Sam was at the bars now too, puppy dog eyes wide. “ *Said*?”

Jody sent him a look and yup, definitely what it was like to be scolded by your mother. “Did I stutter?”

“Son of a bitch,” Dean said, though there was a smile across his face. And maybe it was a little sad at the corners, but so long as no one called him out on it, they’d be all good. He looked over at Sam, who didn’t seem to share his mirth, but acknowledged their lost friend with a quiet nod. Dean was still smiling as he shook his head and added, “That kid.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam offered, voice quiet and words sincere. Jody switched her gaze to him and he couldn’t quite meet her eye. “That’s a lot to take in.”

“Yeah, well… it wasn’t my first choice, but it’s done. So, answer the

question." Two pairs of identically raised eyebrows – and jeez, they really were brothers – turned her way. Jody, unimpressed, clarified, "T-Rex or witches?"

Dean laughed and even Sam quirked his lips at that one. The older Winchester shook his head, shifting to lean his shoulder against the bars, this time the picture of casual. As if they weren't discussing all this through a jail cell. "Neither. Dinosaurs may be the only thing I haven't seen in this life, and witches are skeevy, fugly sons of bitches. We avoid them whenever possible."

Sam nodded from the other cell, though he seemed far less casual about this experience. Jody chalked it up to him being the younger brother, dragged into all this by the older. Henriksen had been very clear; they were both bad news. But he'd also emphasized that Dean was the more dangerous of the two.

"You won't get any trouble from us," Dean announced just then and darn if he didn't sound like he meant it. "We get out of here using *unconventional* means, you won't know it till we're already gone."

"And what, exactly, am I going to tell Agent Henriksen if you *magically* vanish from *my* holding cell?" Jody asked, still looking entirely unimpressed, but both hands were now on her hips, her gun left in its holster.

Dean still couldn't tell if she really believed them or if she was just playing along. It annoyed him more than it should. He could usually read Jody pretty well but, he supposed, that was a woman who trusted him. Who was a friend to him. This one wasn't and every reminder of that ached.

"The truth," Sam responded when Dean failed to.

The man from the future cleared his throat, looking away from the Sheriff so he could get himself together. When he turned back, it was with a rough smile. "Truth should do it. You've got no clue how we did it, you and your men did everything right, yada yada. He'll be pissed, yeah, but there's nothing Henriksen can do about it."

"You won't have done anything wrong," Sam added with a half-smile that was a lot more convincing than Dean's forced one.

Jody stared at them and the older Winchester immediately recognized her expression. That was Sheriff Mills, standing in front of a suspect expecting answers. It wasn't very far off from Mama Jody when one

of the girls had done something stupid and she knew that, if she just waited them out, they'd fold under the weight of her judgmental silence.

It had always worked on Dean Winchester like a damn charm.

"You don't have to trust us," he said eventually, unable to help himself.

"Well, good, because I don't." Her words were sharp, clipped. Dean managed to hide the wince pretty well. Not well enough, given that Sam was side-eyeing him like he knew something was up. "But… Andy believed in you."

Now it was Sam's turn to look away, the grief still so fresh.

"And knowing what's out there…" Jody shifted, clearly uncomfortable with that topic, "maybe I'm a little more inclined to believe him."

Dean's eyebrows rose, surprised by that, though the Sheriff was quick to give him a raised eyebrow right back and a look that said *'don't take too much stock in it, kid, you're still a criminal.'* But it was Sam, quiet at the bars, head tucked, hair hanging in his eyes, that spoke up.

"He saved my life." Both Sheriff and time-traveler turned to the younger Winchester. He was sniffing, trying to hide watery eyes even as he raised them back up to their current captor. "It was a ghost that got him. He died giving me a chance to escape."

Dean grit his teeth, turning away. Of course he had, the hunter thought. Sam hadn't shared much of the story on their drive. He hadn't been up for it, and Dean hadn't pushed. But that right there was a hundred percent Andy Gallagher. Dean was no less angry or grieving for his lack of surprise.

"He was a good kid," Jody replied softly, eyes downturned and arms dropping to her side. It was her own little moment of mourning for a boy she hadn't known all that well, but she'd seen that he was special. He should have gotten to live a full life. There would always be sorrow knowing that it hadn't worked out that way. Jody took a deep breath, centering her own grief to be processed later, and waited for both men to meet her eyes again. "You didn't blow up Bobby's house, did you."

It wasn't a question. Not really. Still, Dean immediately answered,

“Never.”

“So what did?” Jody didn’t actually want to know. She was pretty damn certain of that. But if these criminals hadn’t, then, as Sheriff, she needed to know what had.

“Demons,” came the immediate response from the older brother and yup, she’d been right. She really hadn’t wanted to know.

“Of course,” Jody muttered, though it wasn’t so much skepticism as inevitability. Because yes, naturally. Demons, armed with rocket launchers, in South Dakota. Why was she even surprised anymore? “Look, between the explosion and the people you say we’ll find in the house… I can’t just walk away from this. Andy was a good kid, and he might have vouched for you-”

“We get it,” Dean interrupted before she could continue, which was great because Jody wasn’t entirely sure what she’d planned to say. “You’re just doing your job. The kid tell you anything else?”

She frowned, uncertain what the man was getting at. “Like what?”

“Like… psychics.”

Sam looked over at his brother, wary of where he was going with this and trying to get a hint out of him. But Dean kept his eyes on the Sheriff.

“I know he was one, but I didn’t ask for more and I don’t want to know,” the woman was quick to reply, hands back on her hips in Mama Sheriff Power Pose. She meant it, too. The little Andy had told her was plenty enough to turn her world upside down. She didn’t need it twisted about any further than it already was.

The older Winchester nodded at that, internally (and externally as well, though he thought he was hiding it better) hemming and hawing.

“Dean?” Sam asked, voice kept low. Of course the Sheriff would hear him, but whatever his brother was thinking, it was clearly bothering him. Sam just didn’t know what was going through his head. He had a feeling, though, that Dean knew this woman where he came from and Sam couldn’t help but wonder how.

His brother glanced over at him, the hesitation and uncertainty in his eyes looking damn close to heartbreak. Sam frowned. He’d seen that

look, or similar enough to it, on and off for the last year. Dean knew Jody Mills *well* and was trying to decide whether or not to tell her something. Something about the future.

"If you had information," he started, looking away from his brother and back to the Sheriff. "Information you knew someone would want, even- even if it might not change anything…. Would you tell them?"

Jody was regarding the older Winchester very warily. "Where did you get this information?"

The bitter smile Dean shared with her was *not* reassuring. "I'm psychic."

The Sheriff continued to stare at the man from the future, completely unsure where he was going with this or if she should even be listening to him at all. Henriksen had warned her the Winchesters were incredibly successful con artists.

"What kind of information?"

Dean hesitated and Jody wanted to believe that he was just as unsure if he should be sharing this. But what if he was just that good an actor? When he spoke, he sounded damn torn about whatever it was, and Jody so very much wanted to think it was real.

"The possibly life saving kind."

Jody's gut clenched, probably with dread, she acknowledged, but tried to put aside.

"I want to make it perfectly clear," she said slowly, so no misunderstanding could be had between them. "I don't know you and I don't trust you."

The man in front of her flinched, which she didn't know what to make of, but when he recovered from whatever it had been, he nodded. "Smart."

He didn't even sound annoyed by it. Jody eyed him for a good long moment. "According to the FBI, you are one manipulative son of a bitch."

Dean actually laughed at that, startling his younger brother who shot him a look that very clearly asked, *'Are you crazy?'* For some reason, it settled Jody's fears more than anything else.

She had no idea what to make of that, either.

If Henriksen was right and Andy wrong… these boys were more than master manipulators. They were *unnaturally* talented at it.

"I prefer charming," Dean said with a wide grin and a playful wink. Jody's mama-bear glare was a sight for sore eyes and he reveled in it. "But I hear you."

The sheriff gave it another several moments, observing the Winchesters while thinking it over, before she relented. Even though she was certain she didn't want to hear what he had to say… if it could save a life, it was her responsibility to hear it. With the barest of nods, Jody said, "Alright. Lay it on me."

"Take Owen to a doctor."

Dean wasted no time, wrapping his hands around the bars, trying to put every ounce of sincerity and urgency into his voice. There was every chance it would look as much a ploy as saying it with a straight face, but he didn't care. He had to try. For his friend.

"As soon as possible, Jody."

Whatever she had been expecting, that wasn't it. Jody did not react well – not that Dean had expected her to. Between losing most, if not all of the color in her face and fear then anger clouding brown eyes, her hand went to the top of her gun, hovering over it.

"You-"

Sam took a step away from the bars, clearly nervous at the Sheriff's reaction. He didn't know who Owen was, but he was important to her. Dean was playing a dangerous game, even if his intention was only to help.

"I know," Dean said, swallowing roughly. He looked damn near as hurting as Jody was angry, and he didn't *get* to look like that. Not about *her son,* God damnit. "And I'm sorry."

Jody hesitated, opening and closing her mouth, rage still clear in her face and body language. After a tense moment, she turned and left the cell block without another word.

Sam looked at Dean for an explanation.

“Leukemia,” his brother said softly, pulling away from the bars only to turn and lean his back against them. He wasn’t looking at his brother, gaze far off in another timeline. “He was four. She lost him long before we crossed paths.”

Still might, Dean thought, but tried to shove that back down. He didn’t know much about Owen, other than the couple of reminiscent stories Jody had shared with them. And he didn’t know shit about the things that killed normal people. Would catching it earlier do anything? Or just draw out the agony?

“You did a good thing.”

Dean raised his head in surprise, staring at his brother. Sam offered him a weak smile.

“Leukemia is treatable. A lot of kids survive it. If they catch it early enough…” He shrugged, like he knew it was only a place of hope he spoke from, but that was better than the other possibility. “Maybe he’ll survive this time.”

“That’d be awesome,” Dean admitted, thinking about Jody and how good a mom she’d been to Claire and Alex. But he wouldn’t get his hopes up. Time hadn’t been particularly forgiving of their meddling so far. Why would it give them this?

But Jody was *good*. She wasn’t like them; she wasn’t a part of this. She deserved to have this one thing, to keep her family. Maybe Time would finally agree.

“What did you say to Bobby?” Sam asked after several minutes of quiet in which both Winchesters settled into their respective cells. Sam was back on his bench, head tilted back against the cement wall behind him. Nothing about his body language spoke of hope – more like exhaustion and resignation – and Dean tried not to wince at seeing his younger, more innocent brother trussed up in chains for a second time now.

He really wasn’t doing a good job at this time-travel, change-it-all-to-protect-your-brother thing.

“When?” Dean, who’d decided the floor looked pretty good, ended up in the back corner, his shoulder against the bars that separated him from his brother.

“Just before we got arrested,” Sam clarified, though by his tone he

clearly didn't think he should have to.

"Oh." Dean leaned his head against the wall, focused more on how they were going to get out of this place rather than the one waiting for them once they did escape. "Gave him the Colt and the key to the bunker, told him where to find it."

"Bunker?" Sam perked up on the bench, staring at his brother. He was becoming increasingly annoyed with Dean treating this like just another Tuesday. "Like the bunker from the Baku dream?"

Dean, who had turned his head at Sammy's surprise, smirked and went back to lounging against the wall. "That's the one."

"You said it was gone." Sam remembered the conversation from the dream. They had appeared somewhere underground and old, somewhere Sam had never been but Dean was familiar with. He had asked then, what the place was, and Dean had been surprisingly honest about it, and then surprisingly dejected when he'd also told him it was nowhere. That it was gone.

Maybe Dean had been talking about a future event that hadn't happened yet. Only, that's not how his brother had sounded at the time. It had been more like… mournful. Grieving the loss of a familiar place, like it was gone forever, even in this time. And the couple of times it had come up before Sam learned the truth of his time travel, well… Dean had clearly been missing it. It had been home.

Between that and his excitement when they found the box… Sam couldn't help but wonder why they hadn't gone to find the bunker sooner.

"It's on lockdown," Dean replied, like that explained everything. "Bigtime lockdown; no way through the warding."

Other than breaking it completely, but that was not something Dean wanted to do to the safest place on earth. Not with a potential Apocalypse around the corner.

"Except," Dean rolled his head over to look at his brother, grin wide across his face, "with that key you found."

Sam frowned. "Which just happened to be in a random, crappy Pinto you stole?"

“Yeah, not likely,” Dean snorted. “It’s not even supposed to exist right now. That key was taken by Henry Winchester in 1958 before he jumped through a time traveling closet.”

Sam’s eyes widened, then bugged entirely out of his head with what Dean said next.

“He was fleeing Abbadon.” Dean winced at even just the name back in his mouth. God, he hated that demonic bitch. He gave Sam a *look* that should convey just about everything he needed to know about that particular baddie. “Super badass Knight of Hell that we are going to hope to god we don’t meet this time around. Anyway, Henry ended up stumbling out of our motel closet in 2013. Scared the shit out of us. Friggin’ time travel, man.”

Ironic, he knew. Or maybe just hypocritical at this point.

“Wait. Wait, back up,” Sam couldn’t quite keep up with all the revelations. He looked caught between a nerd-gasm and strangling his brother for delivering vital – and *what-the-actual-hell* level information – like it was the weather report. “Henry *Winchester*. As in-”

“Our grandfather, yeah.” Dean closed his eyes again, the picture of relaxed. He wasn’t, of course, but the cameras trained on the jail cells didn’t need to see anything more than that. Not while he was secretly working on a way to get them out of this mess. “Dad’s dad.”

“The one who ran off one day and never came back?”

Sam sounded like he didn’t believe what he was hearing (which, *fair*). They’d heard nothing good about Henry before he’d shown up in their motel room that day. Dean remembered his own anger at the guy. Sam had been the one willing to at least listen. It had taken Dean a lot longer to come around.

The man from the future – talking about a man from the past who had traveled to the future, and how messed up was this getting – sent his brother an understanding look. “Now you know why.”

“Holy shit.”

Dean snorted again. “Yeah. He was a Men of Letters. Which makes us Legacies.”

He raised an invisible glass to his brother, offering a toast. Not that Sam knew what the Men of Letters – and therefore legacies – even

were.

"Wow…" Sam looked stunned and maybe a little overwhelmed. He didn't know what to say. It was a hell of a lot of information to process – a big chunk of which he didn't understand. Sometimes, even though it drove him crazy, he got why Dean didn't tell him everything. It was a lot to take in on a good day.

And, since they were sitting in jail awaiting the FBI to take them to federal prison for the rest of their lives… it had not exactly been a good day.

"So wait…" Sam's brain, rapid firing through the new information, snagged on the first gap in Dean's tale. "How did the key end up in that Pinto if it was supposed to be literally lost in time until 2013?"

The silence was more telling than Dean's actual answer. But he did, eventually, spit it out.

"God."

"What?" Sam, damn near breathless, actually scooted to the edge of his seat, eyebrows up and eyes wide.

Dean wanted to roll his, but resisted. He knew Sam had faith, even if he didn't himself. Experience had taught Dean that if he couldn't respect it, he should keep his mouth shut about it. Things tended to go smoother that way.

"Yeah, I know," Dean muttered, aware that his tone was only, like, one step above an eye-roll. "But don't start thinking he's helping. He's *not.*"

Sam huffed, working his jaw and probably going through the same thing Dean was. *'If you don't have anything nice to say…'*

"Kinda seems like he is," was the nicest thing he could come up with.

Dean did roll his eyes then. "If he wanted to help, he'd keep his damn kids from starting the friggin' apocalypse!"

A groan from the third cell stopped both of them before they could get into it any further. They eyed the poor, drunken soul sobering up. He twitched, snorted something that sounded contagious, then rolled over and fell silent.

The two brothers followed suit, though neither seemed happy to settle back into their cells. Sam knew his brother had a bad habit of thinking in totalities. All or nothing, black or white. Either God fixed everything or God did nothing, and no action in between registered. But there was a lot of gray that existed in that area, and Sam believed in the little things.

He wasn't even sure it counted as 'belief' anymore. He had been staring at proof that afternoon: an aquarian star that he'd held in his hand. Given to them by God.

"We need to get out of here," Dean declared, a little too loudly and in a tone that definitely said, *'Moving on.'*

Sam sniffed, stowing his thoughts on God and belief for another time. Dean was right, they needed to escape before the FBI arrived. Unlike the older Winchester, though, Sam already knew how they were going to do it.

"I've got a way," he said quietly. The cameras in either corner of the room didn't look like they recorded sound, but Sam didn't want to risk it. Not that it would matter in the end. He wasn't going to be able to hide what came next.

Dean turned to his brother expectantly, eyebrows up. At least until the sound of an incoming helicopter broke the silence, way too low to be just passing by. The older Winchester's eyes snapped to the featureless ceiling, some of his color draining.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, climbing back to his feet. "I remember that sound."

Even Digger snorted awake as the noise of the chopper grew. It sounded like it was right above them and possibly setting down on the damn roof. Exchanging panicked looks with Sam, Dean climbed on top of the bolted-down bench until he could just barely see out of the narrow, rectangular window at the top of his cell.

"Son of a *bitch,*" Dean repeated, louder this time, as he watched a helicopter land in the station parking lot. The figure that climbed out of the chopper was painfully familiar and utterly unsurprising, based on how the last forty-eight hours had gone for them.

Henriksen had arrived and the asshole was early.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:
Aaaahahahaha! There is absolutely no rest for the wicked (well, except for me and the Muse. We've been doing a lot of resting. It's been great. Entirely unproductive, but great.)

That's actually not true. We've been very productive, just not with writing. We spent the last two days planning out all of Season 3!! Up until, like… erm… a couple months ago it was largely blank space waiting to be filled in. And up until… um, a day ago? It was all a jumbled mess of events with no particular timeline. But ohhhh haahahaha, I'm so excited. The muse came back with a friggin' bang. We're making alliances, forming no-strings-attached dalliances (<.< I know. What?! I swear it really works though), and guys. GUYS. There is actual Destiel planned. Like. Omg. It's on paper. By the end of Season 3, we'll have ACTUAL DESTIEL.

Jane Austen, hold my beer.

(No, wait, we already did that part)

Jane Austen, it's time to give me back my beer!

Okay *ahem* anyway. Hope you all enjoyed the chapter! I'm sure the boys getting arrested and the FBI showing up was probably not on the Season Finale Radar (*glares at the Muse, because we are supposed to be wrapping shit up, not making it more complicated!)

Also, #SorryNotSorry for taking out Ash and Ronald. At this point, I'm blaming it on Time. Some things have to stay the same and I can not keep every character alive or we'd never get anywhere. There's already too many to keep track of 😒

Update Schedule:
I am getting scary low on chapter stockpile because I haven't been writing, but I think all the season 3 planning is a good sign. I just really, really don't feel like dealing with Henriksen being an uptight, self-righteous ass at the moment. He's been a pain to write 😩 But the Muse and I will get through it! (*mutters* even if I have to strap her to a friggin' chair)

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 137: Season 2: Chapter 103

Chapter Notes

Author Notes: Oof, so this chapter was something of a labor of love to get up. It was supposed to be posted last weekend. But I've been in a mood funk for two weeks, and I knew the likelihood of me getting it edited and up on my own was low, so I even reached out to my lovely group of editors working on the overhaul and asked them to proof it for me! And they did because they are wonderful people.

And then I didn't get it posted. Ugh. I want to say I'm the worst, but that's depression brain being a lying McLieFace.

Anyway, I had a whole extra week after that to read through the chapter myself, because the first half had been pretty rough - I ended up improving a lot of little things, so it's very likely the second half would need the same amount of nitpicking. Do ya think I did any of it all week long? Or Saturday? NOPE.

Ugh. THE. WORST. (No, I'm not. I'm struggling, and that's an okay thing to be, so deep breaths, grace and understanding, inner peace and zen, yada yada yada (no, not yada, yada, yada, mental health and making room for it is *important* , Silence. SHEESH))

Sigh. So here we are. It's midnight, I have a load of laundry going that is the only thing keeping me from sleeping (other than the insomnia that's been going for two weeks, yay! -_-) and a jam-packed day tomorrow. But come the end of the dryer cycle, this chapter will be up, whether I get through it or not. Cuz my editors did, and it is *okay* to lean on other people when you need the help.

[*wanders off to check the washer, repeating that like a mantra*]

Chapter Warnings: Henriksen's choosing between land and sea, Dean's getting fed up with his hot-shot fed attitude, Sam's pulling tricks (not like that), the boys are role-playing some Winnie the Pooh (still not like that), and Dean is a very calm older brother who is absolutely not freaking out. Oh, and Gabe's got someone he wants Cas to meet (this time it is absolutely like that)

Have fun! XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 103

The chopper blades were still whipping up wind in the parking lot, the engine not even powered down yet, when Henriksen stormed into the sheriff's station in a flurry. He was sans folders this time, instead carrying a black duffle bag slung over one shoulder. He was followed by the harried deputy who'd gone out to greet him (only to about-face a handful of feet out the front door as the agent swept right past him). A third man, dressed in a suit and looking like another fed, followed at a more sedate pace behind the other two.

Jody looked up from the front desk where she was currently standing, phone pressed to her ear. She nodded at the approaching men, wrapping up her call with a quick, "Thank you, Dr. Dwight. We'll see you Friday," before turning her full attention to the FBI agents. "Gentlemen."

"So, they showed, after all," Henriksen announced, apropos of any greeting.

"There was an explosion at the Salvage yard," Jody explained after the slightest hesitation. "We couldn't get a hold of Mr. Singer, but he, uh, he was apparently out of town. Showed up this morning with the Winchesters in tow. They seemed genuinely surprised to find the house gone."

She wasn't sure why she added the last part, other than it being the truth.

"Unlikely," Agent Henriksen snorted rudely. "They were involved."

Jody had to admit to herself then that she knew exactly why she'd said it, but instead of voicing any further opinion, the sheriff shrugged in response. It wasn't like the FBI agent would hear it if she did, and that was a can of worms she wanted nothing to do with.

"They in the holding cells?" Henriksen asked, pointing to the door over Jody's right shoulder. The sheriff nodded and, with no further

words, Agent Henriksen headed for it.

Jody followed, trying (and only partially succeeding) to tap down her annoyance at a fed walking around her office like he owned the place. Two of her deputies – Kyle, who had 'escorted' the agents into the building, and Paul – the oldest and generally most level-headed of her men – followed her into the holding area behind the FBI agent. The third, yet-to-be-identified-or-introduced gentleman followed leisurely behind them.

When they entered the holding area, the Winchesters were already watching them, their expressions grim and wary. Dean was up once more up against the front bars while Sam remained a more cautious few feet back, by the bench. Jody didn't even spare Digger a glance, sobering up in his usual cell.

Henriksen, apparently, did. Dropping the bag from his shoulder (with a worrying heavy thud of metal that had the Winchesters exchanging glances), he turned to her deputy. "What's he in for?"

"Uh…" Kyle glanced at Jody for direction. She nodded her assent and her man straightened with renewed confidence. "Drunk and disorderly, sir."

"Right then." Henriksen nodded before holding out his hand. "Keys."

Kyle turned now-wide eyes towards the sheriff in complete uncertainty, but was already unclipping the keyring from his belt. He handed them to the agent, who made quick work of the lock, and then was inside and pestering her Drunk-And-Disorderly.

"Alright, up you go, sir," Henriksen was saying as he helped a stumbling, confused Digger to his feet. "It's your lucky day. You may go."

Even as the FBI agent gestured almost sarcastically toward the open cell door, Jody was straightening up, hand held out to stop her deputy from interfering. She placed herself in front of that door.

"Now wait one minute, Agent Henriksen." Jody spoke in a voice that booked no room for agreement. Her deputies had coined it her 'Mom' voice – and one of them was nearly old enough to be her father – with both a flattering level of awe and a real annoying amount of endearment. Didn't stop her from using it, of course. Or stop it from being incredibly effective. "This is my station, my men, my detainees."

Standing behind Digger, and therefore equally stuck in the cell, Agent Henriksen raised an eyebrow at the Sheriff.

"Now, I'm happy to make sure whatever needs doing gets done, but I can't do that if you don't communicate those needs to me." She had her hands on her hips now and, out of the corner of her eye, she could see Dean Winchester smirking. Jody sent a very brief look his way, which only resulted in the criminal trying – and failing – to lessen that grin.

Henriksen let out a huff of air – an admittedly amused scoff – but there was a touch of approval in the appraising look he gave the woman. "Alright, Sheriff. I need all other cells empty, the Winchesters together in one."

"Alright, then," Jody nodded, turning to the deputy on her left. "Paul, start processing Digger's paperwork. He can finish sobering up in my office 'til he's discharged."

Deputy Paul grabbed Digger by the upper arm and guided him, stumbling, out of the holding cells and back into the main room. Once that was done, Jody moved around Agent Henriksen's other man so she could approach the middle cell, pulling her keys from her belt. Within, the older Winchester was regarding her with strangely intense eyes. There was something about him – no doubt what Henriksen had warned her about – that was definitely unnerving. He looked at her like he knew her. For reasons she couldn't fathom – really didn't *want* to fathom – Jody felt like he did.

Jody furiously pushed aside thoughts of Owen that flooded to the surface. If this man was everything Andy Gallagher had claimed, then her son needed her. Which meant she needed to stay calm and collected. And if it turned out that Dean Winchester was just an amazing conman, one who had learned Owen's name so he could use her son against her…. Well, Jody still needed to stay calm and collected long enough to make sure Dean Winchester never saw the light of day through anything but barred windows ever again.

Standing outside the cell door, keys in hand, Jody gave him a look that Dean immediately (correctly) read as, *'You gonna give me trouble?'* He knew that look, even if he'd seen it aimed at Alex and Claire more often than himself (or so he very much liked to think).

"Not you, ma'am," he answered the unvoiced question, polite as a peach with a smile to match.

Jody's expression morphed effortlessly into *'You'll shut the hell up if you know what's good for you.'* He knew that one, too. That one he definitely got more often than Claire or Alex. Dean's smile turned positively winning before he exited his cell and willingly entered Sammy's. The door closed behind him, clanging loudly before locking shut with a click, and the Winchesters turned as one to the law enforcement watching them through the bars.

A loud jangling of metal drew their attention directly to Henriksen, who was pulling out a beyond-heavy-duty length of chain from the duffle bag he'd brought with him. The FBI Agent began weaving it through the bars and door, adding an extra layer of security the Winchesters had no chance of breaking through. He held up a lock, which looked like something designed to keep the friggin' Juggernaut at bay.

"Know what this is?" he asked casually as he looped the ends of the chain through the padlock's shackle and closed it with an ominous click. "The SS100 Squire padlock. Dual locking mechanism, twenty millimeter thick shackle, with a level 4 LPCB certification. In other words…"

Henriksen let the enormous padlock fall, clanging against the prison bars in a way that made all occupants – free and prisoner alike – jump.

"The most secure lock in the world." He held up a keyring, two keys dangling from the silver circle. He unhooked one, sliding it along the metal circle, before handing it over to the other man he'd come in with. "It takes two keys to open, gentlemen, and is entirely lock-pick resistant. Now, I'll be keeping one on my person and my partner, Agent Reidy, will be… *relocating* the other to a safe place."

Oddly enough, the show of containment didn't seem to impact either brother – though the younger was looking a little greener around the gills, Henriksen noted with some glee. Dean, however, didn't tense until he introduced Agent Reidy. His sudden stiffness and wary glance at the other agent caused Sam to tense as well.

Henriksen watched them with narrowed eyes, filing the information away for later.

"Well, that's definitely not legal," Sheriff Mills announced loudly, her eyes on the heavy chain and lock. She gave both agents a side-eye that could wither greater men. "And definitely a fire hazard."

“We’ll have them on the chopper and out of your hair soon as the transfer paperwork is all done,” Henriksen reassured her, as much as anything could. “Until then, I’m not taking any chances.”

Jody just sighed, resigned to the situation. If the Winchesters were the real deal – were the men Andy had spoken so highly about and Bobby had so strongly defended – she kind of doubted an additional lock – no matter how strong or advanced – was going to slow them down.

She honestly didn’t know how to feel about that. So, Sheriff Mills just nodded.

“I’ll get on that paperwork then.”

“Why doesn’t Agent Reidy go with you,” Henriksen offered, a wide smile still on his face that Jody could not exactly call reassuring. “He needs to call the Boss anyway.”

Reidy just nodded, already heading for the door, one of the two necessary keys for the Winchester’s escape still clutched in his hand. Jody just went along with it. The sooner this whole situation was no longer her responsibility, the better. She gestured for Kyle to follow, and the two headed out of the holding cell area behind the other FBI agent.

“So, guys.” Henriksen turned back to his prisoners, grin all teeth. The door closed to the holding cells, and it was just the three of them. “Been a while.”

Chapter Break

Light flooded over Castiel as the closet door finally opened. She looked up at her brother through a curtain of jackets, tape firmly in place across her mouth, and found herself torn between a glare (if she recalled, locking her in a closet had been a ‘dick move’ last time. What was his opinion on it this time, exactly?) and a plea not to be left in the closet again (as an angel, Castiel could be patient for untold lengths of time, but even this was pressing her limits). Gabriel sighed at the sight of her, reaching in and grabbing a leg of the chair so he could haul her out of the confines of coats and forgotten odds and ends.

“Not a word,” he instructed as he got her back into the living room, returning to shut the closet door. Castiel obliged (regardless of the gag, she did not intend to anger her brother further, seeing as it was unlikely to get her anywhere but back in the closet) as Gabriel trudged over to her. He threw himself into the Lazy Boy only to immediately scoot right back to the edge, facing her.

Castiel blinked as her brother grabbed the arms of her chair, rotating and pulling her closer until they were knee-to-knee. The angel of Thursday was unsure what Gabriel intended to do, but him reaching forward to spread a hand across her sternum, infusing her cracked and damaged grace with his own, was not what she expected.

They sat there like that for well over an hour: the archangel infusing his own grace into Castiel, slowly but steadily softening the sharp, shattered edges of her own and Castiel, in turn, regarding him silently. Gabriel focused solely on undoing the damage his sister’s temper tantrum had done, which had obliterated any healing that had been previously acheived. It was tedious, annoying work, in part because Gabriel was *not* the healer of the family, dammit (and was endlessly annoyed just to be reminded of family), but mostly… Gabe had never liked seeing any of his siblings hurt.

After eons of blessed silence and single-minded concentration, his patient finally made a noise. It was a soft plea, enough of one that the archangel finally looked up, meeting pleading blue eyes. With a sigh, Gabe pulled the tape from Castiel’s mouth.

“I swear to Dad, if you ask about the Winchesters-”

“What happened?”

Gabriel clenched his jaw, but didn’t pull away from his sister. Technically, she hadn’t asked about the Winchesters… though it was a loophole if he’d ever seen one (and he would know; he invented them). With a gigantic eye roll, Gabriel returned his attention to healing the damage his sister had done to herself.

“Sam’s alive, if that’s what you want to know,” he grumbled, still unsure exactly how he felt about how things had gone down. It sure as hell hadn’t been to plan, which he was pissed about. Written in Dad-damn *stone* . But throw two mule-headed humans, an angel that didn’t know when to quit, and a friggin’ Golmagen against that stone and apparently it crumpled like paper.

Not that it had proven anything yet. Gabe knew how stubborn Fate

could be. How stubborn his *family* could be. The Winchesters hadn't stopped anything; they'd only delayed it – muddled the hell out of it – as far as Gabriel was concerned.

Still… he didn't appreciate his definition of ' *written in stone'* called into question.

His sister stiffened beneath his care and Gabriel could not help himself. He glanced right back up, meeting intense, fear-filled blue eyes. "And Dean?"

Those stupid eyes, Gabriel thought as he ducked his gaze back to Castiel's grace and chided himself for looking up in the first place. There was something about this stupid little angel that could. Pulling on all those heartstrings Gabe had been so very sure he'd severed centuries ago.

It didn't help that it was a human – and the Righteous Man at that – his sister was so damn caught up in.

The archangel's grumble was not so much audible as it was a physical presence in the room. The apartment darkened, the walls gave a little tremble.

He should kill Dean Winchester for ever getting his little sis's hopes up so damn high.

It was only further insulting, then, that his annoyance actually seemed to *relax* her. Castiel's fear lessened and the swirls of her grace resumed a slow, steady beat of movement. Like a human finally releasing a held breath.

Gabe was gonna find Dean Winchester and castrate him. That's what he was gonna do.

Later. Right now, he did his best to glare at the littlest angel that could. Cassie at least looked a *little* repentant. "Fully intact. Soul and all."

At least until Gabe got his hands on him. He was going to *ruin* the Winchester for so much as looking at his sister, let alone fucking with her mind so thoroughly that she was willing to almost kill herself for him.

The sheer relief that flooded across Castiel was *obnoxious* , and Gabriel decided it was well past time for a soda. He disentangled himself

from her damaged grace, human fingers still tingling with the sheer, Dad-damn *happiness* that he'd been able to feel as though it was his own . Gabe shook his hand, checking for hives (he was allergic to emotions that weren't his own, thank you very much) and headed for a more-than-earned soda and a Benadryl.

Chapter Break

"You know what I'm trying to decide?" Henriksen was standing outside their little prison cell, pacing like he had a difficult decision on his mind. Dean felt only vaguely nauseous with déjà vu, which meant this was less something-to-be-afraid-of and more like gloating. He settled down on the little bench, Sam still standing beside him. Déjà vu induced nausea like this usually meant only one thing: a monologue. Henriksen confirmed it a moment later with a wide, smug smile. "What to have for dinner tonight. Steak or lobster."

Sam stared at the FBI agent like he had lost it, and Dean resisted the urge to mouth off, instead rolling his eyes towards the ceiling. He vaguely remembered a conversation similar to this, in another jail cell.

Which, when he finally placed it in the timeline of memories, did cause some color loss. The last time Henriksen had monologued, all smug from the other side of a set of bars, they'd been in the middle of a demonic siege.

That was the last time he'd seen the FBI agent alive, actually.

"What the hell," Henriksen was still going on, despite Dean suddenly being a stiff, colorless mess of *'please not again, Time wouldn't screw us over* that *badly, right?'* and Sam was eyeing his brother with increased concern as well. "Surf and Turf. I got a lot to celebrate. I mean, after all, seeing you two in chains…"

"I wouldn't break out the lobster bib just yet," Sam muttered, a little too under his breath to be any real threat, but it was backtalk all the same. The FBI agent raised an eyebrow at him, and the younger Winchester met it with a glower. "You couldn't catch us at that bank, couldn't keep us in custody in Baltimore. You really think one more lock is going to change that?"

Dean actually turned to look up at his kid brother with some surprise

and no short amount of encouragement. Sam? Mouthing off to Law Enforcement? Hell must have frozen over and Dean was happy to break out the winter coats and fur boots.

"How'd you do it?" Henriksen asked. For that singular moment, he sounded genuinely curious. At least, enough for that smug cloud of egotistical jackass hovering all over him to recede. "How'd you get out of that bank? Our boys said you got shot, Dean."

The last comment was directed at the older Winchester, who just smiled charmingly. "What can I say? Guess I got an angel watching over me."

Sam choked suddenly, drawing Victor's attention once more. The younger of the brothers cleared his throat several times, coughing through whatever had gone down the wrong pipe.

Henriksen frowned at them both, fairly certain he was the butt of a joke he hadn't heard.

"You're right, Sam. I screwed up. Underestimated you." Victor resumed the small pace along the length of their bars, that cloud of arrogance wrapped back around him like a security blanket. Dean rolled his eyes at its return. And he called them actors. "I didn't count on you being that smart. But now I'm ready."

Dean just snorted. "Ready to lose us again?"

"Ready like a court order to keep you in a supermaximum prison in Nevada till trial," Victor fired back, ready for them this time. "Ready like isolation in a soundproof, windowless cell, that – between you and me – is probably unconstitutional. How's that for ready?"

To his enjoyment, the younger Winchester was back to looking green around the gills, staring straight ahead and not at the agent. Dean looked pissed, but didn't have anything to say to that, apparently. Victor would happily take it as a win.

"Besides. I may not know how you got out of Milwaukee, but I know all about Baltimore. The lawyer? That was Andy Gallagher, right?" The FBI Agent did not miss the way the younger Winchester flinched or the color drained from the older's face. Dean looked away, not meeting his eyes, and Victor knew he'd found something vital with that hit. Now it was time to twist the knife. "Well, his little hypnosis trick won't get you out this time. I heard he's six feet under."

Dean was on his feet in an instant. "You shut your mouth."

Victor snorted. "Forgive me for not mourning a murderer."

"You son of a bitch." The older Winchester came right up to the bars and Henriksen just smirked. He would love nothing more than Dean giving him a reason to use a little excessive force.

"He wasn't a murderer." Both FBI agent and criminal turned at the soft declaration. Sam had sunk down onto the bench, staring at his cuffed hands in his lap. "He was a good kid."

Seconds ticked by before a sudden, loud clap had both brothers jumping. Henriksen slow-clapped two more times, shaking his head. "Wow. You two are good. Even I almost believe you. I can see why so many of your victims get duped."

Dean shoved off the bars with a snarl. "Fuck you."

"No," Victor immediately snapped, with enough ferocity that Dean Winchester blinked in surprise, staring at him. "See, that's not how this works, Dean. You're in there and I'm out here. You're the ones who are fucked."

"You are so full of crap," the older Winchester growled.

"Take a good look at your brother," Henriksen goaded right back, straight at Dean, as he nodded towards the younger Winchester. Sam was warily looking his way from the corner of his eye. "You two will never see each other again."

Dean adamantly refused to look at Sam – he kept his fierce glare on Victor – but the younger of the two was definitely a few shades the wrong color now.

"Aw," the FBI agent practically cooed, leaning into the bars. "Where's that smug smile, Dean? I want to see it."

'Go to hell ,' was on the tip of his tongue, but the man from the future bit it back. Henriksen had been through hell. Only hours after a situation very similar to this. And the worst part was, Dean knew that the guy who existed under the FBI agent exterior was a decent man. One worth saving.

So the older Winchester sighed and shook his head, biting back the anger and going for something… simpler, he supposed. "You got the

wrong guys."

Henriksen just snorted, then outright laughed. The younger Winchester startled at the unexpected noise, staring at the agent with wide, hazel eyes. "Oh, yeah, I forgot. You fight monsters. Sorry, Dean. Truth is, your daddy brainwashed you with all that devil talk and no doubt touched you in a bad place."

Sam jolted to his feet, body going rigid with outrage, but Dean grabbed onto his flannel, holding him back from approaching the bars. When Sammy glanced at him, confused, he just shook his head.

"Not worth it," he mumbled beneath his breath. The younger Winchester just stared. Dean wouldn't be surprised if the kid reached out and checked him for a fever, next.

"That's all," Henriksen concluded, smug smirk still in place. "That's reality."

"Why don't you shut the hell up?" Sam barked, whipping his head back towards Henriksen, but staying where he stood.

The FBI agent regarded him coolly. "Guess what? Life sucks. Get a helmet. 'Cause everybody's got a sob story, but not everyone becomes a killer, Sam."

"You don't know shit, Victor," Dean spat, finally releasing his brother but the two remained several feet back in the cell. "You have no idea what you're even talking about. You're so friggin' small, man. If you only knew. You'd be pissed, wasting all that potential on a string of ex-wives and a job that's more paperwork than saving lives."

Henriksen raised an eyebrow at the man and his apparent knowledge of Victor's life. Sure, Dean had caught him by surprise back in Milwaukee, knowing more about him than he'd been prepared for. But this held an air of something… else. Something more than that phone call from the bank. There was an undercurrent to Dean's words – no doubt what multiple witnesses and some victims had claimed about the Winchesters – that was unnerving. Like Dean *knew* him.

He was going to have to keep an eye on that, Henriksen thought, mentally raising his walls.

"You know what your job is?" Dean kept going. Beside him, Sam's presence was now the only thing that kept him from marching forward. "Your job is frustrating. It's *boring* . You spend years

combing through paperwork for one break so that you can maybe – *maybe* – catch a bad guy on a good day. You don't even know what saving people *is,* Henriksen. You are wasting your life when you could be making a goddamn difference, and you don't even know-"

The younger Winchester did have to interfere then, putting out an arm to hold his brother back as Dean started forward. It caught Dean's attention enough that he glanced at Sam, who was shaking his head minutely.

"Not worth it," he grumbled Dean's own words back at him. The older Winchester looked pissed – another thing Henriksen filed away for later – but chewed on the inside of his cheek.

"Just imagine," Dean spoke one more time, making some pretty intense – almost pleading – eye contact. Henriksen had to hand it to him (and rethink several less-than-understanding thoughts he'd had about previous victims of the Winchesters). Dean Winchester was the most talented conman he'd ever had the displeasure of dealing with. "For one second. Just imagine how many people you could be saving – the *difference* you could be making – if me and my brother aren't crazy."

The FBI agent just raised an eyebrow at them. Internally, he was unnerved. Outwardly, he chuckled, tucking his hands into his pants' pockets. "Are you really trying to, what? Recruit me? Gonna have to try a lot harder than that, Dean."

But so would Henriksen, the FBI agent reasoned. Dean was very good. Henriksen had thought of his job like that, on more than one occasion, in almost those exact terms. But the Winchesters were known for this kind of manipulation and Henriksen would not give them the pleasure of being affected. So, he shoved it aside and maintained his mask of legal and moral superiority.

The older Winchester sneered at the dismissal. "Just remember this conversation, Victor. Cuz one day, I'm gonna owe you the world's biggest 'I told you so.'"

"That'll be the day, Dean." Henriksen let loose another chuckle. With a wide smile and no lack of pride in his work, he added, "By the way, you aren't wrong. My job *is* boring. But it's important, too. I think I'm making plenty of difference just putting you two away for the rest of your lives. Who knows? Maybe I'll call it quits after this. Enjoy a cozy retirement. But don't worry, I won't forget about you, Dean. I'll

raise a beer to you every night, knowing how many people *I saved* just by locking you up forever."

The agent stepped away from the cell, signaling the end of the conversation even as the door to the holding area opened. Reidy stuck his head through the gap.

"Boss wants to talk to you," he told Henriksen and the other agent nodded. Reidy disappeared and Victor turned back to his prisoners with a shark's smile.

"Surf and Turf time, boys."

Dean snorted again, but Henriksen didn't stick around for more scintillating chatter. He followed Reidy out of the holding cell area, leaving the Winchesters to contemplate their soon-to-be eternity behind bars.

Chapter Break

The moment Victor was out of sight, Dean turned to Sam, who sank onto the bench with less color in his face than was strictly healthy. Dean was probably a shade or two light, himself. There was definitely a feeling of panic buzzing just beneath his skin.

And not just because they were in a holding cell awaiting transfer to a federal prison. There was too much déjà vu going on for Dean not to be at least slightly panicking.

"We've gotta get out of here," he announced, looking around the cell for anything they could use. "You said you had a plan? I'm all ears, Sammy."

"You won't be for long," the other Winchester muttered self-deprecatingly. Dean's brow pulled down quizzically, but since he wasn't sure what Sammy was getting at, he didn't really know how to take that. Sam straightened, meeting his gaze with a serious look that had Dean automatically squaring his shoulders like a soldier coming to attention. "Look, I can get us out of here, but I need you to remember your promise."

The frown was immediately back as Dean tried to think through all

the promises he'd made to his brother. First and foremost was definitely the one where he didn't make a deal, sell his soul, go to Hell, and break the first seal. But he'd held up his end on that one. Plus, he wasn't sure what it had to do with escaping county jail.

A bad feeling started to form in his gut. "What promise?"

"The one where I share what's going on with me – no secrets – and you don't freak out or get pissed."

That feeling got much, *much* worse. Dean swallowed roughly and looked around the cell again like maybe there was another way out (not that he knew what Sammy's way out *was,* but if it required that promise, it was in no way something he would like). But there wasn't another way out. Not that he could see. At least, not yet.

The man from the future took a frustrated, deep breath, clenched his jaw, and gave a rough nod.

Sam's face was pinched, like he'd been expecting – maybe even wanting – more of a fight. But the younger Winchester nodded back. He rolled his shoulders, then his neck, and visibly braced himself as he locked his eyes on the cell door and that ridiculous padlock and chain Henriksen had added. Slowly, Sam raised a hand, fingers spread wide, and Dean's feeling got much, much, much, *much,* worse.

There was a crunch of metal followed by a click and then the base of the padlock was falling to the floor, leaving just the U-shaped shackle dangling from the two ends of chain. Dean stared, wide-eyed, between the lightly swinging chain and the heavy-duty lock lying, untouched, on the floor outside the cell.

"Holy shit-"

"You promised you wouldn't freak out," Sam reminded him way too calmly as he stood and crossed to the door. He reached through the bars, pulling the shackle free of the links and sliding the length of chain through the bars. He lowered it to the ground gently with just a quiet jingle of metal on metal.

"I am *not* freaking out," Dean growled as he came up beside his brother, still staring at the lock lying useless on the floor. In a lower, less approving mumble (like he could hardly believe he was *encouraging* this,) he mumbled, "Cameras, Sammy."

Dean took over door duty as his brother raised his head to the two

cameras, mounted to the ceiling in either corner of the hallway outside their cell. The older Winchester dropped to a crouch, ready to pick the lock with whatever they had on hand, only to jump at a sudden crunch from outside the cell. His head whipped up to find both cameras, now a mangled mess of tech barely clinging to their mounting posts.

“Are you friggin’-”

“You promised,” Sam repeated, voice sharper this time and Dean sent him one hell of a glare. Sam pressed his hand to the locking mechanism built into the cell door; the one Dean was less than a foot from. There was the sound of metal crunching in on itself, followed by a click. Dean stared, wide-eyed and frozen. It hadn’t even taken half as much time as the padlock.

Sam pushed the door open, several interior bits of metal (were those the *tumblers* ?!) coming loose and clattering to the floor as he did. Dean was still staring at the wrecked lock, horrified (and also maybe a little impressed? No, no, definitely mostly horrified), as Sam strolled right past him. The older Winchester shot to his feet, following after his brother in a jittery mess of anxiety, panic, adrenaline, and fear.

“I am not freaking out,” he whispered harshly in response to Sam’s repeated scolding. He jogged after his brother, both Winchesters pressing themselves to the wall beside the door that led back to the main office. “I am exceedingly calm. See how calm I am?”

Sam gave him a look over his shoulder that had Dean right back to glaring.

“Alright, fine. I’m holding it in right now, and I’ll keep holding it in until we get out of here.” And wasn’t that the next hurdle? How the hell were they going to sneak past a room full of law enforcement and FBI agents? “But once we do-”

“I know, I know,” the younger Winchester cut him off, leaning forward just enough to catch a glimpse of the room through the door’s narrow window. “I’m getting a lecture.”

Dean pulled his head back, affronted. “I don’t *lecture* .”

Sam pulled away from the door, gesturing Dean to do the same and they moved further down the hallway back towards the cells. There were too many people in the main room for them to have any chance of escaping that way. They’d have to find another exit. But the door

was the only one leading into or out of the holding cells. Sam's eyes veered over to the window in the middle cell, the one Dean had climbed up to when Henriksen's helicopter was landing.

"Would you prefer 'yell?'" he asked even as he pulled open the cell door and headed for the back wall.

"Oh, I am going to *lecture* your ass into tomorrow, Sammy. That's what I'm going to do," Dean hissed, checking the main door again as Sam climbed onto the same bench Dean had used until he could look out the window.

"Can't wait."

It was going to be a tight fit, Sam thought as he looked at the narrow window that ran almost the length of the cell. There were bars mounted to the outside, but he was pretty sure he could handle those. From what he could see, they were affixed with screws, not built into the wall. He could deal with those. It was the size of the window he was really worried about.

Dean followed Sam into the cell while he did his little recon. He rattled his still-cuffed hands for emphasis of how still-very-screwed they were. "Did you have a step two to this escape plan, Chris Angel?"

Sam gave him a look (bitchface #3a, a subset of number three, which pretty much meant, *'You really think that's the priority here, Dean?')*

"Just remember your promise," he said for the umpteenth time as he jumped down from the bench and grabbed Dean's cuffed hands. His brother tried to pull away at first (earning him the purest form of Bitchface #3, no subcategory needed), before holding his hands out, realizing he was behaving like a child and that doing so just might be counterproductive to their escape attempt.

Sam pulled open each cuff like they were the kid's version, made of plastic and not reinforced steel designed to keep hardened criminals detained. Dean stared in both awe and horror at his freed hands.

But he kept his mouth shut. He'd promised and he had meant it. (Even if he was utter crap at keeping it and *holy shit* what the hell had happened to his brother in the Morton House?!)

Sam freed himself of his own handcuffs, tucking them into his pocket (meanwhile Dean chucked his back into the hall as a present for

Henriksen to find, only regretting that he didn't have a bow to stick atop them). The younger Winchester turned back to the window, brow pinched.

"You gonna fit through there?" Dean asked, catching on to his brother's plan – and concern – as he eyed the window they would apparently be climbing out of.

Sam had the same worry but voicing them wasn't going to change facts. He kept his voice as calm and neutral as he could, in hopes that it would keep his brother equally calm. "I think so. I just have to get the bars off first."

Sure enough, the mention of that had Dean immediately tensing, arms crossing over his chest. But he just chewed the inside of his cheek harder, adopted an expression more commonly seen on someone sucking a lemon, and nodded jerkily.

Everything about this was bad. So, so bad. But he'd promised, and stopping mid-escape hardly seemed like a better idea. So the man from the future grit his teeth, swallowed the words cutting up his tongue like glass, and managed a mangled, "Best plan we got. Let's get to it."

He left the cell again before Sam could respond (or call him out on his totally-not-freaking-out status yet again (he was *fine* , he was handling this revelation like a goddamn *champ,* so everyone could just *shut up*)), and made his way back to the office door so he could keep an eye on the activity in the main room. When he was sure no one had noticed their little escape attempt yet, he nodded to his brother, who raised his hand once more, concentrating on the window.

The younger Winchester took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He let out that breath slowly, envisioning the world he'd seen back at the Morton House. The one where Ava's soul, dripping black, had been as easy to see as a neon sign. When Sam opened his eyes again, he could see the bars. Well, sort of. He could see an impression of them. A dozen straight lines of hazy nothingness – grayish voids where the energy of the world was forced to move around the bars – confined by a box of similar nothingness. A metal frame and twelve bars.

The cell wall was a void all its own, but that just made seeing through it to the world beyond all the easier. Sam wouldn't have been able to describe what he was seeing if asked. It was sort of like viewing the world through a scale of light to absolute dark. Kind of like x-ray

vision, only it was souls that were white and clear-to-see as bone. Living things like flesh and muscle were a hazier, diffused gray, leaving inanimate objects as a transparent black, like background noise in an x-ray image.

Evil, though, that was like sludge. Ava's soul had been dripping in an opaque and oily mud that Sam hadn't been able to see through at all.

But he could see right through his own brother's chest now (which totally wasn't unsettling at all, and Sam wasn't thinking nonstop about that or anything.) Dean's skin, muscles, and organs were all a diffused gray that Sam could right through, straight to his brother's soul, which was so blindingly bright Sam couldn't stare at it for long. He could see other similar orbs (though none so blinding) inside gray bodies walking around the main office two dozen feet from where the Winchesters stood. Though those were further muffled by walls and objects in between him and them. Lifeless objects like those tended to be darker, though no less transparent.

Sam turned his attention back to the cell wall and the bars securely fastened to the other side. Those were his priority. All he had to do was unscrew eight bolts, pull the bars off the window, and lower them to the ground without making any noise. Easy, he told himself.

Outside, the screws began to spin in their threads, slowly but surely freeing themselves from the frame they held in place. Sam raised his other hand as the screws fell loose one by one, ready to catch the bars. Once all eight screws had fallen to the pavement below, he gave the frame a little push with his first hand. Sam manipulated the energy that he could now physically see: a malleable force that could be shaped and wielded. The bars jolted free with a shove of the battering ram he'd all but created and Sam quickly scooped them up with his other hand. He made a hammock of energy to cushion and catch the heavy structure before it could clatter to the ground.

The psychic took in a deep breath, releasing it once he'd managed to keep the bars floating in the air outside the cell. To be honest, he was thrilled. Surprised, but pleasantly so. He may have opened a door to some insane abilities, but the truth was he barely knew how to use them. He'd definitely approached this escape with far more confidence than he actually had. But Dean didn't need to know that.

Sam lowered the heavy metal bars to the ground outside and then stepped back, shoulders sagging. There was a headache building behind his eyes, but he quickly swiped at his nose, confirming he

wasn't bleeding.

"Okay," he said, voice a little hoarse. He cleared his throat, stripping out of his flannel and wrapping it firmly around his clenched fist to protect his skin and muffle the noise that was about to follow. "I don't know how quiet I can keep this next part. Keep an eye out?"

Dean nodded, his eyes locked on the people moving about the other side of the door. He was trying very hard not to watch his brother just casually dismantle a jail cell with his brain. Instead, he reminded himself of his promise and trusted his kid brother to get them out. They'd discuss the means afterward.

The older Winchester kept watch through the small window, staying as far back as he could with a hand up to signal his brother. When the timing lined up – the deputies and Jody were as far from the door as they were ever going to get, the civilians in the office weren't paying any attention, and Henriksen and his partner were doing paperwork at a deputy's desk – Dean gave his brother the signal to go.

Sam combined physical force with some energy manipulation and punched the thick glass clear out of the frame, shattering it in three places. He scrambled to catch the pieces telekinetically (not having expected it to give that easily) before they could hit the ground outside and shatter.

He managed to catch most of them – the big ones at least – while the others hit the ground without too much fanfare. Sam still winced, checking the parking lot for movement before glancing at Dean, who gave him a thumbs up. No one had noticed.

The younger Winchester let out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding, sinking back onto the bench for a minute just to breathe.

Dean moved quickly from the hallway back into the middle cell, hopping up on the bench beside his brother. He grabbed the edge of the window and hauled himself up, hooking a foot first since he knew it was going to be a tight fit for his chest. Not to mention he really didn't want to drop from that height headfirst.

But Sam was going to be the one with the real squeeze. At least if Dean went first, he could help pull his brother through from the other side.

He slipped his legs and hips through easily but, sure enough, Dean's

chest protested the tight fit. Luckily, a little wiggling and a little more sucking-it-in saw him through the narrow space, and Dean dropped to the ground below. He quickly scanned the parking lot to make sure no one had seen him before whistling for Sam to follow.

Beanstalk legs dangled out of the window seconds later, followed by an ass and Dean checked the parking lot again. It was ninety percent to make sure they were still in the clear, ten percent a misplaced, desperate hope that if someone was around, they were at least getting this on camera. Because Sam's giant legs and butt flopping around like a fish lodged halfway through a wall was priceless. Even stuck in prison, Dean could get *years* of blackmail out of that one.

But back to escaping jail so they didn't spend a future in federal lockup.

Sure enough, when Sam had all but his upper torso dangling out of the window, all progress stopped. Dean kept a nervous eye out for anyone wandering by or going to their car – they'd gotten incredibly lucky so far – as Sam wiggled and jerked his body. It was like watching a worm stuck in a vice instead of on a hook. Growing increasingly anxious, Dean darted forward, grabbing onto Sam's ankles.

"Look at us. We're a friggin' scene from Winnie the Pooh," he complained, digging his heels into the cement and leaning back, pulling as hard as he could on his brother's legs. "Remember that book I used to read to you? Back before you ate too many Wheaties and became a god damn giant."

"You're… seriously… bringing that up… *now* ?" Sam grunted between trapped ribs, aware that every breath in made the job harder. He poured his focus into pushing all the air out of his lungs. If he could shrink his ribcage down just another inch, maybe between that and his brother trying to dislocate his legs from the rest of his body, he could slip past the window frame.

When something did finally give, it was sudden. With no warning, the younger Winchester slipped straight through the window and crashed to the ground.

Luckily, Dean was there to break his fall.

"Oh my god, you're a thousand pounds," came the muffled groan from beneath him.

Sam rolled his eyes before climbing off his brother. He held out a hand and hauled Dean up from the ground. "Really? You wanna talk dietary choices, Dean?"

Dean grumbled and grumped as he got back on his feet and shook off the dirt from his jeans and jacket. "Let's just find Baby and get the hell out of here."

Sam couldn't agree more, so he dropped the bickering and the two brothers took up a cautious jog across the parking lot towards the Impala. Sheriff Mills had arranged for a tow truck to bring the vehicle to the station as evidence. She hadn't been hard to spot from the cell window, still hooked up to the tow truck, awaiting relocation to wherever the FBI wanted.

When he got to her, Dean did a quick circle around Baby, muttering under his breath the entire while about how the tow operator better not have done any damage, plus all the things he'd do to them if they had. Sam just shook his head, ignoring his brother (and his priorities) to start unhooking the Impala.

It was quick work for the two Winchesters. It was hardly the first time they'd snagged Baby back from a tow. Once she was safely back on the ground, Sam went for the passenger door, only to find it locked.

"Shit," he mumbled, looking up at his brother. "Can you pick it?"

He figured every version of Dean – extra ten years of life experience or not – would be adept at breaking into his own car. It wasn't the first time they'd had to do that, either. And if half the stuff Dean mentioned offhand ended up happening in this timeline, it wouldn't be the last.

"Sure can, but I'm not going to," Dean answered, rapid fire. Instead of heading for the driver side door, the man from the future headed for the engine. He squatted in front of the grill, reaching beneath the front bumper to pull out a long, flathead screwdriver which had magnets duct-taped to it. With a wink at his kid brother, Dean slid the tool through the grill, fiddled for only half a minute to get it propped against something inside the engine compartment, and then gave the butt of the screwdriver a hardy tap with his palm.

Metal clicked and the hood popped open. Dean lifted it the rest of the way and slid the prop rod into place so he could root around the insides of his Baby. It only took another half a minute to pop the top

off the air filter compartment and dig around for the spare key he'd kept there since Dad had given him the car (it only took one time losing the keys on a hunt to learn that valuable lesson). All in all, they were inside the car, engine turning over and Baby peeling away from the Sheriff's station, in less than three minutes.

Sam refused to be outwardly impressed, knowing he was still in for one hell of a 'lecture'.

Chapter Break

When Gabriel plopped back into his recliner, loopty-loop straw between his lips, Castiel had composed herself, thank Dad.

"So," he started, swirling the can of pop and watching the straw twist in a lazy circle with the motion. "Why exactly is Dean pronoun-challenged when it comes to you?"

By Castiel's expression, that was not what she'd been expecting her brother to come back with. It wasn't clear if the confusion was from the question itself or the choice of topic. Gabriel decided to take pity on her.

"He referred to you as 'he' multiple times," the archangel explained while trying to grab onto his straw with his tongue alone. When he finally managed it, Gabe took a long, slurping sip, eyeing Cassie the whole time. "Pretty sure he got it wrong more than he got it right."

His sister's face – and grace – scrunched up like she couldn't decide what to say in response to that. She looked part constipated to be discussing it, part annoyed Gabriel had noticed (or perhaps annoyed that Dean did it?) and part resigned, which is what her expression – and grace – finally settled on.

It was… an interesting experience to watch. Gabe took another long, loud slurp through his straw.

"In the timeline that Dean came from, I possessed a male vessel." Castiel was glaring at him by the time she replied, as if she knew it was material Gabe wouldn't be able to resist poking at.

"Hmmm." The archangel reached down and pulled the lever attached

to his chair, enjoying the way it dropped back with a flop. "Do you have a preference? Obviously, I enjoy the male form of the species. Of course, back when I chose a vessel, being a woman suuuuucked. So the pick was pretty easy."

Gabe rocked back and forth like a third grader in his grandpa's chair. It kept that glare on Cassie's face though, which was the entire goal.

"I do not have a preference."

"Really?" Gabe propped himself up for a moment to regard his sister with genuine interest.

Castiel looked uncomfortable under the attention, glancing away with the sluggish, disorganized movement of self-consciousness sliding through her grace. "I do not see a difference."

"Huh." Gabe laid back. Interesting. "I'd have figured Dean wasn't much into guys, given the whole…" he waved his hand half-heartedly, "macho thing."

But what did he know? Other than everything, of course. Gabriel offered a shrug, glancing back at Castiel only to find his sister staring at him in confusion. The archangel raised his eyebrows, realizing that maybe he'd misinterpreted some things.

"With the way he talked about you – practically wrung my neck just for saying your name, for Dad's sake – I was sure you two were…" he gestured emphatically with both hands, only somewhat hampered by the soda can. Cassie followed his movements, head tilting as she did, but the confusion remained on her face. "You know. Banging."

The head tilt got tilt-y-er and Gabriel's eyebrows got raise-y-er.

"Bumping uglies? Making the beast with two backs? Doing what they do on the discovery channel? Seriously?!"

It had only taken about half of that list before Cassie was looking away, stoically and staunchly staring at the wall. Stiff as a board, she finally responded with, "You are referring to sexual intercourse."

Gabriel groaned, throwing a leg up over the armrest and placing the back of his wrist dramatically to his forehead. "How does he do it? That's it. I'm educating you right here, right now."

The archangel bounded up and out of the chair, much to his sister's

alarm. Castiel physically withdrew into her seat – as much as she was able while still tied to it – as Gabriel marched right up to her side.

"Educating…?"

He plopped down next to her, the smaller angel suddenly on a couch instead of a kitchen chair, restraints gone and brother slinging an arm over her shoulders. Somehow, the situation felt far more perilous than being bound to a chair.

"I'm going to introduce you to the wide world of porn, little sis." Gabriel reached over to the abandoned recliner and snagged the remote off the armrest. Castiel remained rigid under his arm, grace churning with reds and yellows and pinks. If a vessel could blush without an angel's express permission, his little sister would be beet red.

"I fail to see how erotic cinema is going to educate me on-"

"Oh, ho, ho, *no* , Cassie," Gabriel corrected, raising the remote like it was his pointer finger and he had an academic argument to win. "Downloaded material is for the masses, and I don't *do* masses. Unless it's an orgy, then we can talk. Oh no, I present to you…"

He clicked a button on the remote and two of his constructs entered the room dressed in silky, short-cut robes tied loosely around their perfect, gorgeous, creamy bodies. They were followed shortly by a man dressed as a pizza delivery guy.

"The live show. Everything you need to know, little sister, you can learn from the pizza man."

Cassie's eyes were about three times wider than normal and she was still stiff as a board beneath his arm. Oh, Gabriel was going to *enjoy* this.

"I-I do not require nourishment."

The archangel almost spat soda from his nose with that one, bursting out laughing. This was going to be the best thing ever.

"Oh, I promise you, Cassie. He's here for an entirely different kind of hunger."

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: See? It's legitimately a good chapter! Why on earth could I not get it edited?

(I know why. It's because writing out the visualization of Sam's psychic powers was kind of a 'wing it' situation that I never actually came to terms with (aka I never read back through it and concluded yes, good, carry on). So now every time I try to read it, I get, like, super bogged down and heavy (only way I can think to describe it) and I want to do just about anything else.)

((Brains are dumb, guys.))

(((Depression brains are dumber, still.)))

Henriksen : A lot of commenters have mentioned their excitement over potentially seeing Henriksen join the boys' side and I am happy to confirm, though it will take time, that is absolutely where I'm headed. I struggle writing him as the arrogant fed, so I can not wait to give that boy a reality check and bring him over to the right side of things I mean, no promise he doesn't end up getting himself killed in the end, because this is me we're talking about, but if he does, it won't be *immediately* after he becomes an awesome character and a fantastic asset/ally to the boys.

Jus in Bello: Oh man, I looooved how many readers were worried I was about to pull a demonic siege! Not gonna lie, I would have loved to do that to you all (and the boys), but the timing wasn't right. Of course, that's not to say Jus in Bello won't repeat itself later on It's one of my favorite episodes, after all (and we all know what I do with my favorite episodes)

Hope you enjoyed, especially that end bit ;)

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 138: Season 2: Chapter 104

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Surprisingly, I don't have much to say tonight

Chapters Warnings: Henriksen is predictably pissed but making unpredictable choices (note: pretty sure I spelled "stupid" wrong just now), Sam's talking about doors and walls and darksides, Dean's having a panic attack instead of the lecture he was promised, Cas is receiving further education at the hands of her brother, and Jack is a happy, vibrating clam.

(Yup, you read that right)

Actual Chapter Warnings: Beware, we have actual character growth happening below!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 104

Henriksen stared at the SS100 Squire padlock and accompanying 80 grade, steel alloy chain sitting in a useless pile on the cell block floor. Each link of the industrial grade, heavy-duty chain was intact and the padlock – his dual locking, level 4 LPCB certified, professional-grade lock – was sitting in the middle of it all, untouched. The first of two required keys was still sitting pretty in Victor's pocket, and Agent Reidy had immediately checked and confirmed the safe location of the second. Yet here they were. A Federal agent staring at the most secure lock on the market, laying on the ground like it had sprung open by the grace of God, Himself.

Henriksen's hands curled into fists at his side as he stared down his latest failure.

Again.

The Winchesters had escaped from under his goddamn nose hairs.

Again .

One of the sheriff's men was retrieving the video surveillance of the cell block, lot of good it would do them. The cameras had gone a couple rounds with what had to have been a sledgehammer. The answer to how the Winchester had managed that one should be fun, if any of the data survived.

The rest of Sheriff Mills' men, along with the sheriff herself, had taken off after the Winchesters, who had *appropriated* that damn '67 Chevy Impala right out of the parking lot. They'd had to unhook her from the tow truck and break into – and hotwire – the car. Which meant they'd managed to escape in record-breaking time, considering the brothers had been left without supervision for all of fifteen minutes. In a fucking *jail cell* .

Henriksen felt like he was losing his mind. Gone crazy, right along with the psychos he was chasing.

"Well."

If that was the case, there was only one thing left to do. Henriksen straightened, looking up at the narrow, previously barred window the Winchesters had somehow escaped through.

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

It was time to pay Gordon Walker another visit.

Chapter Break

The Winchesters tore out of Sioux Falls at the fastest speeds Baby could carry them. They almost collided with a car turning into the Sheriff's office as they peeled out of there, but Dean didn't let it slow him down.

He was absolutely breaking every speed limit in the book and a handful of unwritten ones too. Calling attention to themselves and breaking the law wasn't exactly a concern at the moment. They'd just broken out of jail. Every cop in the county would be on their tail soon enough, and it wouldn't be long before every other cop in every other county was as well. So they might as well break all the laws until

they were far enough away that maybe someone *hadn't* heard of them.

That didn't stop the older Winchester from keeping an almost obsessive eye on the rear-view mirror, even two towns later when he finally started driving like a sane, law-abiding citizen again.

"Alright," Dean announced loudly once he finally felt safe enough to turn his attention to something other than escaping federal custody. "Spill."

The sigh that came from the passenger seat was so dramatically world-weary Dean almost launched into that *lecture* a little early.

Sam shifted in his seat, really not looking forward to the conversation they were about to have. But he'd promised he'd explain and Dean had actually done a fairly decent job not losing his shit during their escape. Sam decided to bite the bullet, get through it the best he could. And hope his brother did the same.

"It was something Ava said," he started, unsure of where to begin.

"Ava?" Dean interrupted sharply, gaze whipping between the road and his brother. "Ava Wilson?"

Sam found himself sighting again, this time in exhaustion. God, so much had happened in the last twenty-four hours. He'd almost forgotten that for Dean, he'd gone missing from that gas station and that was all the man knew for once. Dean wouldn't know what had happened in the Morton House – an entirely new set of events from his brother's timeline – and that would only complicate this conversation.

"Yeah," Sam replied, voice softer than he'd meant it to be. The younger Winchester cleared his throat. "She, uh, she was at the Morton House. Apparently had been for months."

Beside him, Dean sucked in a breath of air, realizing what that must have meant the same as Sam had back in that murder house.

"What…" Dean cleared his throat, trying his best to let go of past horrors he couldn't change. "What did she say? That, uh… started it?"

It being his brother's apparent embrace of demonic blood powers like it was no big thing.

“That all I had to do was accept what I was.” Sam’s voice was earnest, but also resigned, and Dean immediately picked up on both. There was something there, something niggling at Dean’s conscience. But he didn’t know what it was yet.

The older Winchester swallowed past a quickly tightening throat. “And what are you, Sam?”

His brother shifted, uncomfortable, and Dean only braced further for words he wouldn’t like. When Sam spoke, he didn’t disappoint.

“Powerful.”

The way that Dean tensed immediately had Sam turning to him, finally looking at his older brother for the first time since this conversation had started.

“Remember your promise,” the younger Winchester was quick to say. Dean’s mouth snapped closed with an audible snap. “This isn’t what you think, Dean.”

“And what am I thinking, Sam?” Dean growled back, knowing his anger was misplaced but unable to pour it out in any other direction.

“That I’m going to go darkside.”

If anything, Dean went even more rigid. His knuckles turned white on Baby’s wheel, her leather squeaking in protest under his punishing grip.

“And you’re not wrong for thinking it,” Sam added, calm as could be, staring out the windshield as the world flew past. He saw none of it, eyes a hundred miles away, inside the basement of a hell house. Meanwhile, Dean’s stomach was tying itself into knots beside him and Sam knew it. But he didn’t have the bandwidth to process Dean’s emotions along with his own. His brother would just have to do it himself for once. “It’s like there was a wall separating me from those abilities. And I broke that wall.”

Dean sucked in another panicked breath as memories flooded his brain, blinding him to anything else. Another wall from another time, scratched at by his brother and felled by his angelic best friend turned betrayer. A broken brother he couldn't fix and the world falling apart around them. Dean's breath started coming faster and he couldn't slow down his pounding heart, no matter how much he yelled at the thing to cool it.

Sam turned to look at him once more, already knowing Dean was thinking of this all wrong. Thinking of it like Sam was the brother he'd once known, the one from his timeline that broke the world.

But he wasn't. And he wasn't *going* to be. Sam knew that now.

"I did it to save Andy," he confessed softly. Gently. "Even if I was too late, I had to try."

In the driver's seat, the tension holding Dean rigidly upright all but deflated. He sunk into the seat like a puppet whose strings had all been cut. Sam was pretty sure there was water gathering in his brother's eyes but he didn't mention it.

He missed Andy too. The loss was still too raw, for the both of them. They'd had no time to properly mourn him, to process their grief. Sam turned his own tear-blurred gaze back out the windshield.

"I can't close those doors now," he admitted, voice still soft. "But everything I did – back in that house and just now – I did without demon blood, Dean." He twisted in his seat to look at his brother head on, eyes alight with an excitement that only worsened Dean's knotted gut. "Don't you get it? I don't *need* it. I never did. I just had to accept what I was."

"Powerful," Dean echoed, staring at Sammy for what was likely an unsafe amount of time, considering he was still driving. He didn't sound nearly as confident nor reassured by that word as Sam had been. Not that it had been an easy-as-that acceptance for the younger Winchester. He'd just had more time to process it and move on.

"Yeah," Sam agreed with a single shoulder shrug. "And I don't plan to go darkside, by the way-" he sent his brother a knowing look, which had Dean turning back to the road guiltily, "-but you should still be watching for it. I *want* you to watch out for it, Dean."

The older Winchester glanced sidelong at him, eyebrows up, clearly surprised. Sam offered a weak grin.

"I'm not going to pretend it can't happen," he admitted, "but I can't change what I am, either. I don't think I could, even if I wanted to. And trying… I think trying might have been what took me down the wrong path where you come from."

Baby's leather creaked and groaned beneath Dean's white-knuckled grip, but he couldn't manage to relax his hold. The man from the

future swallowed roughly, throat filled with jagged shards of glass that tore more at his soul than actual flesh. His cheat ached, and he wasn't sure if it was him, Cas, or the looming panic attack, just waiting in the wings.

He had no response to that. None he could force out through the tension taking over his entire body.

“Which is why I need you to trust me,” Sam continued.

Somehow that tightness in Dean’s throat only got worse and he didn’t know *why*. Only he did. Of course he did. He just didn’t want to own up to it.

“At least until I give you a reason not to, okay? A *real* reason,” Sam was quick to clarify, already seeing Dean opening his mouth to argue. “Not just something *you’re* afraid of.”

Which *damn* . Dean was flooded with equal parts guilt and defensive anger. But… he couldn’t really argue, could he? Sam wasn’t wrong and *ouch* , it hurt like a bitch, but it was damn accurate. Painfully, painfully accurate. Because Dean *was* afraid. He was so, so very afraid of something that hadn’t happened yet but still could. And Sam was asking him, genuinely *asking* him not to be afraid. To stand by and trust it wouldn’t come to pass.

As someone who had been sent back in time to avert the Apocalypse, standing by wasn’t exactly in the job description.

Dean gritted his teeth. Words were still a foreign concept to him, apparently, as his mouth stayed stubbornly glued shut. It was something he would obviously have to think about, because Sam’s accusation wasn’t wrong. Dean knew he had a habit of jumping to conclusions, especially where his kid brother was concerned. And yeah, he’d been given plenty of reasons for that distrust, at least in his timeline, but he didn’t have those here. This wasn’t that world and he knew, he *knew,* that treating Sam as someone he wasn’t – someone he might never become – wasn’t fair to the kid.

They’d talked, more than once since his time travel reveal, about trust. And yeah, Dean sucked at it, but he also knew Sam – every version of him, but particularly *this one* – deserved to be trusted.

Dean just wasn’t sure he knew how to at this point.

“I’m not afraid of these powers.” Despite the very one-sided

conversation (Dean having trouble getting anything past the vice grip on his throat at the moment), Sam kept talking with a quiet confidence that left the older Winchester clueless as to how to respond. And concerned. Terrified, actually. But mostly clueless.

"I'm not evil. I know I'm not," the younger Winchester continued, finally able to speak a truth he'd struggled with his entire life. Especially since Dean had shown back up in it and Sam learned the origins of that feeling. His 'destined' role to literally destroy the world. He dropped his eyes down to his hands, steady in his lap, veins pumping the faintest traces of demon blood through his body, even now. "I was terrified of what I could do when I was on the demon blood, because I felt *powerful* , Dean. But I didn't feel like *me* ."

He had felt intoxicated. High on power and scared of what he might do because of it. Things he didn't want to do, but could. And, somewhere deep down, he'd instinctually known he *could* and because of that, he eventually would. That feeling of wrongness would eat at him until he wasn't himself anymore. Until he'd *want* to do those things just because he *could* .

He'd known it was wrong – he could *feel* that wrongness. But right now?

"I don't feel powerful," he admitted, slowly curling his hands into fists and watching those veins stand out beneath his skin. "Even though I know I am. I don't feel different. I just feel… like me."

And the difference was everything.

The demon blood had never been about accessing or increasing his abilities. It had been about control. A form of manipulation for the Yellow Eyed demon. Sam should have seen it earlier. None of the other psychic kids had needed an amplifier. None of them had needed control. Now Sam knew why. None of the other kids had his potential to fulfill Azazel's apocalyptic plans. None of them had been viable vessels for the Devil. The demon had needed a way to control him because, left unchecked, Sam *was* powerful .

On the demon blood, Sam lost that control. Not over his powers, but over his values. He could see it so clearly now, how he would have ended the world so very easily. On the amount of blood Dean's notes talked about, Sam would have justified any action to use those powers, just to let the building itch out before it overwhelmed him.

To feel, for even the briefest of moments, back in control.

But now, he didn't feel any of that. He just felt like himself. More so, perhaps, than ever before. Because the truth was, Sam had always been this, whatever this was. He'd always been powerful and fought against it, endlessly. Feared it, enough to bury it deep within and forget it existed. He'd exhausted himself hiding what he was until he never could have accessed that power without an aid. Without demon blood.

Sam's own self-hatred and fear had set himself up perfectly to be controlled.

Well, no more.

"I'm not evil," Sam repeated, more for himself than his brother, but Dean needed to hear it, too.

Which was why he needed his big brother to keep an eye on him, the younger Winchester knew. Because Sam felt more confident in his path than ever before, but that didn't mean he couldn't still make mistakes. Couldn't still he controlled.

"No. No, you're not, Sammy," Dean agreed, voice hoarse and words forced through an abused throat. He still had his own hesitations. His own worries and fears. Boy, did he have them in spades. But if there was one thing they could both agree on, it was that Sam Winchester was many things, but evil wasn't one of them.

Chapter Break

"Soooo."

Castiel looked away from the television screen, currently showing the Winchesters having a much-needed heart-to-heart after escaping police custody. Gabriel was fully reclined in his chair, arms tucked beneath his head, not a care in the world. He was regarding her with intense hazel eyes, though she couldn't place the emotion there.

"You actually enjoy this crap?"

Castiel tilted her head, considering the question. Enjoy was not the

right word, she identified immediately. Enjoy implied want, and what Castiel wanted was to be free of her confines and with the Winchesters, not serving as an observer to their story.

Which was… somewhat of a startling revelation. Castiel had not wanted much throughout her long life, and what she had wanted was tempered by duty. Repressed at worst, if the want was unacceptable for an angel, and ignored at best, as angels were not meant to want much at all.

But she wanted, very badly, in that moment to be with the Winchesters.

An odd sensation, Castiel decided, fidgeting in her seat as she tried to get comfortable with the new emotion.

“I am grateful to know what is happening with the Winchesters,” she finally decided on admitting, glancing between her brother and the brothers on his television screen.

Movement across her thighs pulled Castiel’s attention away from the hunters, who had lapsed into silence, and down to the black cat curled in her lap. Jack had once more shifted to a feline – something he only seemed to do when he wanted to snooze atop the angel’s legs – and was currently balled up, forepaws wrapped around his elongated back legs in a contortionist move that seemed paradoxically comfortable for the creature.

“Why can your dog shapeshift?” Castiel asked, both for a change of subject away from unwanted emotions she had yet to properly process, and to satiate a curiosity that had been bothering her ever since Jack had first shifted unexpectedly.

“Because I made him that way,” Gabe answered nonchalantly, as though having a shapeshifting pet was an exceedingly uninteresting, normal occurrence.

Castiel continued to stare at the cat sleeping quite peacefully in her lap for some time more. Gabriel got bored fairly quickly (which Castiel had learned was very much a normal occurrence for the archangel), and dug around in the cushions for the remote. Cas quickly checked up at the screen once more, confirming the Winchesters were merely driving, before returning her gaze to the cat. Gabriel changed the channel and Castiel found herself immensely relieved when cartoons appeared on the screen rather than more erotic entertainment.

“Would I be correct in assuming his true name is Fenrir?”

Gabe turned his head a little sharper than necessary to regard Castiel with yet another intense gaze she couldn’t read. Those hazel eyes slid down to his dog- er, cat, for a brief moment before going back to his sister.

“He’s had lots of names,” Gabe answered with a carefully calculated shrug, going back to the episode of *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* . The archangel had taken a very quick liking to the show. He and Blooregard Q. Kazoo shared a similar sense of humor and emotional maturity, after all. “But yeah, that’s one of ‘em.”

He could sense Cassie’s gaze on him, so he mustered up his most unabashed grin and turned to those curious blue eyes. She was searching for something and, while Gabriel didn’t know what, he was determined not to give it to her.

“What? I can’t get bizz-ay as a pagan?”

The implication of where Jack had come from was enough for his sister to blush bright red – recent educational experiences clearly coming to mind – and she tore her gaze away quickly. Gabriel just grinned and returned to his show.

After several moments of Castiel taking in none of Bloo’s antics or Frankie’s lecturing, her eyes dropped back down to the cat in her lap. Gabriel’s son, apparently. She would need to stop referring to him as a pet. Castiel considered herself lucky no reference to the dynamic had yet bothered the archangel.

Angel’s didn’t have children, she thought absently, staring down at Jack. How… interesting it was, then, that Gabriel did.

“May I have my arms free?” Castiel asked, apropos of nothing, looking over at her brother earnestly.

Surprised by the sudden request, Gabriel regarded his sister very carefully. He hadn’t resumed healing the angel yet, so she was unlikely to be able to escape, even with freed limbs. But he hadn’t exactly forgotten how fiercely she’d tried to get away in the past, heedless of any injury it caused.

As the silence stretched between them, Castiel eventually took his lack of response as answer enough and turned back to the television.

It was another few moments of imaginary friends bouncing about on the screen before the grace binding her left wrist suddenly dissolved, freeing her forearm to the elbow. The angel blinked in surprise, turning back to her brother, but Gabe was watching the TV as though he had not done a thing.

Hesitantly, Castiel flexed and rotated her freed wrist. Then, cautiously, she ran her fingers through the black fur in her lap. Jack instantly extended his limbs, causing the angel to freeze, unsure if the touch was welcome. But the cat merely unfolded from his pretzeled position, stretching across her thighs before resettling in an open sprawl. It seemed an invitation to the angel, so Castiel resumed her cautious pets.

Within minutes, Jack was purring contently. Gabriel glanced sidelong at his sister, finding the lesser angel inordinately pleased with the development. She returned her gaze to the show she did not understand, but her gentle strokes became more confident. Jack slept on, happy as a vibrating clam.

Gabe turned away from the scene, trying and failing not to be similarly pleased.

Chapter Break

Dean was pretty sure they were being followed.

A blue Ford Bronco had been in and out of the rearview since Sioux Falls. It could just be a coincidence; they were heading due south on I29, which was a decently large interstate and the only major route south from Sioux Falls. Plenty of people took it every day. So there was no guarantee their Bronco buddy wasn't just driving south.

Except Dean had turned off at Junction city and the SUV had popped up in his rearview mirror again not five minutes later.

"We've got company," Dean finally said aloud. Even keeping his voice low – he wasn't a hundred percent sure, after all – was enough to rouse Sammy beside him. The kid hadn't slept in who knew how long, but given the shallow breathing and frequent jolts and twitches, he wasn't managing it now, either.

“Who?” Sam asked, immediately sitting up and eyeing the side mirror. There were multiple cars following behind them on the two-lane road heading West.

“Blue Bronco,” Dean supplied, keeping an eye on the larger vehicle that was hanging far enough back to fall in and out of view. “Can’t be sure, but they’ve been with us since Sioux Falls.”

“Take the bypass,” Sam suggested, eyeing the vehicle several cars behind them. “See if they follow or if they’re just going into town.”

Cherry St, more commonly known as State Highway 50 (or old 50 to the locals), split into two as it approached the city of Vermillion. One way went straight through the city while the other wrapped around to bypass the more traffic- and stoplight-heavy streets of downtown. A car coincidentally on the same road as them, having turned off I29, was more than likely going into town. Which meant they’d find out pretty shortly if the vehicle was following them, or if it was just another innocent, oblivious traveler on the road.

Dean took the bypass, wrapped around the town to the North, then abruptly cut South to merge onto the 19.

The Bronco matched them move for move.

“Shit,” Sam grumbled as the blue SUV pulled onto the state highway behind them once more. He looked around the Impala for easily accessible weapons, but everything was safely stored in the trunk. Which had definitely been for the best when they’d been arrested and the vehicle towed. Now, though, it was decidedly inconvenient.

“What’s our play?” Sam asked after he confirmed what he already knew; they’d have to pull over to get to any of their guns.

Dean must have realized the same thing because, even as he continuously checked the rear-view mirror, he said, “We can try to outrun them-”

“And call unnecessary attention to ourselves,” the younger Winchester countered quietly.

“ *Or* we confront them,” Dean finished, ignoring his brother’s interruption. Sam wasn’t wrong. Outrunning them would likely require some crafty moves and breaking at least one (probably more) speed limits. They weren’t exactly in the middle of nowhere, either. They’d just left a pretty major town center.

He could stall, maybe, until they got to the Nebraska border. It was less populated there, as the road took a turn along a wash and wound its way through some hills. But there weren't any real turnoffs that he could recall. No tree cover or terrain rocky enough to hide the Impala as the Bronco sped past. They could maybe get away with speed alone – Baby certainly had more horsepower than that blue beast – but it would be a risk.

Of course, so would a confrontation.

Dean glanced at Sam, eyebrows up, but his brother only shrugged. He'd back whatever play Dean went with.

The older Winchester abruptly pulled the Impala off to the side of the road, spraying a cloud of dirt into the air as they hit the shoulder at inappropriate speeds. Both brothers were out of the car, Sam going for the trunk and throwing Dean a handgun even as the Bronco pulled off the road, brakes screaming to a halt only a handful of feet from Baby's bumper.

Dean raised his gun and approached the driver's door, Sam doing the same on the passenger side.

Chapter Break

"Here."

Castiel tore her attention away from the most recent cinematic education Gabriel had settled on (which was no longer mindless cartoons that hardly made sense and was, thankfully, not porn, either. However, as the angel quickly realized, the new content was equally as baffling as all previous) and focused on the can of soda her brother was holding out to her. She accepted it with her free hand, setting it down on the table between them, next to the other two cans he had brought to her already. The newest, like all the others, remained unopened.

"I don't understand," she confessed, blue eyes immediately back on the screen.

"What don't you understand?" Gabriel asked, amusement in his voice as he plopped down into his recliner.

“This movie…” Castiel shook her head as a creature appeared on the screen, silhouetted by the brightly lit, sin-filled city. “It is grossly inaccurate. The hunters are armed with silver weapons and garlic. Neither of these things would harm a vampire down or even slow it down.”

Gabriel choked on a laugh, coughing through it and covering with a long sip of his own soda. “That’s because it’s *fiction,* Cassie.”

Castiel was getting better at not flinching at the nickname. No one had called her that except Balthazar. It was a painful reminder of the loss of her brother. However, Castiel was growing more used to the flare of grief that accompanied the annoying name. She’d had to adjust to it, seeing as repeated attempts to stop Gabriel from using it had not been remotely successful.

Another thing that reminded her of Balthazar, though that one hurt significantly less.

“You ready for me to heal you some more?” Gabriel asked out of nowhere, drawing Cassie’s attention back to him with those wide, penetrating eyes.

“Do I have a choice?”

Gabe sputtered against his loopty-loop straw, taking some pop down the wrong pipe. He cleared it with a wave of his hand and instead focused on his confusing-as-all-get-out sister. He rubbed the back of his neck, actually contemplating the merit of her question.

“I mean… yeah, uh, I guess.” His brow furled over his eyes. “Of course you have a choice. But why wouldn’t you want healing?”

Whatever Castiel had been looking for in an answer, she clearly found it. The littlest angel that could nodded and turned her gaze back to *Blade* . It only left Gabriel feeling all the more like he’d missed something.

“I will accept your assistance. Thank you, brother.”

The archangel was lucky he wasn’t trying for a second sip of soda, because he definitely would have choked that time. Gabriel immediately poured his all into ignoring the spark of… *something* in his chest that had flared at Castiel calling him ‘brother’ and instead focused on the task of healing his stubborn, befuddling sister.

Chapter Break

“Hands up, get out of the car!” Dean yelled even as he approached the driver’s side door of the Bronco. The cloud of dust from both cars pulling onto the dirt shoulder was only just starting to settle. Through it, he saw two hands appear out the open window of the Bronco.

The hunter kept his gun raised as he approached but it wasn’t until he was damn near on top of the car that he recognized the figure sitting in the driver’s seat. He lowered his gun, arms instantly numb with shock.

“Ellen?”

Sam was rounding the car, tucking his gun into his waistline, before Dean managed to get the driver’s side door opened. Ellen Harvelle stumbled out of the Bronco and promptly swayed. The younger Winchester caught her before her legs gave out beneath her. She sagged in his grip, shaking like a leaf.

The two brothers exchanged surprised, worried looks over Ellen’s shoulder as she clung to Sam, face buried in his chest, and he hugged her all the tighter for it.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Omg, Dean *refused* to talk during that whole conversation with Sam. Maybe because when I planned it out, I only wrote down Sam’s side but omg. It was so, sooo weird having a conversation where Dean didn’t talk, like… at all. I’m still half convinced it’s terrible, out of character, and makes no sense

Up Next: Guys. Guys guys guys. It’s time. We’ve made it. Next chapter is the **last of Season 2** 💀💀💀💀💀💀💀💀💀💀 Can you even believe it?!?

Hope you enjoyed the chapter and see you all again soon for the final post of Season 2!!

Cheers,

Silence

Chapter 139: Season 2: Chapter 105

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Season. Fucking. Finale. Y'ALL!!!!!

And, befittingly, it's thirty friggin' pages long. I think it may be the longest post yet. The longest in a while, for sure!

Chapter Warnings: Omg, so much happening. We're wrapping up season 2 with multiple bangs! But only after some somber moments first. We've got a bunker to find, a prophet to catch up on, a wayward angel to try and understand, a funeral to hold, some episodes of Star Trek to watch, a party to have, and then those promised booms! Big baaada booms!

Actual Chapter Warnings: Cliffffffhaaaaanger! Like only a season finale can offer. Y'all are gonna screeeeeeeam 😬 I'm so excited.

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Chapter 105

Ellen Harvelle had not been having a good day. Granted, she had nothing on the Winchesters or Bobby (God, Bobby's *house*) and her thirty hours of hell, while still ongoing, couldn't be compared to Ash or Ronald, who would never have another day again, good or otherwise. But nothing about her day had been a cakewalk, either.

She'd shown up at the Morton House in the early hours of the morning after hours of driving without rest. Dawn had just been climbing over the treetops when she parked her car in front of a dead body, sprawled in the middle of the road. He'd been shot through the head. Other than that, there wasn't much else. The house itself was empty, though dried pools of blood and overturned furniture in the basement suggested she hadn't missed the action by more than a couple hours.

Ellen left the house as it was. Something had clearly gone down, but she didn't know what and she wouldn't find answers there. So she headed for Bobby's, the next logical place the boys would have gone.

Finding a phone along the way to call them – any of them, including her own cell phone that she'd left with Ash, and Bobby's landline – had gotten her nowhere.

Which was when she actually started to worry.

When she arrived to torn police tape and smoking ruins, Ellen sunk to her knees in the debris, unsure what to do next. Bobby's house was *gone* . She'd left Ash and Ronald in that house. And she was certain the Winchesters and Bobby would have come back here…

Dean's voice had been nothing short of panicked when he'd told them to get out of the Roadhouse. He hadn't hung around to explain why, but now Ellen knew.

Ellen clasped a hand over her mouth, viciously biting back the sob that tore at her throat. They weren't gone: not yet, not for sure. Until she knew for sure…. There weren't answers here, that much was certain. So she'd have to find them somewhere else.

Ellen Harvelle would be damned if she broke down before she got them.

Her hand was shaking when she finally lowered it back to her side and climbed to her feet. An explosion big enough to raze the salvage yard to the ground wouldn't have gone unnoticed. Which meant the nearest police station was her next best bet for finding out what the hell had happened while she'd been busy crisscrossing the damn country.

It took some time to find the sheriff's station, since she had no way of looking up its location. But when she did, Ellen almost couldn't believe the coincidence as a '67 Chevy Impala came tearing out of the parking lot just as she was turning in, damn near hitting her in the process.

It was undoubtedly her boys – *alive* – in that car that went racing down the road at speeds suggesting either another crisis or a damn prison break. Ellen could hazard a guess at which one it was, especially when, not twenty minutes of tailing the boys later, she spotted sirens in her rear view.

The cops never caught up, thankfully, as Dean wove his way through side streets and back alleys until he got onto the I29 and took off like a bat outta Hell. Ellen had struggled to keep up, making some educated guesses when did she lose them to the backways.

And then she'd struggled not to run headlong into them an hour later when they abruptly pulled off the road and she followed suit in a truly mad maneuver.

Ellen was shaking – for reasons she didn't understand beyond adrenaline – as she stumbled out of the car. Her legs gave out from under her unexpectedly, but Sam was there to catch her, pulling her into his broad chest. Ellen couldn't stop shaking as she sagged against him, burying her head in his shirt.

"Shit," she whispered, then repeated it again. Sam only held her tighter. She could feel Dean at her back. " *Shit* . I thought-"

"I know," Dean was quick to say, a hand settling on her shoulder with a reassuring grip. Ellen pulled away from the younger brother to meet his guilt-ridden green eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Bobby?" Her voice was a hoarse, cracking thing and she hated it. Hated the way her hands still shook.

"He's okay," Sam hurriedly reassured her, rubbing at her arms even as she found her footing and drew back from the man's chest. The younger Winchester smiled sadly at her, eyes rimmed with unshed tears. "Bobby's okay, Ellen. He wasn't there."

"Ash and Ronald?" she followed up, wiping at her eyes and the relief that dampened her cheeks. She already knew the answer before Sam's head dropped. Behind her, Dean cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, voice as guilt laden as his gaze had been. He withdrew his hand as she turned to him. "I… I didn't know they'd follow them to Bobby's."

"Who was it?" Ellen asked fiercely, strength building in tandem with the anger at whoever had dared go after her people.

"Demons," Dean replied, still struggling to keep her gaze but trying valiantly. She appreciated the effort. This was hardly his fault. "I should have known they'd follow Ash for the information he had."

Ellen nodded. "The Hellgates."

Ash had told her, hurriedly and with more technical jargon than she could keep up with, about the demons' plan that he had stumbled over. She'd understood the sensitivity of the information. What Hell could do to stop that knowledge from getting out. It just hadn't

occurred to her they'd *know* Ash was running. Just like it hadn't occurred to the man from the future standing in front of her.

The older Winchester nodded, eyes downcast, but he offered a weak smile. "It's okay, though. They can't open it without the Colt, and Bobby has it, safe at the bunker."

Ellen frowned, glancing between the two brothers. "Bunker?"

Chapter Break

When Monday morning came, Chuck found himself staring at a blinking cursor and wondering how he was going to come up with a plausible background for a secret, magical bunker in Kansas. Perhaps whatever inspiration had given him the idea in the first place would be so kind as to follow it up with the backstory.

He rubbed at his stubbled jaw, contemplating how nice it would be to come up with ideas for the story before he was actively writing it.

A solid, familiar knock startled the writer from his morose thoughts and left Chuck staring, wide-eyed, at his front door. He knew that knock. He stared for far longer than was appropriate for his poor, computer-strained eyes.

Or his apparent guest. The knock repeated.

Chuck sprang out of his chair, very nearly tipping it over in his rush and having to take all the more time to catch and right it. He hurried over to his door, immediately reaching for the knob before hesitating. The prophet pulled back and adjusted his robe, only to realize he was once again wearing nothing but boxers and a dirty t-shirt several days old beneath.

Oh well, that was nothing new.

He reached for the knob but, again, pulled back at the last second. Maybe he had time to change. A quick shower, even?

A third knock, this one far less patient (and somehow all the more familiar), ended his internal debate. Chuck opened the door fast enough to nearly tip himself over.

There was Stephanie, standing on his front porch. It was a familiar sight he really hadn't been expecting this morning. Well, sort of, because Steph looked completely different than she usually did. Gone was the professional assistant and in its place was a pair of black leggings, sneakers, and a cotton tank top with some band name Chuck didn't know. It was the most… human she'd ever looked, if the terrified writer was being honest.

And, for some reason, she was staring at the ceiling.

"Steph?"

Blue eyes snapped down to him. The look of cautious trepidation, like she was waiting for something to happen, vanished in the blink of an eye and before him once more stood his stoically confident, incredibly intimidating, utterly unimpressed editorial assistant, *Freaky Friday* outfit aside.

"Chuck."

"Uhm…" The writer blinked several times, standing there, holding his door wide open. They both stood there, staring at one another. "You're here."

"Yes," Stephanie answered, brow furling as she regarded the writer with something akin to confusion. "I told you I would be."

She had told him that, hadn't she? Chuck wasn't quite able to wrap his head around that fact, though, because he'd known she wasn't coming back. He didn't know why he'd been so sure of that. Couldn't remember his reasoning, actually. It was just… something he'd known. As if she'd told him her contract was up and she'd never see him again.

But that's not what she had said. She'd said she'd be back on Monday. Today was Monday.

Huh.

"Did you… wanna come in?" he wondered aloud more than asked her, realizing he was blocking the door. Chuck hastily stepped to the side, gesturing her in with his arm.

Steph was looking particularly unimpressed as she walked past and somehow that made the writer feel immediately better. Still… rather than close the door behind her, Chuck took a hesitant step out onto

the porch and twisted to look up at the ceiling.

Well… there was a rather unimpressive cobweb in the corner, the writer supposed. Maybe Steph was arachnophobic.

As Chuck pulled back inside, he spotted a car parked (if you could call it that) in the wrong direction along the curb (and on top of it), which drew him up short. It had no windows. Chuck squinted, trying to make out if it was a trick of the light, but no. All the windows – or at least the ones he could see – were gone. He was pretty sure the windshield was blown out rather than missing.

Okay…. That wasn't something you saw every day.

Chuck pulled back inside, closing the door. He'd known the house a couple doors down had two boys approaching the rougher teenage years but yeeeesh.

Chapter Break

"Welcome to the Batcave, Sammy," Dean announced with a grin as wide as his face and arms spread out before him.

Despite the terrible introduction, Sam stared at the room below them – identified as the 'War Room' by his brother (and yeah, they were *not* keeping that name, Sam thought) – with a dropped jaw and genuine awe.

It was just like the Baku dream. Sam almost couldn't believe it was real.

"And Ellen, too, of course," Dean added hastily, glancing sheepishly at the woman as she came up beside Sam, wrapping her hand around the railing. She was a lot less expressive than his brother but Dean knew her well enough. She was similarly impressed.

"Took you two long enough."

Bobby came from an adjoining room, wiping his hands on a rag as he entered the War Room. Sam couldn't see much of the room he'd come from but given the end of a conference table and some old leather chairs, Sam hazarded a guess it was the library. He recalled the

shelves and shelves of books he'd started on in a dream, looking for a way to defeat a Baku.

He hoped all those books weren't just part of the dream. Sam was practically salivating at the thought of all that knowledge, just feet away.

Sudden, joyful barking announced Sarge well ahead of the dog charging into the room, mouth open and tongue flopping.

"Some guard dog you are," Bobby grouched down at the Shepherd as he came to a stop beside the older hunter, panting and staring up at the newcomers, oblivious to the critique.

Dean eyed the mutt with distaste, muttering to himself that *his* bunker didn't come with a dog, before sidelining the thought of a dirty furball running around his home. Nothing was gonna dim his spirits. He was *home.*

He grinned down at their surrogate father as Sam headed for the stairs (no doubt to jubilantly greet said furball). Bobby had clearly found the place and gotten the lights up and air running, something Dean hadn't had time to explain before getting arrested.

"We had to break outta jail first."

"And what? You stop for coffee afterwards?" the old hunter complained, though he was grinning as the group descended. Sam reached the bottom of the stairs first, crouching down to an enthusiastic Sarge. Ellen reached the bottom next and Bobby only had eyes for her.

"Ellen."

If those eyes were a little watery, no one seemed to notice.

The barkeep enveloped the man in a fierce hug, pressing her cheek into his neck. "I saw the house," she whispered against his neck. "I thought-"

"Don't matter what you thought. I'm alright," Bobby said gruffly, squeezing her before he pulled away. He offered a shrug, both abashed and full of relief. "We thought the same for you."

Dean had just set foot off the stairs when the lights flickered and everything suddenly powered down. The older Winchester yelped,

though he was the only one, as the generators kicked in, lighting the War Room momentarily red with lockdown protocol. The subtle hum of air rattling through old vents died out as the fans stopped.

Then, with another electric hum, it all started back up again. The red lights switched off, replaced with the normal white, the air started flowing once more with a heavy hum, and the hunters were left looking warily around the bunker.

"Yeah," Bobby said with a one-shouldered shrug. "It's still a work in progress."

"Did anyone else feel that?" Dean asked, rubbing at his chest. There'd been a second, just before the lights cut out, when pressure had wrapped around him, like the air itself was trying to squash him. Just as it had gotten uncomfortable, it – whatever *it* was – had just… snapped. Like a rubber band drawn taut and slapped against some tender, unsuspecting skin. It had hurt like a bitch, however brief. Dean was still rubbing away the sting, even though it had kinda been everywhere. "Must have been the wards."

Sam stood from his crouch, eyes locked on his brother's chest. Dean immediately disliked the look of contemplation there and dropped his hand, adopting a glare. His brother at least looked a little sheepish before shrugging.

"Cas did say there could be consequences-"

Dean cut him off before they could have this conversation, yet *again* . "It's fine," he argued back, waving off his brother's concern. "Just the wards getting used to the new and improved me. I'll fix 'em later."

And he would. They'd have to make some adjustments anyway to make sure Cas could get in when she made it back to them.

Sam shrugged again. He and Bobby had both taken turns trying to get Dean to at least acknowledge the possible drawbacks of having a sliver of angelic grace merged with his soul, but the man from the future refused to hear any of it. At this point, the younger Winchester wasn't sure what else they could do. It was ultimately Dean's decision.

So Sam would just have to trust his brother to know more about slivers of grace and bunker security systems than the rest of them. Instead, he turned to Ellen, settling a hand on the barkeep's shoulder and smiling gently when she looked over and up at him. "We're really

glad you're alright, Ellen."

It wasn't the first time he'd said it since they'd found her, Sam riding with Ellen for the remainder of the trip, but it might have been the first time Ellen really heard it. She sniffed again, refusing to let her eyes tear up, and nodded gratefully at the taller hunter.

"I'm glad you boys are alright, too." The woman rose to her full height – the equivalent of dusting herself off and standing back up – and leveled an intense stare at each of them in turn. "Now. Tell me everything that happened."

Chapter Break

Chuck watched his editorial assistant nervously, chewing on the end of his pen, as she flipped to the last page of the chapter. The last page of the whole book, actually. She'd had several chapters to catch up on, since she'd left before finishing the setup for the climax. Stephanie was a fairly fast reader but she'd paused several times, long enough to leave the writer twitchy.

"So?" he asked the second she flipped the final page to the bottom of the stack. Stephanie was staring at the top page with an expression Chuck couldn't fully decipher. It was looking disastrously close to indignation, though. He twisted and wrung his hands nervously. "What did you think?"

Blue eyes – nothing like the green he'd described in the book – locked onto his, and Chuck swallowed with some difficulty.

"Is it… uh… too- too much?" he stammered, pulling at the neckline of his t-shirt. It was suddenly feeling awfully tight. "She sort of came out of nowhere, if I'm being honest. But when I pictured her, she looked like you! Well… kinda."

Chuck scratched at his chin, still jiggling his leg nervously. Stephanie opened her mouth to reply, but the writer was already rambling on, climbing to his feet to begin nervously pacing.

"So you get a character in the story! She's even named after you. Sorta. It rhymes, anyway." Chuck suddenly drew up short, eyes wide as he whipped around to face her. His expression was slack with

horror. “Is that, uh… bad? Too forward? Did I make this awkward?”

Steph held up a hand, mouth once again parted to reply, but Chuck resumed his pacing.

“I mean, I’m pretty sure she’s a bad guy, so there is that.” He tapped his finger against his chin, already thinking through how to correct the blunder he’d definitely just stepped right into with his editorial assistant. Of course she wouldn’t want a character named after her. Especially not a villain! What had he been thinking? “B-but who knows, right? Maybe the boys will win her over to their side. She’s definitely got a thing for Sam. Maybe we can use that. *He* can persuade her-”

Chuck spun away from his editorial assistant, who was now staring at him with wide eyes, jaw snapped closed. He’d have to get writing pretty quickly to fix this. He had maybe, sort of promised Sera he was almost done with the book.

“Chuck.”

The writer froze, halfway to sitting at his desk, pen already back in his mouth, mindless chewing resumed. “Hm?”

The look Steph gave him could almost be called fond, if Stephanie was ever fond and Chuck wasn’t completely delusional (and knew it).

“The character is fine,” she assured him, offering up something of a smile, but it didn’t quite seem right. “I’m honored.”

“Oh. Oh!” The writer was momentarily surprised, then found himself grinning. “Ah, that’s, uh, great. I mean, no stress if you don’t end up liking her.”

“I’m sure I will-”

“I don’t even know her role yet,” Chuck continued babbling, plopping into his desk chair rather ungracefully. He was already reaching for his laptop.

“Let’s not worry about that right now-”

“Or what she has planned for this whole Bind-thing with Sam.” Chuck wasn’t really listening as his editorial assistant attempted to steer him towards any other topic. “I mean, worst case, if she turns out evil, I can just kill her off!”

The silence that followed that statement took several painfully long moments to register, but when it did, Chuck was instantly back on edge. His head whipped up, eyes seeking out Stephanie, who had a strained smile that stretched her face in really weird ways. Chuck blinked. Had he made things worse again? He was only trying to reassure her that if she didn't like being a character, he could easily erase her from ever existing. That was all!

Upon telling her as much, the smile got so, so much worse and Steph's voice made a weird, strangled noise as she tried to assure him it was fine.

Chuck spent the next thirty minutes panic-rambling about the new character until his editorial assistant gave up trying to console (or distract) him and just put in her headphones to tune him out.

(Well, his headphones actually. She'd sort of claimed them, along with his iPod, as her own since day one. It was fine, he didn't use them all that often anyway.)

Chapter Break

The sun was getting low in the sky, setting the horizon afire with intense reds and yellows that drifted upwards into softer pinks and purples. Stars were just beginning to dot the sky as a once vibrant blue faded towards deep indigo. The tree line was a silhouette against the setting sun, casting long, haunting shadows across the meadow. Birdsong was still the primary competition against the crackling fire, but soon they would settle down and the crickets would start up.

It was a peaceful spot, really. Located behind the bunker, close enough to the river to hear the rush of water over rock, it was a little chunk of nature tucked away from a world of blood and violence and things that went bump in the night. Dean had even seen a couple deer wander through the field on the rare mornings he spent out there with a cup of coffee and his dead guy robe. Sam swore there were foxes and rabbits, too, but he'd stopped recapping his morning wildlife encounters once Dean started calling him a Disney princess.

Cas had once marveled at the bees. A couple months from now, the meadow would be a field of wildflowers, quite literally abuzz with insects, and the angel would just plop himself down in the middle of it

and sit for hours. Sammy had helped him set up a little garden back there and together filled it with plants that would attract honeybees.

Dean had made fun of the two of them out loud, but secretly he'd been warmed to see Cas follow the younger Winchester so intently, parodying his moves as Sam dug a hole and plopped a seed inside.

("You want a hole about twice as deep as the seed is wide," Sam had said, using his thumb to make the smallest of holes in the dirt. Dean had just harrumphed – might as well toss the damn things onto the ground and see what happened – but the angel had studiously followed the younger Winchester's actions with attentiveness and care. Dean had hidden the warm fuzzies behind a sip of coffee.)

So yeah, it was a peaceful place full of peaceful memories.

This wasn't one of them.

Dean watched the pyre burn with forced numbness. The pain was there, he could feel it, eating away at his chest like those flames were eating wood and flesh and bone. But he refused to let it surface.

They'd laid too many friends to rest here.

Kevin.

Charlie.

Now Andy.

It was a good spot, at least, if there had to be a spot (and they were Winchesters; there would always have to be a spot). Charlie would have liked it. Dean wasn't so sure about Kevin – he didn't usually like anything that had to do with the Winchesters in general, let alone death.

And Andy… well, Andy would have loved the spot and hated the somber affair.

It was just the two Winchesters still standing watch now. Well, and the dog. Ellen had helped build the funeral pyre and stayed a respectable amount of time before making her way back inside. She had barely known the kid, so what she grieved was the loss of a good hunter and her daughter's friend. Bobby had stayed until just a few minutes ago, when too much 'dust and smoke' had gotten in his eyes to stay on.

Which left Dean and Sam. And Sarge, who'd sat down between Sam and Bobby when they first lit the fire and hadn't moved since.

'Like a friggin' poster for a hallmark movie called a Boy and his Dog', Dean thought, both bitter and full of grief. Mostly bitter to be so full of grief.

"Andy would hate this," Sam said from beside him, arms crossed over his chest against the chill creeping in around them as the sun went down. Dean grunted what might have been a laugh under better circumstances. The corner of Sam's mouth twitched upward. "There isn't even beer."

"Or chips," Dean agreed with a nod, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Sam fell quiet beside him once more, the mood trying to pull them back under. "We should make a run after this. To a store. Get some supplies."

Dean nodded again, but didn't say anything. The bunker was predictably empty of anything that wasn't canned and meant to survive an apocalypse (go figure). It wasn't much of a hunter's funeral without a drink to pour out, but none of the hunters had wanted to wait any longer.

"We'll throw him the party he would have wanted," Sam added, shifting from foot to foot. Dean glanced sidelong at his brother. He was trying to make small talk, the older Winchester noted, frowning.

The question was why? Whatever the answer, Dean knew he wouldn't like it. Otherwise, Sam would just come out and say it. Well, he wasn't going to help. With any luck, Sam would lose whatever courage he was building and never bring it up again for the rest of their lives.

The birds faded out and the crickets did, indeed, start up around them, along with a stronger breeze. It got quieter. Stiller. Dean almost thought he'd gotten away with it.

"Dean-"

"You're gonna love the bunker," the older Winchester interrupted, unsure what had prompted him to but suddenly dreading whatever it was his brother had to say.

Beside him, Sam huffed. "Yeah, I bet I will. But-"

“We get our own rooms,” the older Winchester tacked on, tone edging towards desperate but eyes locked on the fire. “Are memory foam mattresses a thing yet? If they are, we have got to get a couple of those. They are *amazing* , let me tell you.”

“Dean.”

There was something in Sam’s voice. Chiding, sure. Annoyed, of course. But mainly it was the slight ring of disappointment that finally shut Dean up. Hesitantly, he looked over at his kid brother, who was regarding him with sympathetic, knowing eyes. Dean hated it, because it confirmed that the tight ball of anxiety in his gut wasn’t misplaced. He wasn’t going to like this.

“I can’t wait to see all of it,” Sam said with genuine interest once he had his brother’s attention. “But I can’t stay.”

Yup, there it was.

Dean closed his eyes, turning back to the fire. It was truly cold out now, even standing as close to the blaze as the brothers were. March nights in Kansas weren’t exactly warm. Dean shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket.

“I need to figure out how to… use these powers,” Sam explained cautiously, turning his gaze back to the pyre as well. He knew Dean didn’t want to hear it – about his powers or the fact that he had to leave. But that didn’t change either thing. He had powers and he had to figure out how to safely use them. “I can’t do that here.”

“Why the hell not?” Dean snapped back, anger clear in his voice and posture. “The bunker’s a friggin’ treasure trove of knowledge.”

“And I want to learn all of it,” Sam said earnestly, stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets as he turned to his brother. Dean refused to follow suit, stiffly staring at the fire, but Sam didn’t let that deter him. “But books can only take you so far.”

As intended, that finally got Dean to look at him, shooting Sam an affronted frown. “Who the hell are you and what have you done with my brother?”

“I’m still him, Dean.”

And if there was a little too much underlying that statement… well. That had been intended too. Dean was staring at him with eyes a

little too wide now. A little wounded and a little more understanding.

That was his brother's called-out face. He looked away again and Sam couldn't help the soft smile.

"I will always be your brother. I'm just… a Jedi, now, too. And I need training."

"Padawan. If you need training, you're a friggin' padawan," Dean grumbled beside him but Sam's smile only grew.

He knew when Dean stopped arguing, he'd usually won. Oh, his brother was still pissed. It was visible in every line of his body and the square of his very clenched jaw. But he wasn't going to fight Sam on it.

"I'll be here. You need me, call and I'll be here," Sam promised fiercely, and Dean's gaze slid his way, sidelong. Green eyes were suspiciously wet – *scared* Sam correctly identified – but after several long seconds of crackling wood and flame, his older brother nodded roughly.

They lapsed back into silence as Andy's pyre began to die down. It was Dean's turn to awkwardly shift his weight from foot to foot. He was pissed. And grumpy as hell. Talk about a mood killer – and your surrogate little brother's funeral wasn't exactly a great starting place. But he'd told Sam he'd let him make his own decisions. He'd made his bed and now he had to lie, fuming, in it.

"You know where you're gonna go?" he asked, trying to sound neutral and failing miserably. What came out was a garbled mess of disinterest and anger. But Sam didn't hold it against him, at least.

"I thought I'd start with Missouri Mosely," he answered, the corner of his mouth quirked upward. It was sardonic and possibly self-deprecating, but at least it wasn't the frown plastered all over his brother's face. "She's the only psychic I know."

Dean grunted, thoughts drifting his significantly fuller little black hunter's book. He should offer the kid some names. Dean didn't know how Psychic Padawans worked, whether it was the one Jedi Master Sam was looking for or a more well-rounded education from multiple 'masters'.

He idly wondered if Pamela Barnes would be happy to see them, not

knowing what associating with them would cost her, or if she'd somehow know they were bad news. She was, after all, the best damn psychic in the state.

Dean thought about it as they lapsed back into the surrounding stillness. It didn't take long to shelve it for later. There'd be time and, as much as he didn't care for her, Missouri would be a good place for Sammy to start. He could bring it up later if Missouri didn't work out. Tonight had had enough depressing shit, already. Dean was done thinking about it.

"Guess I better go to town and get those party supplies," the older Winchester said moodily, turning away from the diminishing fire. After a second – no doubt a silent prayer (a final farewell) for their fallen brother – Sam turned and joined him.

"I'll come with. Your idea of party food is microwavable burritos."

Dean shoved his giant of a brother hard in the shoulder, taking some comfort in the offended huff of laughter he got once the man righted. "And yours is *vegetables* ."

Sam quickened his pace to catch back up, lest Dean leave without him (which he wouldn't put past his grumpy brother, who'd 'just want a drive' and some unhealthy alone time that probably started and ended at a bar). "It's called a party platter, Dean. Party is literally in the name. You're not going to win this one."

"And you are not bringing vegetables into my Baby, no matter what the label calls 'em."

Chapter Break

Gabriel was watching his sister with no amount of subtly. Straight up staring at her, that's what he was doing. If she noticed or cared, Cassie didn't show it. Her eyes were locked on the TV once more (and he was going to have to have a word with lil' sis about getting addicted to the idiot box pretty soon). While no emotion showed on her host's face, her grace was *teeming* .

The archangel couldn't stop staring if he tried. An angel, openly exhibiting emotions. Well, open for an angel, he supposed.

An errant thought flitted along the peripheral of his consciousness. He couldn't let Castiel return to heaven. They wouldn't abide such an attachment to a pair of humans, let alone the true vessels. And there was no way his sister could hide it. She wasn't even *trying* .

Gabriel had no idea how to stop the avalanche that was coming her way.

"Why do you care?" He hadn't meant to say it aloud. Hadn't even been conscious of his mouth moving or his tongue shaping the words. Castiel didn't so much as blink.

"Andy Gallagher was my…" She paused, hesitating on her next word and Gabriel wondered what it would have been if she hadn't started thinking. Friend? *Family* ? God, she was so screwed and the archangel didn't know why it mattered so much to him. "He was a good person."

He snorted.

"Good people die all the time, Cassie."

Blue eyes finally turned his way, wide as ever but so intense. Gabe didn't know what it was about his sister's eyes – borrowed eyes, though the grace behind them echoed the intensity in a way that was just… not angelic – but they carried a severity to them, a challenge that no other sibling had ever managed.

Gabe had never once been called on his shit by any of his family members. Not even Mike or Luci. At best he'd faced their disappointment or disdain. But no one ever actually called him out. The painful truth was none of his siblings had ever really known him – or cared – enough to try.

Cassie didn't know him either. But her stupid eyes still said, *'I'm gonna call you out, regardless.'*

"So," she began, voice grave in a way that made Gabriel's gut clench. He felt like a kid with his hand stuck in a cookie jar and he had no idea *why* . "Because death is common, it does not deserve to be mourned?"

Turned out, being called on your shit kinda sucked.

"… Touché," Gabriel conceded with a tilt of his head. Castiel turned back to the television, but Gabe wasn't done yet. He hadn't gotten an

answer. At least, not a satisfying one. "Why do you care *so much* ?"

"I don't know," came the honest, immediate reply. He could tell by the swirls of her grace, an array of vibrant blues: from the icy cerulean of sorrow to the deep midnight of acceptance. They blurred with eddies of affectionate rose and nostalgic mauve. She was not unlike the sunset on the screen, and Gabriel was back to staring.

Castiel wasn't hiding the movement of her grace and Gabriel felt oddly… honored to be trusted like that. Or maybe his sister just didn't care what he thought.

The archangel looked away, bothered by that and deciding not to look further into it. He had done enough introspection already to fill that quota for the next three centuries. Instead, he reached for his soda, determined to stop letting his sister get to him so much. He'd spent thousands of years so far unmoved, doing whatever he wanted regardless of the consequences.

One little angel that could was not going to change that now.

"I just do," Cassie continued, oblivious to her brother's internal struggle. "I know I am not supposed to."

Gabe snorted so hard he took a dose of soda straight to his sinus cavities and boy, a bump of cocaine had nothing on carbonation. Holy *shit* did that sting.

Castiel was regarding him with what looked like cautious concern as he coughed and sputtered. He flapped a hand at her as if to say, *'no need, I'm fine ,'* and managed to get himself back under control in admirable time.

"Please," he scoffed, voice still rough but tone making up for it. He leveled his sister with a look. "Angels have emotions. We get scared, and happy, and angry. We grieve when one of us is wronged, mourn when one of us is killed. We have emotions *aplenty* , sis. We just got real damn good at hiding them and then pretending we don't."

Cassie was regarding him with those stupid, wide eyes again and once more Gabriel had stuck his hand into that damn cookie jar. And once more, he didn't know *why* .

"…Like Vulcans."

This time the soda didn't go up the wrong set of tubes, but it sure

went down the wrong one. Gabe was stuck coughing and hacking until Castiel – hesitantly as all get out – reached over and hit him several times on the back with her one free hand.

It really didn't help, but the archangel figured he could give her that one. Thought that counts, and all that.

"I'm sorry," he said as he finally got air back into his lungs with a choked gasp. There were tears in his eyes from the trauma he was putting his poor vessel through. "You've seen *Star Trek!?* "

Castiel just blinked.

Chapter Break

"I can't believe Dean *taught* you about Star Trek and didn't show you any of it. What a total douchebag." Gabriel slurped at his loopty-loop straw, eyes on the screen. McCoy was running rampant around 19 th century New York, high off his mind, and Kirk and Spock were trying to find him without falling maddeningly in love with a dead girl. Well, one of them was fighting the good fight. The other one was Vulcan.

"We were rather pressed for time." Castiel hadn't taken her eyes off the screen since the opening credits of the first episode. Turned out, his sister was a total sci-fi junkie. Gabe was so proud (and already creating a list of what they'd watch next.)

"Terrible excuse," Gabe shot back, settling into his recliner. He was watching Cassie again, this time from his peripheral. He still hadn't gotten his answer. "I didn't ask *if* you care. You obviously do. You totally suck at hiding your emotions, by the way. You'd make a terrible Vulcan."

"I was not trying to hide them," Cassie answered without missing a beat or taking her eyes from the screen as Spock and Kirk finally located Doctor McCoy. "Perhaps I am like Spock. A hybrid."

Gabriel frowned at that, wondering what the littlest angel that could even *meant* by that. Hopefully nothing remotely close to the creation of a species from, erm, reproductive means. They already had those; they were called Nephilim. And if there was one thing he was sure his

sister wasn't (even if he was still figuring out just what the hell she *was*) it was a nephilim.

"Don't even joke about that," he grumbled, thinking back to a towering dung heap and a city full of people who couldn't understand one another. As far as cosmic jokes went, the tower of Babel had been hilarious. Gabe almost wished he'd been responsible for it.

The genocide of the Nephilim that followed… not so much.

"I am told I lie like a Vulcan quite well," Castiel continued, once more oblivious to the internal turmoil she was causing in her brother.

"Now *that,* I believe." Gabe said with a snort, tucking his legs under him as Edith Keeler ran into the street. He wondered how his sentimental sister would handle the death of a fictional character. "But I asked you why you care *so much* ."

Cassie turned her attention to the archangel even as the car struck Ms. Keeler, answering Gabe's curiosity. Either she didn't care, or she deemed his question more important. Gabriel didn't know which of those was less satisfactory, but they both kind of sucked.

"I don't know," she repeated from before and Gabriel's open curiosity morphed into annoyance. But the littlest angel that could wasn't done yet. "There is… something about Dean Winchester-"

A shadow crossed over the archangel's face, taking it from annoyed to something a lot more dangerous. Castiel was quick to move on.

"It's not just them, Gabriel. It's everything. Earth is beautiful."

The archangel looked away, still frowning. "Earth is a mess."

"Maybe, but it's interesting."

Well, he couldn't argue against that. Gabe wouldn't say he'd gotten attached (he'd been real damn careful not to, or so he'd thought), but Earth had been a pretty entertaining roommate for the last six thousand years.

"It doesn't deserve to be wiped out by our feuding."

"It will literally be paradise for all of them, Cassie," Gabe countered, but even as he said the words, they felt hollow. Like they were someone else's words and he was just parroting them because… well,

because he'd been told to.

"Even if paradise did exist-"

Gabriel's head snapped back to his sister with a sharp look. "You're saying Heaven isn't paradise?"

Castiel returned the look with one of her own, even if her face barely moved. Her grace said it all.

"If it was, why did you leave?"

Gabe fought the urge to shrink back. To think, an *archangel* , being schooled by a power. Ridiculous. Laughable. And yet, Gabriel felt called out once more.

What the hell *was it* with this angel?

He cleared his throat and looked away, the *'touché'* remained silent this time.

"Even if Heaven was paradise – was the incorruptible, happy ending that everyone deserved," Castiel continued on her earlier train of thought and Gabriel could do nothing but sit and listen, a captive audience. Her eyes were a fierce and blazing blue that Gabe, for all his effort, kept coming back to. "Wouldn't that be boring?"

Castiel's thoughts were of her days in the archives, sorting battle plans. Tasks that had once seemed vital, now meaningless. Busy work and nothing more.

"Earth may be a mess," she admitted, unable to deny it. There was disease, death, and violence. But there was also good. Pancakes that tasted like molecules, brothers that loved one another, a boy that found a dog just to bring an old man some comfort. "Humans may be flawed, and their imperfection is chaotic, sometimes deadly but… is that not life? From the dinosaurs to the first fish that walked upon the land. All of it was born from chaos. Who are we to end that? It's beautiful and fascinating. We should be nurturing it, not heralding its destruction."

The angel turned back to the television. They were on a new episode, but Castiel wasn't really watching it.

"We were created to nurture it."

Gabriel stared at the screen, ignoring his sister. She wasn't wrong. He'd never thought of it in those terms, sure, but they weren't wrong. A little overly poetic and sickeningly cheesy, sure. Annoying, but not wrong.

Then again, neither was he.

"We were also created to destroy it. It's written in *stone* , Castiel."

And it was. It *was* . If there was anything Gabriel had learned, anything he still believed in, it was that. He had to, because if that wasn't true…

What the hell was?

What had it all been *for* , if none of God's plans actually mattered?

"That is not a good enough reason to stand by while something worthwhile is annihilated." Those blue eyes were back on him again but Gabriel refused to turn to be taken in by them again.

"I don't understand you."

He really didn't, despite all attempts. He couldn't. How could an angel – a creation of God – have such faith in the very idea of faithlessness?

Gabe shoved the footrest of his recliner back into a seated position and made to stand. Castiel was still watching him (and he was adamantly refusing to return the not-favor), but her thoughts were elsewhere, with a human she'd only known for a short time. Someone who had explained it to her, when she didn't understand either.

"Gabriel," she began slowly, still finding the words that had once helped her. "Have you heard of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* ?"

Chapter Break

It was a good night. Maybe a little somber for a 'party', but even a celebration of life could afford some sorrow. They drank and ate – Bobby put chips on everyone's sandwiches, pressing down the bread with a crunch Andy would have appreciated – and they told stories. Most of 'em were about Andy, but Ellen threw in her fair share of Ash

and his newfound friendship with Ronald ("two peas in a paranoid pod," she'd called them).

And if some bouts of laughter faded into silence or ended in tears… well, that was life, after all. What the hell else were they celebrating, if not that.

"So wait," Ellen interrupted the latest story with a wave of her hand, beer bottle included. Luckily it was almost empty. There was lingering water in her eyes, but this round was from ab-abusing laughter. "You're telling me Jo – *my Jo* – helped dig up H.H. Holmes? *The* H.H. Holmes?"

"Well, Andy did most of it," Sam corrected, though he was grinning too.

"The city did most of it," Dean corrected his brother's correction. "Andy just told them what to do."

"But Jo helped," Sam added impishly, recalling how the young blonde had spent half that night by Andy's side, giggling and whispering things to him until he was laughing too. Well, cackling was a better descriptor. Ten minutes later, enough pizza had shown up to feed the half of the city working the dig. Thirty minutes after that had been a delivery guy with a lot of beer and red bull. At around three in the morning, masseuses had shown up.

Those two together had been damn dangerous.

"Shouldn'ta spent the whole night pouting in the car," Bobby piped in, eyebrows raised at Ellen, who glared right back.

"Excuse me," she started, reaching forward to steal the glass of whisky in front of the old hunter. She downed it in one gulp, slamming it down on the table. A clear indication that she'd have another, thank you very much. "Did your daughter go and get herself *kidnapped* by America's most famous serial killer without telling you?"

Dean twisted the top off the bottle of Bobby's rot gut and poured her a full glass.

"And I do not *pout* ," she added petulantly.

Bobby snorted, swiping his now full glass back before she could take another swig.

“Hey!” Ellen snarled at him, but there was zero heat in it and a whole lot of played-up outrage.

Dean tilted his chair onto its back legs, leaning back until he could stretch out his arm and reach the nearest bookshelf behind him. He slid two books to the side, revealing four upside-down whiskey glasses. The man from the future snagged one, flipped it around and offered it to Ellen as he settled his chair back on all four legs.

The other three hunters were staring, conversation fully paused. Dean just continued holding out the glass, looking at them innocently. With a huff and a smirk, Ellen reached out and took the glass.

“Might be dusty,” Dean offered with a half-cocked grin.

Ellen just got to pouring, unconcerned. “Finally, some future knowledge that’s actually useful.”

The library fell horribly, painfully silent. Dean had sucked in a single breath, loud in the abrupt silence, and hadn’t let it back out. His expression was carefully blank – too much so – but he was noticeably a shade paler than he ought to be.

“Didn’t mean nothin’ by it, kid” Ellen said immediately, tone firm as she set the bottle of whiskey back down. She kept her eyes on the boy until he met them and he let out that shaky breath. An equally shaky nod followed.

“It’s alright,” Dean said, tone muted but expression open. He nodded at Sam and Bobby and the two men relaxed as well. The older Winchester offered a weak smile Ellen’s way. “I know you didn’t, Ellen.”

Harvelle women were tough by nature and Ellen was the toughest of ‘em all. She got that way through loss and a hundred punches that took her to the ground before she clawed her way back up. She was steel and sometimes just as cold as it. But she was never, ever cruel.

It was only after Dean’s words that Ellen herself relaxed. Her fierce expression shifted into something softer, hurt and apologetic. Hell of a woman, Ellen Harvelle.

“Still,” Dean drawled, trying to put some more strength into that smile and mostly succeeding. He rolled the base of his near empty beer bottle in a circle on the table, staring at it. “Would be nice if some of this future crap I got stuck in my head actually did shit for a change.”

He tilted his head back to chug the remains of his beer.

“What the hell do you call having an intact soul, you idjit!” Bobby barked, reaching across the table to smack Dean as surely as he would have smacked Ellen were she not a woman (and one that he was terrified of (and rightly so)).

“Ow!” Dean balked once he didn’t have a mouthful of beer (that had almost gone everywhere, thank you very much, Bobby). He rubbed at the back of his head and glared grumpily at his surrogate father. “Well, I don’t call it grounds for hitting me!”

In the chair beside him, Sam rolled his eyes and stood, collecting his empty beer bottle from the table and grabbing Dean’s from his hand. He headed out of the room in the direction of the kitchen.

“What happened where you came from?” Ellen interrupted what was mounting to be a bicker-fest. The group could probably use the banter, but a thought had settled in her gut, too heavy and obtrusive to ignore. And she wouldn’t bring it up later, not after they returned to festivities and happy memories. Best to get it out now. “They get the Roadhouse?”

The mood immediately came crashing back down. Ellen regretted it, but not enough to take her question back.

Dean swallowed, the motion visibly difficult, and nodded. “Yeah.”

“While we were open?”

It wasn’t the first time the thought had nagged at her while she was driving across the country searching for someone to tell her what the hell was happening. Dean had only mentioned her and Ash when he’d told the MIT mutt to get the hell out of the bar in a damn near panic. Ash hadn’t been able to say more and there hadn’t been time to ask. But Ellen had her suspicions. Call her a glass half-empty pessimist, but if anything had taught her to be that way, it was this life.

Dean clenched his jaw, staring directly at her with a gaze that questioned where she was going with this. Unfortunately, he already knew the answer. The hunter didn’t respond other than to nod.

“How many?”

The man from the future was already shaking his head. “Ellen, don’t.”

“How. Many.”

Sam walked back in, hesitating for only a moment at the charged tension in the room. He set the beer down in front of his brother before retaking his seat, eyeing the others cautiously.

Dean sighed, rubbing at the back of his neck and refusing to make eye contact. With anyone. “Eleven. Including Ash.”

“Jo?”

“No. God, *no* ,” Dean insisted fervently, involuntarily jerking forward at the question. “I would have told you.”

“Me?”

The man from the future hesitated, glancing first at Bobby before shaking his head. When Ellen immediately raised a challenging brow, he shook his head again. “No. I mean it, Ellen. You were out getting, uh… pretzels, I think. Dumb luck, you called it.”

Across from him, Ellen huffed. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sounds about right…. Eleven hunters.”

“Don’t, Ellen. Don't do that to yourself,” Dean repeated, practically begging her. But the woman just shook her head.

“You saved eleven people with that phone call, Dean,” she said, voice once again firm but no longer hard. Her gaze was difficult to meet, but too intense to look away from either. “Good people.”

Dean swallowed roughly once more. He was getting damn annoyed of the feeling of glass shards in his throat.

‘Harden up ,’ he thought viciously at himself.

“Yeah,” the older Winchester agreed bitterly, leaning back in his chair, but his shoulders unconsciously hunched in on himself. “Just not enough of ‘em.”

“Don’t do that to yourself, Dean,” Ellen warned him, throwing his own words back at him. She wasn’t unkind about it, but it didn’t leave him with much of an argument. At least, not without being a hypocrite (which he already knew he was, it just wasn’t something he was used to acknowledging aloud).

“We can’t save everyone, boy. You know that,” Bobby added, eyeing

him with the same challenging look as Ellen, daring him to somehow name himself the exception to self-flagellation and blame.

The man from the future opted for silence as his best response, not agreeing with them but dropping it since he wasn't going to win either. Bobby gave him the stink eye, knowing exactly what he was doing, but turned to Ellen.

"Did Ash tell you what he'd found that the demons wanted so bad?"

"Uh, yeah, here." Ellen set down her glass to reach into her back pocket. Dean had already known about the Hellgates, so it didn't seem like important information anymore. At least not time-sensitive information.

She pulled out a folded up piece of paper and set it on the library table between the four of them, starting to unfold it. Ellen used her hand to flatten it out and Bobby's whiskey glass in the top corner to keep it that way. It was indeed a map of Wyoming, with five x's marked in the lower left hand corner. Dean knew if he drew lines connecting all of them – lines that matched the placement of the railroads – it would form a devil's trap.

"A Hellgate, in Fossil Butte," Dean identified, deciding it was safe to participate again so long as the conversation remained on this new, safe topic. He traced those iron lines with a finger, clearly creating a star with his invisible drawing. "Samuel Colt built an eighty mile devil's trap around it with iron railroads. Demons can't cross."

"And the only way to open it is with the Colt," Sam added, though it sounded enough like a question aimed Dean's way that the older Winchester nodded.

He'd wondered, ever so briefly, if they should go to Fossil Butte anyway. Not to keep the Hellgate closed – there was nothing demons could do to open it without the Colt. Which would make bringing it there a damn stupid thing to do.

But John Winchester had escaped Hell through that gate. What would happen if they didn't open it?

Of course, about thirty seconds of self-deprecating and apocalyptically suicidal thoughts later, Dean had realized (in a voice that sounded a *lot* like his dad) that John Winchester would have kicked both his sons' asses for even *thinking* about unleashing hundreds of demons onto Earth just to get his butt out of Hell.

So, as difficult and as painful as it had been to acknowledge that he was sealing his own father's fate, Dean had let go of the thought. No point bringing it up to Sam or Bobby. He could carry the weight of that knowledge on his own.

"Ash found it by tracking demonic omens. Same ones we had him tracking to find Yellow Eyes." Dean's gaze was still on the map, though his thoughts were in a different timeline.

"Yeah," Ellen confirmed, though she was eyeing the older Winchester in a way that pulled him immediately back to the present. She tugged a second map out from under the first, the two having been folded together. "That one, and the one in Arizona."

Dean sat straight up. "What?"

Just then, an ear-piercing alarm started to ring. Ellen and Sam clapped hands to their ears even as Bobby sprang from his chair, knocking over the bottle of whiskey in the meantime. Dean was already up and headed for the War Room, heart pounding.

The consoles there were lighting up like fireflies on steroids. The bunker lights switched, casting the four hunters in an ominous red. And Dean, staring at the console, was pretty sure all hell had just broken loose.

Chapter Break

The men were working tirelessly, around the clock, to dig out the old mineshaft. No one had told them why they were doing it and most hadn't asked. They were getting pretty hefty paychecks for this one, so they went where the work took 'em and did what they were told.

Andrew McCormick – the overnight crew chief – wiped at his sweat and grime-covered forehead, staring at the tunnel entrance.

It had taken them months to excavate the old shaft, rebuild the necessary supports and reinforcements, to get down to the mine below. They were very nearly there. The crew had made it through the last collapsed section safely, only to come across a pretty damn solid wall of stone. That hadn't been no collapsed tunnel – it was a damn dead end.

A dead end the bosses said they were busting through.

Which seemed dumb as all get out to McCormick, along with quite a few of his men. Whoever had first dug this thing obviously gave up when they ran into the wall, and likely for a reason. Although they'd estimated its thickness and planned accordingly, it was a *wall* . You didn't get this deep underground, encounter a rockface, and find something on the other side. You only found more wall.

Whoever stumbled across it eons ago doodled all over it too. Thing was covered in funky symbols and nonsense. Jeffries had mentioned then that the whole area was old Indian ground, so they were probably petroglyphs.

McCormick told the men he'd try to get them some extra cash for digging up an old burial ground – some of 'em were suspicious while others just had a conscience that upper management clearly didn't – but no one had gotten back to him about it yet.

Didn't matter either way; the bosses had told them to blast through it, so that was what they were going to do. Or, at least, it had been up till an hour ago. The dynamite was all lined up, switches were primed, and McCormick and his men were all at a safe distance back up top.

It should have been time to get paid. Which meant, of course, the men in the white hats had told them to stop.

Now they were all just sitting around, waiting for the word to proceed. McCormick cast some serious side-eye at the white hats just a few feet away. They were waiting around doing nothing as well.

Bureaucratic bullshit, McCormick thought with a shake of his head. Some pencil pusher in some city somewhere was probably waiting on the word of a politician or government official, who had to confirm they were good to go destroying what was very likely an indigenous peoples' holy ground.

Whatever was on the other side better be worth the paycheck.

One of the white hats checked his watch, muttering to the other. McCormick strained an ear to listen in.

"It's fifteen past," Mr. Seivers was saying. McCormick never much liked Seivers. Slimy weasel of a man who'd spent the last three months looking down his nose at the crew. The rat had probably

never worked a real day in his life. White dress shirt always pristine and pressed in the middle of the fuckin' desert. Hell, he'd probably popped outta his mama wearing it just like that.

"I'm aware," Mr. Javier replied, eyes on the silent dig site. "Patience."

McCormick didn't much care for Mr. Javier, either, but that was more on principle than a general dislike of the man. He was a straight shooter. Serious, stern, no nonsense. He told you what he wanted and expected it to get done. McCormick could respect that well enough, even if he thought the work he wanted done was a waste of his men's time.

But as long as the checks cleared, they could go about digging up whatever the hell they wanted wherever the hell they wanted to do it.

A ringtone broke the relative silence of the camp and Mr. Javier unclipped his cellphone from his belt to hold up to his ear.

"Yes. Confirmed. We're on it." A man of few words, that Mr. Javier. Another thing McCormick liked about the man. He hung up the phone and replaced it in its hip holster. He turned to Seivers. "It's time."

Seivers grinned and his eyes slid over to McCormick. In the dim light of the site – new moon, Andrew thought errantly – his eyes almost looked black. McCormick shivered and blamed it on the chilly desert night.

"You heard him, McCormick. Knock it down."

The crew chief hesitated for only a moment – something about Seivers smile giving him the damn creeps – before he shook it off and held up his walkie talkie. He pressed and held the button on the side. "We are good to go, Jeffries. Blow it."

"Copy," came the crackled reply. "Detonation in three. Two. One."

The camp fell eerily silent, Jeffrie's countdown echoing from a multitude of walkies throughout the crowd of men. A distant sound, like muffled thunder, rumbled through the ground beneath them. A shockwave hit a second later, nothing more than a minor quake but enough to rattle the tent poles and lighter equipment. Harris's thermos rolled off a cooler and clanked loudly on the ground. The kid righted it without looking, eyes locked on the tunnel.

It fell over again a second later.

McCormick stared at the canister as it trembled atop the dirt. He could feel the same vibration beneath his own feet. Something wasn't right.

A second jolt hit them all and it wasn't no minor quake. Several of the crew were knocked off their feet.

"Cave in!" McCormick yelled at the same time as several others. He was already pulling out his walkie talkie when he heard screams. McCormick whipped back to the tunnel, stunned into frozen silence.

Black smoke was pouring out of the tunnel entrance. At first he thought they'd ignited an oil fire, sending an immediate prayer up for the three men that had been stationed just inside the entrance to ignite the switches. But then he saw his crew running.

And the smoke, chasing after them.

"What in God's name-"

McCormick stumbled back as his men were taken to the ground, one by one, by the black smoke. It was thick, slithering, and alive. Andrew turned in horror to the bosses and froze at what he saw.

They were watching it with smiles on their faces. And it was no trick of the light. Their damn eyes were black.

It was the last thing Andrew McCormick saw – surrounded by the horrified screams of his men – before the smoke was on him, too, forcing its way down his throat.

Andrew hit the ground from the force of impact, struggling and choking as the black, slithering essence plowed into him. He went still shortly after it disappeared down his throat. It took him a moment to climb back to his feet, to dust the Arizona dirt off his already filthy jeans and adjust his heavy jacket around his shoulders.

He cracked his neck side to side and took in a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, they were yellow.

"Welcome to earth, my Prince," Mr. Javier said, a wicked smile stretched across his usually reserved face.

The newly possessed McCormick just smiled. "It's good to be back."

Chapter Break

It was too damn cold to be walking around without mittens, Adam Milligan thought as he shoved his hands deep inside his winter coat. Sure, it was March and sure, maybe in other places that meant it was springtime. And yes, a daytime temperature above thirty was such a nice change that *everyone* broke out their lighter coats and started skimping on scarves and accessories. But in Minnesota, the truth was March was *not* springtime, no matter what it said on the calendar.

Somehow, he (and everyone else in town) always seemed to forget that once the thermometer reached forty.

The fifteen-year-old found himself digging his hat out of his school backpack and shoving it over his ears as he made the walk from Rose's house to his own. He really needed to start looking for a car. He didn't quite have the money saved up yet, but he still had seven months before he could get his license anyway. Maybe if he found the right one, the seller would hold it for him.

Or maybe he could talk his mom into helping out and he could pay her back once he had it.

'No,' he thought immediately, shaking his beanie-covered head. *'Mom works hard enough as is. You want a car, you'll pay for it yourself.'*

And he definitely wanted a car. Walking to and from school this past winter, plus the times he'd trekked to and from his girlfriend's house, had been *unpleasant* . With his mom picking up extra shifts at the hospital, he'd been forced to hoof it more often than not. He may be Minnesota born and raised, so he knew cold, but that didn't mean he wanted to spend so much time walking out in it.

But come next winter, he'd have a car with a working heater. He'd be the king of the world.

Adam jogged the last block to his house, both to get some blood flowing and his temperature up, but mainly because he wanted to get out of the cold and into the heated interior as quickly as possible. He fumbled with his keys – stupid fingers were so cold they looked blue – so it took two tries before he actually managed to unlock the front door and slip inside.

“Mom, I’m home!” he hollered in case she was there. She didn’t have a shift tonight, he didn’t think, but sometimes she picked others’ up last minute as a favor to her coworkers. With living costs on the rise, she’d been picking up a lot of shifts. Adam tried not to feel guilty about his own expenses, covering as much of them as he could on his own. Of course, his mom always told him not to worry about that but, well. He did worry. Mostly about her.

“Mom?” he called again, shucking his backpack and jacket and kicking off his heavy boots. He glanced up the stairwell as he passed, wondering if she was asleep.

It wasn’t until he headed for the kitchen, hoping for leftovers in the fridge, that he realized something was wrong. There weren’t any lights on in the house. On its own, it wasn’t that unusual. It probably meant his mom had picked up that shift, after all.

But her purse was sitting on the kitchen table.

Adam swallowed roughly, a shiver running down his spine. “Mom?”

He moved cautiously from the little dinette nook, staring at his mother’s purse and trying to tell himself he was panicking for no reason. She was upstairs, asleep. That was all. But as he rounded the half wall dividing the dinette from the main kitchen, Adam came to an abrupt halt.

It was the blood more than the body that tipped him off. It was… it was everywhere.

Adam Milligan stumbled back, away from his mother’s lifeless form lying facedown on the tile, until he hit the kitchen table. He reached back to grab onto it, supporting himself on arms that were shaking as badly as his legs. He couldn’t make a sound, not that there were words to speak, even if he could.

Fear more than panic broke him out of his shock and he ran forward.

“Mom!” Adam slid to his knees in the blood, hands slipping on wet tile and slippery skin as he searched for a pulse somewhere there wasn’t damage. He knew it was hopeless, but he couldn’t just stand there doing nothing. He had to try. “No, no, no, mom, please!”

The fifteen-year-old sagged, a sob wrenching its way from his throat as his bloodied fingers found nothing but cold skin and silence.

“Shame, that.”

Adam shot upright, spinning so fast he fell onto his butt and, in a panic, scrambled back from the sudden, unfamiliar voice. A man stepped out of the shadows of the kitchen doorway. He was kind of short, average all around really, clean-shaven with a receding hairline. Whoever he was, he was dressed in an expensive looking, all black, three-piece suit. Except for his tie. It was bright red.

Just like his eyes.

“Of course, if you’d like me to fix it,” he continued with a British accent and the smile of a snake oil salesman. “I’m sure we can come to some sort of… arrangement.”

End of Season 2

Author’s notes: I TOLD YOU I WOULDN’T FORGET ADAM 😁😁😁

Also, **WE FUCKING DID IT!!!!!!** Omg guys. We made it. SEASON 2 – that 105 chapter little bitch of a season – is FINISHED!!!!!!

Not gonna lie, there were days when I started questioning if I’d make it. 70 extra chapters, five years (I blame three of those on Covid), 728k words, and ***four*** Word documents to hold it all. Sweet cheese and crackers, but WE GOT THERE.

Man, I am so glad you all like verbosity because holy shit.

Alright, time for some quick chapter notes!

Ellen Harvelle : She’s such an odd one to me, but I always found her gruff demeanor fascinating. Then again, I’m a people pleaser with anxiety; if I so much as *think* I insulted someone, I am immediately overdoing it trying to apologize. Ellen, on the other hand, seems to stare down emotional fuck ups the same way she stares down monsters. I will look you in the eye until I convince you I didn’t mean nothing by it and you will believe me because I wouldn’t lie about shit like this. Sheesh. She’s, like, terrifying but also… so badass?

[grumbles] Still, would it kill hunters to learn how to pronounce the words “I’m” and “sorry” and then occasionally use them in that

order?

Gender Studies : Okay, so about the comment where Bobby wouldn't hit Ellen cuz she's a woman. First and foremost, opinions expressed by the characters in this story do not reflect *my* opinions. Otherwise Dean wouldn't sound like Dean when it came to feminism and any form of emoting. Second, we all know Bobby would hit a woman if he needed to (he killed the love of his life when he had to, after all). The point of that sentence was that he would never headslap Ellen like he would Dean (and not because she's a woman, but because she's 1. His age (and kinda therefore an equal), 2. Not his kid, and 3. yes, terrifying)

I wanted to state it because sometimes things I write in Bobby or Dean's voice make me squirm a little. Not enough to stray from character, but anytime I have Dean putting down healthy emotional expression as "growing a vagina" there is always a frown on my face. But that's our boy, and we love him, flaws and all.

(I swear, we are slowly pushing that boy out of those dumb flaws and towards emotional growth. We. Will. Get there. XD)

What's Next? Why, Season 3 of course!! But first, an intermission that explains what on earth your author is thinking dragging poor Adam Milligan to Hell (that poor boy) :D

How many of you requested I remember Adam if I was going to steal away Andy? Tee-hee-hee [insert dramatic bow here] Your wish is my command.

And no, Adam will not be like Andy, but, yes, I will make you all fall in love with him and then mistreat him so, so badly. Whump is my JAM.

(I actually really do think y'all are gonna love where I take Adam's story. Like… a lot.)

((If Dean's emotional constipation and relationship hangups are the biggest fix-it in this little rewrite of mine, redemption for Adam is the second. It just took 900,000 words to get there 😓))

When, Silence? Soon.

How Soon? Okay, the next line in the quote is obviously "very soon" buuuuut that probably won't be reality. Sooo, I'm going to take a little break (I know, I know, so many breaks lately!) But I am smack

dab in the middle of crunch time and it's a big one, so I'm not gonna have a huge amount of writing time for the next two months. Luckily, whenever I get busy at work, writing is usually all I wanna do XD So writing will happen, just not enough to continue posting right away. Give me August and September to get out of crunch (and hopefully build up a little bit of a stockpile) and then I will resume posting!!

What do we have to look forward to? : Oh man, so much. Let's see… Sam's getting himself trained up to proper Jedi status, Dean's carrying on hunting and dreaming of a world without an apocalypse, Bobby's adjusting to life in the Bunker (and trying to find someone who can bring that place into the twenty first century) Henriksen is resorting to last resorts, Gordan's getting some vacation time, Cole is still on the hunt, and Cas and Gabe spend some more quality bro time together. Oh, and Loki's going to go make a new friend out of a certain Golmagen :D

What else?: What do you mean, what else? That's not enough?!? Alright, alright, fine. How about a mounting civil war in Heaven, Azazel and Lilith topside causing all sorts of shit that Time is not going to like, Sam decides summoning Persephone for some answers is a smart choice, Chuck's kinda wishing he hadn't given up that whole see-the-future-and-write-the-story thing, we can't forget about Bela Talbot, a rabbit's foot, and a hangman's right hand (that sounds like a joke. All we need is a bar…), the Roadhouse in working order (Hey, there it is!), we'll celebrate a very Supernatural *Winchester* Christmas, and, of course, all the while we'll be building up to one hell of a season ending, as always! ;}

Excited yet? I sure am! Now… I just have to write it.

(Let's aim for 500k words this time and only 50 chapters. We can manage that, don't you think?)

[insert sound of Author snorting here]

Cheers,

Silence

(and, yes, my author's notes were too long for A03. Because of course they were 😂)

Chapter 140: Season 2: Interlude I

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Hello everyone!!! I've got the first of two interludes locked and loaded for y'all in an effort to span the break between seasons! I am finally finished with two months of insane crunch time and eager to get writing (although a ton of planning has happened for season 3, sadly the crazy hours have left me too brain dead to actually write 😴 Hopefully that's all behind me now!)

Chapter Warnings: Ruby's on a mission, Alistair's got a juicy tip, Crowley is a smarmy asshole, Rose Parnell is a bitch, and Adam Milligan is a masochist. Let's go!

Actual Chapter Warnings: None, really, but this is our first real foray into Adam's personality when he's not a ghoul, not been lied to by angels and therefore defensive and aggressive, and not spent centuries in Hell abandoned by his family. I'm always a little nervous finding my footing with new characters (especially ones without a lot of real screen time, let alone screen time as a 15-year old-innocent high schooler 😳) so hopefully I've landed on my feet and y'all enjoy my take on Adam Milligan!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Interlude I

Ruby walked with swift, confident strides through the rocky corridors of Hell. Demons got out of her way, not the other way around, and that was just the way she liked it. She strode into Lilith's office, expression making it clear to anyone around that she was expected and they'd best not delay her.

"Lilith," she greeted the small girl standing behind a desk, pouring over maps. Ruby stood at attention, hands clasped behind her leather-clad back, awaiting orders.

She'd been expecting a summons for the last forty years. Lilith had been testing her, *training* her, for centuries now. Ruby was certain of it. Which meant Hell's Princess had a task in mind and Ruby was *ready* . She would prove her worth.

"Ruby," the young girl smiled, sweet and wide, like a child getting a visit from their favorite aunt. "I'm glad you're here. I have a special assignment for you."

Ruby bit back her grin. Best not to appear too smug. A little was alright, of course; a demon could be proud of their work. But too much and Lilith might feel upstaged. Like Ruby was reaching beyond her station. She'd learned that lesson the hard way. It had taken decades to climb back into a position of regard in the Princess's eyes.

"Whatever it is, I'm your girl," Ruby assured her with rigid posture, ready to obey. Lilith smiled sweetly again and hopped down from the stool she'd been standing on. She came around the other side, baby-pink dress swishing and dress shoes tap-tap-tapping against the boiling rock.

"Good, that's what I want to hear." Lilith crossed her arms over her flat chest and leaned back against the edge of the table. She tapped her foot idly, a thoughtful expression on her face. "We have a problem, Ruby, and I'm putting you in charge of fixing it. Azazel may believe we can get Dean Winchester's soul into Hell while it's infested with angel grace, but I'm not risking this war on *faith* ."

Ruby nodded. The Prince, while a formidable and admirable demon, was wholly confident in the plan he had devised. Twice now, that had very nearly proven disastrous. Unlike herself and Lilith, Azazel was not adaptable. And those who did not adapt, died.

They could not allow the Plan to become a casualty of Azazel's undue confidence.

"What would you have me do?"

Lilith's childlike smile turned unpleasant as she stared at her top demon. Soon to be her top spy. "You will get me a Righteous Man on Alistair's table by the end of next year."

Ruby did not allow a single thing to show. She had been waiting for this: an assignment only she could complete. A chance to prove herself, to prove she was the best.

“Consider it done.”

Chapter Break

Finding an alternate way to ensure Dean Winchester’s soul went to Hell – and sooner rather than later – was no small ask. But Ruby tackled it with calm determination and vigor. Her first stop was Alistair’s tower to see if their rough draft of a Righteous Man had anything to offer.

“He’s a tough one,” Hell’s top torturer said, wiping his brow with a blood-soaked hand. John Winchester was strapped to his table, breathing raggedly in the break between sessions. Ruby knew from personal experience his next round would be all the worse for it. “Hasn’t broken yet. Might not ever.”

Ruby’s eyes slid to the man, staring up at the ceiling with deadened eyes. Some souls never picked up the blade. They were rare – most would do just about anything to stop the pain at that point – but some held out. They broke in a different way, their souls shattering beyond what could be put back together. It would take centuries, but eventually they withered away into nothingness.

“But he might have something of use,” Alistair continued and Ruby’s eyes snapped back to him. “Keeps moaning and groaning for his sons.”

Annoyance flared at the false hope and she rolled her eyes at the sadist. “How is that helpful?”

They knew everything there was to know about the man’s brats. Unless he could explain what was going on with his eldest, something that was enabling Dean Winchester to fuck up all their plans. Ruby sincerely doubted it. Alistair had been tasked with finding those answers decades ago. If anything had come of it, he’d have reported it to Lilith already.

But Hell’s top torturer just smiled serenely in response and, despite herself, Ruby felt a shiver run down her spine.

“All *three* of them.”

Chapter Break

Crowley was her next stop, as much as Ruby would prefer he wasn't. The man was a snake, and that was saying something. She, like most of her kind, had a healthy fear of demons such as Alistair and Lilith. They were straightforward. You mess up, you will experience pain. But Crowley? He was a *salesman* , and one that had risen through the ranks incredibly fast. It wasn't that he couldn't be trusted – no demon could be, so the very idea was laughable – it was that everything with him came at a price and, if not a price, then a game.

He was obnoxious to deal with.

But, he was the man with the resources and the contacts she needed. As King of the Crossroads, Crowley had access to Earth and information there. More than that, though, Crowley believed that information was power. And he wasn't wrong, though he was overly confident about it in Ruby's opinion. A healthy balance of blackmail and brawn was important to any demon's survival. The problem with Crowley was that he never got his own hands dirty.

However, his network was more expansive than any other demon she knew, which was one of the things that made him so annoying. He always knew everything (and never failed to remind you of it, either. *Obnoxious* .) It was also one of the reasons she was stuck dealing with him now.

"I need information," Ruby announced as she strolled into what was largely regarded as Crowley's office. It wasn't an official location – no one in Hell was *assigned* space – so much as a small, secluded area in the bowels of Hell that he'd claimed as his own and filled with leather chairs and a large desk. He could often be found lurking there with a glass of liquor.

Today was no exception. Crowley, in his chosen meatsuit and swirling something amber in a fancy glass, raised an eyebrow at her unannounced entrance.

"By all means, come in," he drawled, turning away from her to finish whatever he'd been looking over at the desk. He signed something, then tucked the pen inside his suit jacket, disappeared the contract with a wave of his hand, and turned his attention her way. Crowley

settled against the edge of his desk with crossed his ankles and an air of boredom. “Information is one of the many things I sell, love. So, what are we interested in today? The latest gossip? This week's top contenders on Hell’s social ladder? Which belly button ring would suit you best?”

Ruby ignored the demon’s pointless quips, walking around the rocky walls of the ‘office.’ She feigned her own disinterest in the finer things among Crowley’s collection of objects and slowly lollygagged her way over to one of the leather armchairs. Ruby traced the seam that ran along the top of the chair with a single finger. “You’re aware of the Plan, I assume?”

The look Crowley sent her way was properly offended. “ *Please* .”

She nodded. Crowley was King of the Crossroads, one of the three heads of Hell. The lesser of those three spots, but a head all the same. No one thought much of his position because, well… *sales* . He was certainly the best at it, no point denying that. But comparing Crowley to Lilith? Or Azazel? As if he were even in the same league. She’d be throwing that sarcastic ‘ *please’* right back at him.

But the Plan couldn’t happen without a crossroads deal, so…

“I need to know what constitutes a Righteous Man.”

Crowley’s eyebrows went right up to his receding hairline and Ruby speared him with another look. One that said no matter what he asked, she would not be answering.

“And why, I wonder, do you need to know that?”

She resisted an irritated sigh. This was the problem with salesmen. They spoke a different language. You gave them a look that said don’t ask and they asked anyway, just for the hell of it. Which meant additional time wasted on rephrasing her intimidation into something Crowley might actually care about.

“I’m writing a book report,” Ruby replied with a pout and the fakest expression of innocence she could summon as she placed an arm along the back of the lounge chair and leaned in. The King of the Crossroads snorted.

“I was under the impression we already had a plan to get the Righteous Man’s soul in Hell,” Crowley drawled again, keeping an air of nonchalance that Ruby knew was complete bullshit. He was fishing

and they both knew it.

“Lilith likes to hedge her bets,” the spy answered honestly enough because she didn’t need to lie. Besides, sometimes a demon telling the truth was the best lie because no one would believe it anyway. Crowley hummed in response and Ruby wondered which way he was leaning. Not that it mattered, of course.

“Well,” the crossroads demon swirled his drink, ice clinking. Such a showoff; he always had to have *ice* in *Hell* . Ruby didn’t know how he actually managed that – or how it didn’t melt instantly – but refused to ask. Not knowing was a weakness in her world. And it was especially a weakness in Crowley’s. “The Canon only has two stipulations that must be met for the First Seal to break. First, a Righteous Man must shed blood in Hell.”

Ruby barely bit back a growl. Crowley had purposefully avoided answering her question directly. The King of the Crossroads held up a hand when Ruby opened her mouth to tell him so. He took a long sip of his Glencraig whiskey, savoring the flavor before swallowing and expressing a noise of pure enjoyment.

“Second, he or she must also be able to serve as the Michael Sword.”

God wasn’t stupid, after all. His lock and key were an exact match – a one in a million. Not easy to find. The Righteous Man had to not only be one of the true vessels (of which there were only four available bloodlines on the planet), he had to be self-sacrificing enough to make the deal, then dumb enough to tack on a ‘yes’ after all that.

In short, Dean Winchester was the Apocalypse’s best – and only – bet. If only Crowley could figure out how to eliminate him entirely, then he’d be sipping Glencraig and smelling roses for the rest of eternity. He downed the last of his drink, ice clinking against the glass. If only.

Ruby, ignoring the theatrics (like she had mentioned before: *obnoxious* to deal with) and tapped one manicured finger against the top of the leather chair. “So, in order to get the Michael Sword in Hell, he-”

“Or she,” Crowley interrupted helpfully.

“Or she-“ Ruby sent him a look that stated her annoyance in not so many words- “has to make a deal first. But how can a deal with a demon ever be righteous?” she pondered aloud, playing up the dumb blonde (even if she knew Crowley wouldn’t fall for it) as well as her

need for information that surely only a King of the Crossroads could supply (an ego stroke that Crowley absolutely would fall for, even if he tried not to).

Indeed, the King puffed his chest out that much more, looking both inordinately pleased and annoyed at her play. Poor little weasel, Ruby thought.

"It would have to be a selfless act," Crowley explained with a good deal more self-importance than Ruby thought fitting. "Pure sacrifice for the greater good."

"Like Dean selling his soul to save Sam," Ruby once more thought aloud, now tapping her cheek with that blood-red nail. "But why didn't that work with John?"

Daddy dearest had sold his soul to save Dean, but Alistair and Lilith had both been fairly certain he wasn't their Righteous Man. Even though he could serve as the Michael Sword.

Crowley just snorted. "That wasn't selfless. That was a desperate man bringing his kid back to do his dirty work for him."

Namely taking out the Moose if he proved to be less human than Daddy Winchester could stomach. Crowley's spies had kept him well appraised of that developing family drama right up until its nasty end. No, John Winchester was never going to fit the bill. The only way he fit the term 'righteous' was by putting 'self' in front of it.

"No, what you need is someone who's self-esteem is so low, who's so insecure about his own worth, that his existence means nothing in a world that doesn't have a certain someone else in it." Crowley offered her a look of his own.

"Sam Winchester," Ruby supplied easily enough. She, like the crossroads demon, knew the Plan. Kill Sam and poor little abused Dean, who'd never been worth anything in his life if Sam wasn't succeeding, would sell his soul without a second thought to bring the boy back.

John Winchester had done all the work for them. All they had to do was kill Sam.

"Bingo." Crowley crossed behind his desk, pulling out a large carafe filled with that amber liquid from a drawer. He poured himself another drink without offering his guest one. "So, I suppose what

you're here for is finding out what else Dean Winchester would sell his soul for without a scrap of selfishness. Not sure there is another way, love."

"Hmm," Ruby just hummed, allowing the demon to keep guessing. She pushed off the chair, having gotten what she needed from this conversation. She had no need to linger and spend any more time than necessary with the King of the Crossroads. "You may be right, Crowley. I guess I'll just have to keep working on it."

Chapter Break

Ruby strolled back into Lilith's office not even a full month of Hell-time later, a sly grin in place. She'd spent that time well, cultivating her own little network of spies that had gotten her the information she needed topside.

She'd have to kill them all later, she suspected, if Lilith's plan came to fruition. Not a problem, they'd served their purpose.

The little girl looked up from her desk, spotted her top spy's wicked smile, and developed one of her own. "You found something."

Ruby crossed her arms, jutted her hip out, and smirked with every ounce of confidence and pride she'd damn well earned. She was *awesome* and now Lilith was about to know it, too. "Did you mean *the* Righteous man or *a* Righteous man?"

Lilith's eyes lit with a truly evil amount of anticipation. "There's another option."

Ruby's face broke into a horrendous expression of pleasure. "There's another option. And the best part is, the Winchesters don't even know he exists."

Chapter Break

Getting topside was not as easy as opening a door and popping up on the surface. For starters, those doors were rare and carefully

guarded. Escaping Hell without one was difficult. It had been designed that way, after all. And unfortunately for Ruby, despite being top brass in Lilith's good graces, she didn't get to use one of the easy ways out.

For their plan to work, Ruby couldn't be in Lilith's good graces. Which meant escaping the hard way.

It took time. More than she was comfortable with, given the ever approaching deadline Lilith had set, but Ruby reminded herself this was part of the plan. Escaping Hell wasn't supposed to be easy. She had to earn her place by Lilith's side, and this was part of that journey.

When she finally did make it, singed and banged up and tired but *free* , Ruby took a full twenty-four hours to recover from the flight. Then she went shopping.

A blonde was too cliché for this. She couldn't afford to stand out; she needed to blend in. Of course, she'd never settle for average. Just something a little less average than her normal picks.

She found Rose Parnell on her third walk-around of the mall (the nearest one had been in a different *state,* for fuck's sake . Little pissant town didn't even have a *mall* for proper meatsuit shopping). Ruby hadn't even seen her the first two times, which was even better. Rose was a quiet thing, tucked away in the bookshop's cafe, nose in a novel. She was nice enough looking, for a nerd. Unremarkable auburn hair that would do just fine (though the bangs would have to go). Big-frame glasses, but not heavy enough to detract from her pretty-in-a-plain-way face. And a shit ton of freckles.

She was perfect. Adam Milligan would love her. Ruby would make sure of it.

Chapter Break

She waited for the right moment. Kids were walking through the crowded hallways of the high school, chatting loudly with friends, being obnoxious as teenagers were wont to do. Ruby waited until she spotted her target, walking alongside two other boys, before she dropped one of the books in her arms and bent to pick it up.

As planned, she collided with Adam, causing the boy to trip over her as she went for the textbook. Adam managed to save himself from a complete crash to the floor, but Ruby allowed herself to hit the ground with a startled gasp.

"Whoa, sorry!" Adam said, righting himself and holding out a hand for her. "Didn't see you there."

"Oh, uh… that's okay," Rose said with a soft, embarrassed smile. She'd practiced in the mirror that morning until it had been *perfect* . She reached up, accepting his hand. "Thanks."

"Sure thing." Adam pulled her to her feet, then he bent back down to collect the multitude of books and folders she'd lost in the fall. He handed them back to her with an easy smile. Too easy. The boy turned his back on her, starting down the hallway again with his friends already making fun of him. He shoved playfully at the closest one.

"Um, I- wait!"

The group of boys – and several others in the hallway – turned at her sudden exclamation. Rose tucked her shoulders up around her ears, cheeks flushing red. "I- oh god, this is embarrassing. Um, do you know where room 224 is?"

She held up a piece of crumpled paper, having taken some damage in the tussle. It had her first class of the day listed on it.

Adam Milligan looked genuinely surprised she was talking to him, standing there in the hallway without an immediate response. One of his friends snorted a poorly concealed joke and gave him a push back towards her. The Milligan boy stumbled a step forward before he waved them both off with a 'shooing' motion and an eye roll. Adam walked the couple of feet back to Rose and plucked the paper from her outstretched hand.

"New student, huh?" he asked, looking over the class schedule.

Rose grimaced, doing her best to look optimistic. She didn't try very hard, shouldering her bag a little more securely. "Unfortunately."

"Well, you are in luck." Adam folded her class schedule in two. She watched with a curious frown in place, wondering when he planned on handing that back. Then he offered her his elbow. "Care to follow me?"

Rose conveyed just what she thought of *that* with a look, eyeing both kid and arm. She walked right up to him, purposefully ignoring the proffered elbow. With a grin (that she had no need to practice that morning), she swiped her class schedule from his other hand. "Not as your arm candy."

"Oh, ouch," Adam laughed out, dropping his elbow but grinning ear to ear. He started down the hallway, Rose by his side. "That's hurtful, you know. Thinking *you'd* be the candy."

A genuine laugh escaped her before she could contain it, hand over her mouth. The bell rang throughout the halls and students started moving with more purpose. They fell in with the crowd.

"I'm cute too, you know," Adam Milligan continued as he took a left. Rose adjusted her books, eyeing him purposefully up and down from the side. "Real catch, you should know."

"I guess," she offered, keeping it purposefully nonchalant. The boy beside her made a noise of mock-offense. "In a scruffy, Han Solo sort of way. If Han Solo was severely atrophied."

This time he flat out squawked.

"Atrophied?!" Even as he led them towards a propped-open door and a sign that very clearly read *224* , he was looking at his arms, flexing almost non-existent muscles. "These guns?"

"Yes, those peashooters were the ones I was referring to."

"That's it," the boy said, stepping back so a kid could pass between them and into the classroom. Adam's grin was infectious. "We're no longer friends. After all I've done for you, letting you speak to me like this. The betrayal."

Rose just smiled and turned into the classroom without so much as a thank you. Adam followed her a half-second later, purpesefully choosing the same aisle of desks and sliding into the seat behind her. When she turned around to raise an eyebrow at him, he just grinned.

"What? This is my first class too." He waggled his eyebrows even as he dug a book out of his backpack. "Told you I knew where I was going."

She rolled her eyes and turned back to the front of the classroom, but her amused smile turned a lot more sinister once Adam Milligan could

no longer see it.

Chapter Break

It took less than a month before Adam asked her out. Ruby might have been insulted, only once she got to know the kid it became very obvious that he did not inherit the same suave as his father or eldest brother. Oh, he had the potential. He had it in spades.

The problem was, he was a *dork* .

It made him adorable, Ruby could admit (in a way that gave her hives shortly afterward). Better yet, it made him very manipulatable. Adam was the kid who had potential to be just about anything he wanted to be. He was smart, witty, cunning when he wanted to be, and genuinely sweet (when he wanted to be).

He just didn't seem to know any of that. Which meant all Ruby had to do to make him putty in his hand was point it out.

"I don't know why you let them make fun of you," she said offhand in the middle of a conversation about two asshole boys who liked to shove Adam in a locker. Unfortunately for them, Adam was tall for a fifteen-year-old. They'd yet to actually make him fit.

"For the same reason you let Shelly Sutton call you four-eyes in front of the whole school," Adam shot back. They were far from the social outcasts of the town, but they certainly weren't among the popular crowd. They were the kids that got picked on when the real nerds stayed home sick.

Rose shrugged, adjusting her glasses. "I'll put a stop to it when she finally comes up with an insult worth my effort."

Adam chuckled, staring at the ceiling of her bedroom from his sprawled spot on her bed. Rose sat at her desk, writing out math equations for that night's homework. He rolled over onto his stomach so he could stare at her. She glanced over when several moments of observation had passed without comment.

"We're really not nerdy enough to suffer these guys' poorly conceived insults," he commented, almost offhandedly and she laughed, closing

the textbook. "You'd think they'd make a rule about it. Your IQ must be this high-" he held his hand over the edge of the bed, raising it as high as he could- "to merit attention from someone with an IQ this low."

He dropped his hand almost to the floor, and Rose laughed.

"The rest of us in the middle can just muddle our way through with average, uninspired insults to one another."

"A bell curve," Rose said with a head bob that suggested she was considering it. Adam snapped upright, hopping up on his knees and pointing at her like she'd solved cold fusion.

"A bell curve. A bell curve of the teenage experience." After a prolonged moment of eureka, he flopped onto his butt, hanging his legs off the side of the bed, then fell back onto the mattress once more. "I would gladly take on the average stupidity of my peers if it meant the exceptionally stupid ones left me alone."

Rose chuckled, closing her textbook and setting her pencil aside. She rested her cheek in her hand, propped up on the desk as she gazed at her boyfriend. "You're making some pretty bold assumptions about where you fall on that curve."

Adam's jaw dropped and he sat upright. He didn't manage a straight face long enough to get out, "Oh my god, you are such a *bitch* !"

Rose only grinned. "And you love it."

The boy could only sigh. "I kinda do. I'm such a masochist."

With that, Adam put in some effort to climb to his feet, groaning the entire time (which earned him another 'atrophy' comment, and he repeated what his girlfriend had just accused him of loving). The teenager grabbed his jacket – the nights were just getting cold enough to need it – and backpack. "I gotta go. See you tomorrow?"

Rose glanced at the analogue clock sitting on the desk with some surprise and no lack of teasing. "It's, like, 8 o'clock. What, do you have a curfew?"

"No," Adam said with a light blush before swooping in to kiss the side of her cheek. "But my mom's home early on Thursdays and she always cooks dinner."

Rose straightened as he pulled away, rubbing at her cheek with a blush of her own. "Wow, that's really… sweet."

Adam rolled his eyes. "What can I say, I'm a sweet guy." He shouldered his backpack with a grin. "One who loves free food."

"That's my guy," Rose added with a chuckle, but as she relaxed back into her desk chair, she adopted a thoughtful look on her face. "I wish I had that kind of relationship with my mom."

Adam paused on his way towards the door, looking over at her with a curious frown. "What? You and your perfect white-picket-fence family don't do dinners together?"

"Sure we do," Rose said with a shrug. There was something on her face that gave Adam pause, like she was missing out on something and only just now realizing it. "It's just not, like, a weekly thing."

"Huh." Adam wasn't sure what to say to that, so he offered a one-shouldered shrug. "So make it. Your parents are downstairs. Go cook dinner and invite them to eat with you."

Rose blinked at him, then drew her head back with mock-offense. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Cook? I thought I was supposed to get free food out of this arrangement?"

Adam grinned, making his way back over to her. He bent down, giving her pouting lips a quick peck. "I cook dinner for my mom every Tuesday. What's your excuse?"

He dodged the pencil she threw at him on his way out, cackling.

"You are a squishy soft marshmallow, Adam Milligan!" she yelled at his retreating back.

"And you love it!" he hollered back as he bounded down the stairs.

She could hear him saying goodnight to her parents on his way out the front door. Ruby settled back into her chair, a grin slowly overtaking her face.

"I really do," she admitted, eyes slipping black. "It makes you so very easy to manipulate."

With a wave of her hand, the pencil flew back across the room and snapped into her waiting grip. She used the eraser end to enter her

password into her laptop before pulling up a chat program. Adam would get it when he checked his computer after he got home. Probably after he had dinner with Mommy dearest.

'Say hi to ur mom for me, marshmallow.'

Chapter Break

"Thank you so much for dinner, Mrs. Milligan," Rose said, red high on her cheeks. "It was lovely."

Adam's mom reached out and pulled her hat down further around her ears. "You can stop thanking me, Rose. It was a pleasure to have you. Now stay warm, it's cold tonight."

Rose giggled as Adam told his mom to stop fussing, already pulling on his own hat. Kate turned and adjusted his as well, leaving him to roll his eyes, huff and sigh and fidget, while she took her time. Rose gave him such side-eye.

And then they were out the door, Adam agreeing to walk Rose home. The second the door closed behind them – with one more thank you from Rose – she punched him in the arm.

"Youch!" he yelped, rubbing at his bicep through his heavy coat. "What did I do!"

"You didn't warn me how nice she was!" Rose accused, giving him another hit which he managed to dodge this time.

"Why would I warn you about that?" he laughed, almost sliding on a patch of ice and righting himself. He shoved his hands in his pockets even as his girlfriend had herself a fit. She was pretty cute when she got like that, he thought.

"I was so off my game in there," Rose said, fretting with her hands before Adam had to grab one so she'd stop. She slid the other into her pocket, happy blush taking over her cheeks. Despite that, she still glared at him. "This is your fault."

Adam just laughed again. "You did great. It's really not a big deal, you know. See how I didn't freak out when I met your parents? Let's

try that, for a moment. Let me be your inspiration."

She tried to hit him again, but with his hand holding hers, it didn't really work.

"Please, you're a ruffian who gets off on the bad boy image," she sniffed, turning them onto the sidewalk and towards her house. "Parental approval would just ruin your game."

"Wait," Adam suddenly drew up short, staring at her. "I thought your parents liked me! You said they did!"

She couldn't help the evil laugh. "Oh, they do, Marshmallow. Don't fret."

"Oh my god," he muttered, catching back up to her and they resumed their walk. "Bitch."

She giggled into her scarf. "Masochist. For real, though. I'm jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Of the relationship you have with your mom. I mean, she's wonderful," Rose continued, glancing at her boyfriend with a soft smile. "You're really lucky."

Adam was silent for another few feet, eyes far away as he thought over what she'd said. She squeezed his hand and he looked over at her, offering her a sweet smile. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

Chapter Break

"Good night," Rose said sweetly from the foyer of her house, leaning in to steal one more kiss. Adam tried to deepen it, but she pulled away with a grin. "Go home, marshmallow. It's Thursday and you're already late."

For a second, something sad passed over his face, but he hid it with a weak smile. "Mom's been picking up more shifts lately. She may not be home yet."

Rose shrugged one thin shoulder, pressing against the doorframe with a soft, understanding expression. The outside air fought against the

heated interior of her house. Adam already looked cold, despite the warmer weather lately.

(Of course, warmer was relative in this place. Ruby almost missed Hell.)

“But she could be,” Rose offered up, leaning her head against the doorframe as well. The picture of besotten innocence. “And if she is, then you have a dinner date to make, mister.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right,” Adam agreed with a grin, pulling his backpack up higher on his shoulder. He stole one quick peck on her cheek before pulling away from the front door. “Good night.”

“You’re a lucky man, Adam Milligan!” she yelled after him, laughing. “And put on your hat! It’s not spring yet!”

He waved without turning around. Ruby watched him walk down the snowy street. She knew what awaited him when he arrived home and she was confident that she had primed the boy perfectly. The last six months had been nothing but gentle reminders and quiet needling of how lucky he was. How wonderful his mom was. How much she meant to him. How much he loved her. Appreciated her. *Needed* her.

How, if she were him, she’d do anything for his mom.

Ruby smiled at Adam Milligan’s retreating back, watching him root through his backpack for his hat before walking off into the night. She closed her door and went to her bedroom to await word that their new Righteous Man had made a deal.

End Interlude I

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: And now we know what Ruby was up to in Windom! 😈

Up Next: Crowley does (his best not to do) what he does best (with very little success because Winchesters). Next interlude will be up in a month!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 141: Season 2: Interlude II

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Welcome to our second Interlude!

Chapter Warnings: Crowley's doing his best work, Adam Milligan is the bunny of Caerbannog, and Time, unfortunately, bows to no demon

Actual Chapter Warnings: Several (mild) descriptions of a dead body.

And on that cheerful note, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 2: Interlude II

Crowley stood in the shadows of the Milligan household, concealed by their protective shroud, and watched the new, potential Righteous Man as he sobbed over his brutalized mother's body. Ruby had really done a number on the woman. Spared no expense and all that.

So this is what Ruby had been about, coming to him in Hell a century ago, asking questions about what made a Righteous Man. Clever little fox, keeping the secret of a third Winchester all to herself.

More like a real thorn in his side, Crowley bemoaned. Lilith hadn't even told him why he was traveling to the Devil-forsaken town in this Devil-forsaken state. Just that his talents specifically were needed and Ruby would meet him there.

A potential alternative for the Righteous Soul, ready to sell his goods to bring Mommy dearest back, and for no other reason than the world deserved to have her. Ruby had been watching him. According to that little hell-skank, the kid was a real contender; a decent boy with a good heart and a mommy complex. Which, of course, Ruby had spent the last six months exploiting.

Adam Milligan was the closest thing to a replacement Dean Winchester that you could ever expect to get from a half-brother. If he ended up selling his soul for his mother out of self-sacrifice and a noble cause, he could absolutely break the first seal. Even better, he'd likely break well before a trained hunter ever would.

And Crowley had been hand-picked to make the deal.

Bollocks. He should be preening, but instead the demon was stuck dealing with a real speed bump in an otherwise brilliant plan of not helping the Apocalypse right along.

Now he was going to have to improvise. Luckily, the King of the Crossroads was damn good at winging it. All he had to do was offer the kid a deal he'd never take. Then he could go back to headquarters, innocent arms held out in his best, *'I tried '* posture, and tell them he did what he could, but the kid just wouldn't bite.

Dean Winchester was going to owe him the best damn blowjob of his *life* . And Crowley *would* be collecting.

"Shame, that," the King announced his presence, stepping into the light and watching the little kitten scramble away.

Kitten? Hmm. Seemed more like a skittish little bunny, really. Moose, Squirrel, and… Bunny? No bunny in Rocky and Bullwinkle. No kitten, either, for that matter. He supposed Peachfuzz could be a fit, of a sort; the kid looked like he might not even be able to grow a proper beard even after puberty hit in another… Crowley was going to say six-to-eight years. He had been rather enjoying the animal theme with the brothers….

He might just have to keep workshopping this one and find a proper fit.

"She was quite the looker for a woman of forty-something," Crowley continued his disinterested drawl, coming closer to the mutilated body and tilting his head to take it all in.

The kid spun around fast – must be Daddy's hunting blood – and threw open a kitchen drawer. He had a knife in his hand and had put himself between his mother and the intruder in the blink of an eye. Protecting her even though there was so very little left to protect. Of course, he wielded that blade like someone who had never been in a knife fight in his life, but the kid had balls, Crowley would grant him that. Definitely a Winchester.

The demon raised his hands in a mock offering of peace, taking a gracious step back. "Easy, Bunny FooFoo, I'm here to help."

Apparently, he was going with Bunny. So much for workshopping.

"Help? How?" It wasn't exactly a question as much as it was an accusation. Anger radiated off the boy more than fear or grief.

Definitely a Winchester. Perhaps Moose was the half-brother in this little Brady Bunch rehash, because this one was a dead ringer for Squirrel if he'd ever seen one.

"Who the hell are you?" Adam continued, keeping his eyes trained on Crowley and, despite his inexperienced grip on that knife, everything else spoke of an intention to use it. His gaze broke only once, shifting to his mother and then snapping back to the intruder. "A-are you- Did you-!"

"Wasn't me, Thumper," Crowley answered honestly, switching his palms from upright to outward, the picture of innocence. Well, as much as he could manage while still rightly calling himself a demon. "But I can bring her back."

"You… *what* ?" Adam shook his head, like he hadn't quite heard right. He raised the weapon higher, a physical sign of his waning patience. But his grip was a little less steady. A little less certain.

The King of the Crossroads let his eyes shift red once more, smile spreading across his face. He made sure it was well past the right side of creepy. "I can bring her back, if that's what you want. But… everything comes at a price. The question is, are you willing to pay?"

And here was where Crowley really worked his magic. By the time he was done telling this kid what it would cost to revive mother dearest – on the sly, of course: subtext was everything – of the tortures he would endure in Hell, of the guilt mommy would feel knowing he'd sold his soul to save her… Well, after he heard all that, there was no way the kid was ever going to agree to-

"Yes."

Crowley blinked. He pressed his palm against his ear, giving it a couple hearty taps. "Sorry, kid, must have heard you wrong-"

"I said yes."

The King of the Crossroads stared at the little upstart and tried, really tried, to reign in the flare of immediate, all-encompassing rage.

“You haven’t even heard what it’s going to cost you, Bun Bun,” he tried, using that same raised hand to stop the kid from interrupting him again.

“I don’t care,” Adam bit out before the demon was even done speaking. “She’s my mom. Bring her back.”

Crowley took a deep, absolutely not-calming breath, and tried again. He plastered as much of a let’s-begin-again smile as he could across his face (which was to say, not very much at all), and decided a different plan of attack was needed.

“I’m not talking small stuff here, kid. I’m going to ask for your soul, and you won’t even get the standard ten year contract-”

“Done.”

“No, NOT done!” Crowley hollered, finally losing his carefully crafted, endless patience. “Are you insane? At least hear the contract out, you insufferable BRAT, because it’s not a good one. I’m going to screw you right over.”

“I don’t care. Do it.”

“Well- You- You bloody well SHOULD, damnit!” The demon tried taking another deep breath, even gestured with his hands to calm the tense discussion back down to workable levels. “Let’s think about this a moment, kid. Maybe mull it over until you come to your senses and realize it’s bloody crazy. I mean, your soul and one year with your mom is a crap deal-”

“Deal.”

“No, NO DEAL. STOP SAYING THAT,” Crowley screamed, forgoing any pretense of patience or calm. His fingers were curling into knuckle-aching claws at his sides in a desperate attempt not to pull his own hair out. What the hell was wrong with this damn kid?

“You said you could bring her back,” Adam practically growled, raising his knife once more, as if he might make good on that threat when he couldn’t even back it with a decent fighting stance. “So bring her back!”

“I also said I’m going to take your *soul* , you impatient little INGRATE.”

The kid didn’t even bat a damn eye. Just met his glare with one of his own and snapped out, “And I said *do it* .”

Crowley could only stare. And stare and stare and stare.

“SERIOUSLY?”

And roar.

Adam held out his hands in open challenge. “I’m waiting.”

The nerve of this little-

Crowley tried more deep breathing. He tried a lot of it. And then he gave up when his cheeks were bright red and he was certain he was dizzy with rage.

“Fine,” he hissed, waving his hand. A contract unfurled from nowhere, spilling to the ground and over the corpse of Kate Milligan. Crowley all but threw a pen at the boy, who fumbled to catch it without dropping his knife.

Adam knelt without hesitation, not even trying to read the incredibly tiny print of the eight-foot contract. Just signed his name in the messy scrawl of a fifteen-year-old boy and offered the pen back to the King of the Crossroads.

Crowley swiped it with a terrifying growl and disappeared the contract and himself with a flourish.

Fucking *Winchesters!*

End Interlude II

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Poor Crowley. He gave it his best shot, but nothing beats the hard-headedness of a Winchester.

Peachfuzz: Captain Peachfuzz is a character in Rocky and

Bullwinkle, but I like Crowley's animal theme more than the R&B theme, so we're going with Bunny! (Honestly, kitten might be more fitting but we can't have him giving away Cas's nickname unknowingly! So bunny it will be)

Up Next: So that was our last intermission but I am way, way behind in my writing. Like waaay behind. Damn Muse, only wants to plan Season 3, apparently does not want to write it The planning is a great thing, no complaining there, but the lack of writing means I will be taking a longer break than expected before posting. I'm going to try and resume as soon as I have at least 5 chapters written. I currently have…. Erm…. less than five pages So I can't really provide an ETA for when posting will resume, but I shall do my best to kick that Muse's writing butt into gear.

Hang in there, everyone, we'll get going again soon enough!

Cheers,
Silence

12/01/2024 - Update Delayed: Hey guys, I'm not going to make this weekend's update like I'd hoped. I ended up with a slammed Thanksgiving week and have had no time for the story I should have some time this week to get the first chapter properly edited and, hopefully, I'll post this upcoming weekend. Sorry to get everyone prepped for a chapter and then drop the ball, but I'll get it up just as soon as I am able!

Chapter 142: Season 3: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Welcome Back: Hello good people! Welcome to Season 3! please take a moment and **read the author's notes**

Author's Notes (TRIGGER WARNING for pets and end of life care): Okay, so Real Life is a lot at the moment. My dog, Kodak, ended up in the ER this week and I'm really, really sad to announce that the prognosis is not good. He's home now and doing okay, but I'm afraid it's temporary. He's 12 and a cancer survivor, so we knew this time was coming, but of course that doesn't make it easy. I've had him since he was 6 months old, he's my first dog and my baby boy, so I'm hurting pretty badly right now. My creative energy has flatlined and will probably remain that way for a bit. (Honestly, at this point, I'm hoping to channel the grief into writing genius in the coming weeks but I don't actually know if that's a thing Dear Chuck, let it be a thing.)

So, here's the deal! I wanted to post this chapter because I am already a week behind my anticipated Season 3 start date, which was already a month behind the original plans. And I actually am really hoping the story will help with the grieving process (or serve as a distraction when I need one, if nothing else) I'll keep posting as long as I have chapters to post (which is… 4 currently because I was already way waaaay behind schedule before this happened) so I'm going to use a **two week posting schedule** to buy myself some time. But don't worry, I won't push myself too hard - my grief is gonna process itself on its own time and I can't actually rush it, I know (even if daaaaamn do I want to, cuz feeling things suuuuuuucks)

Thank you all so much for your understanding and patience. So many of you have told me you're in this for the long haul, no matter how long I need for Real Life things and I appreciate knowing it. This will pass and then our little beast of a tale will continue!

Right now, for starters

Edit: Aw shit, I just realized it's been months since the last post and the Shortcut to this story isn't up to date. Damn, sorry folks!

The Road So Far: Sam won the battle Royale but Tom killed him anyway. However, he didn't die and Dean didn't sell his soul because he made a deal with Persephone to heal Sam. Persephone turns out to be something called a Golmagen, Bobby's house got blown up by demons, they found the bunker key, and they had all moved in when a hellgate opened in Arizona.

Okay. Now you're ready to start!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 1

It turned out, memory foam was a thing in 2007, but it was a prohibitively expensive thing. So Dean had settled for an average spring mattress but sprung a little extra on a nice, cushioned topper. It wasn't quite the sleeping-on-a-cloud experience that was memory foam, but it was as close as he could get for the current year. And Dean was just fine with that.

In fact, even on a century-old mattress (which needed a good dusting and a solid toss right into the dumpster) that first night back in the bunker had been the best night's sleep he'd gotten since landing in 2005. The subsequent nights after he acquired his as-close-as-possible-to-memory-foam mattress had been pure bliss. He'd slept like a goddamn baby.

It was friggin' Heaven on Earth, man. If he ever made it to Heaven and actually stayed there, sleeping in the bunker was going to be one of his top memory replays, he knew it.

That morning, five weeks after they'd finally found *home* , Dean threw on his dead guy robe and shuffled in the general direction of the kitchen. He might have slept a little too heavily, given the groggy haze clinging to his brain. Or maybe he'd had one drink too many with Bobby. He couldn't actually recall, which was pretty much a neon sign pointing right that way.

Either way, coffee was a must.

The kitchen door was closed when he got there, which wasn't the oddest thing in the world. He was going to have to tell Bobby he could just leave it propped open. The man was still getting used to his new home (with all the grump of someone who hadn't *wanted* a new home, no matter how awesome new said home was), and Dean kinda thought it was a privacy thing.

The man had lived alone for as long as Dean had been alive. Well, at least till Andy.

He immediately pushed the emotion that came with thoughts of the kid right back down, to stew somewhere below his diaphragm until he was ready to deal with it. It had been weeks since the funeral. Going on two months, actually. Whenever Sam pressed, Dean would insist he was fine. And he was. But he still missed that kid.

It was too early in the morning for grieving, Dean decided with another firm push against the swell of grief that just thinking about Andy brought up.

"Not before coffee," he grumbled to himself and gave the door a hardy shove – it had been sticking lately – only to meet a solid wall of resistance. The door didn't even rattle in its frame.

What the hell. It was too early for this, damnit.

Dean looked down with squinty eyes still full of morning grit. He could see light through the crack under the door, shifting as a shadow moved across it, confirming Bobby was in there. He banged on the door with the side of a fist. "Yo, Bobby! Did you lock the door?"

The shadow moved, getting closer, and the next thing he knew the door was swinging open. It wasn't Bobby on the other side.

"It was not locked," Castiel said, staring along the edge of the door, as though looking for the source of Dean's incompetence. "Perhaps the hinges need to be tightened. They do appear a little loose."

"Cas!" The man from the future could only stare, wide-eyed, at the angel standing in his kitchen doorway. "You're back!"

The expression that overtook the angel's face did not match the level of surprise or elation in Dean's. She tilted her head, first confused then, as clarity settled, she looked much more admonishing than pleased.

Dean immediately wondered what the hell he could have done to piss off a hot nerd angel this early in the morning. And also *how* , seeing as this was the first time he'd seen her in two months.

"How hard did you hit your head yesterday?" she asked, voice ever so barely tinged with concern (which was as loud as a blowhorn for Dean, but then, he knew Cas). The relief at not being in trouble was short lived; her tone immediately shifted into that of an irritated Warrior of God who did not put up with Dean Winchester's shit. "You said you were fine."

Well, that explained the groggy haze and lack of memory.

She reached up with two fingers, prepared to heal him, but Dean grabbed her wrist before she could make contact. "Whoa, hey, I'm fine, Cas! See?"

He patted his own head, only to let out a yelp of pain when he encountered one hell of a lump on the right side of his scalp, just above his ear. "Jesus, what did I do to myself?"

Cas did not appear amused. She sighed – seemingly at Fate itself for pairing her with such a hopeless human – and pushed forward, despite Dean's grip still on her wrist. Her eyes glowed blue as the healing wave washed over him and the hunter closed his eyes beneath the cool, spreading relief of it.

He instantly felt better. Felt more at home.

"Thanks," he said with a smile once the angel had pulled away. He must have had a concussion after all, given how much better he felt now.

"You should have told me it was that bad," Cas admonished, but there was a gleam of fondness in her eye as she turned from the door and headed back into the kitchen. Dean followed, rubbing at his now flat, undamaged skull. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Uh…."

Trailing after Cas, Dean settled his hip against the edge of the counter a couple feet from her as the angel took up her previous position, watching the brewing coffee pot with a completely unnecessary level of concentration. At least, that was what she had been doing before her human forgot how to open a door. Dean tried and failed not to grin at the sight.

“I arrived at the bunker two days ago.”

He jolted so suddenly his elbow slipped and he hit the edge of the counter with his hip hard enough to bruise. “ *Two days* ?!”

Jesus, how hard a hit had he taken last night?

The look Castiel sent his way suggested she was thinking something similar, only with a greater mix of concern and scolding, in equal parts. “You were on a hunt, alone. Bobby told me where to find you. I arrived in the middle of the fight.”

The hunter could only stare in befuddled amazement. He had no memory of any of that. Well, maybe the hunt. He remembered finding a case, telling Bobby, ignoring Bobby when the old hunter told him to call Sam, then heading out alone.

But he didn’t remember the fight or Cas showing up to save his ass.

“Aaaaaaand?” he drew out, grin taking over his face despite all that. He knew what she had left out and that Cas was sure to be thinking it too. She was just too uptight to say it aloud without prompting (*for now* , Dean thought with a goofy smile Sam would absolutely make fun of him for, were he there).

Sure enough, Cas flashed him an annoyed side-eye worthy of a Warrior of God. “And I ended it.”

The grin only grew. “That’s my girl.”

Cas sent him another look, though this one was far more affectionate than the previous, and Dean couldn’t help himself. His angel was back, he had his home and his dead guy robe and his almost-memory-foam mattress. Life was almost friggin’ perfect.

Almost. The only thing missing was Sam.

(Because his brother had, of course, had to run off on his own again, just when they’d finally found themselves a home.)

“I did not arrive in time to save you from an apparently far-more-severe head injury than you suggested last night,” Castiel reminded him, not letting Dean enjoy himself too much (or get too stuck in the thoughts that would stop him from enjoying himself too much.)

Well, Dean was nothing if not a fighter. And he did not like to lose.

So he sent her a wink, feeling truly good – almost light on his feet – for the first time since they'd buried Andy and saw Sam off. "That's me, Cas. Concussion Dean's always fine."

It wasn't the first time, after all, that he'd woken up the day after a hunt with some spotty memories – or no memories at all – of the day before. Workplace hazard, he acknowledged with a shrug.

The angel did not appear to share his cavalier opinion. The deadpan look was damn near perfect on her Jimmy-adjacent face. The only real difference was the feminine curve of her cheeks instead of Jimmy's more angular jaw.

"I will remember that the next time I am speaking with Concussion Dean," the angel answered in monotone and a burst of laughter escaped the hunter.

The coffeemaker beeped, spewing and spitting out the last of its brew, and Dean reached up to the cupboard next to him to fetch two mugs. He set them down as Cas withdrew the pot and poured one of the mugs, leaving enough room for cream. Dean reached out and tilted her hand, continuing the pour until it was almost to the brim. Those blue eyes were intensely locked on him, questioning, but he didn't look away from the mug – or pull away from the angel – until the cup was full.

"I take it black. Don't need room for milk," he explained with another wink, swiping the mug off the counter. He gestured with his chin and eyebrows at the second mug, hoping Cas would pour herself a cup as well. She did not. "Where'd you learn to make coffee?"

"Gabriel," came the offhand reply, and Dean probably should have guessed that.

"He teach you any other human stuff?" the man from the future asked out of curiosity as he sipped at the too-hot-to-chug brew. She'd done a good job. It was good and strong.

Cas sent him a look he had no idea what to do with: part contemplation, part what he would have sworn was mischief (she had spent two months as the sole captive of a Trickster, so that was an absolute possibility now, he reckoned), and part something entirely unidentifiable. It was all wrapped up in a side-eye for the ages. She looked away, replacing the coffee pot on the heating disc.

"Some."

Dean's eyebrows went up and he had *no* idea what to do with that answer. Or what the hell it meant. He stared for a couple extra moments of silence, awaiting further detail, but the angel stayed stubbornly silent. He had no idea what to make of that, either.

"You should not work such dangerous cases alone," Cas said, pivoting back to the previous topic and her interrupted scolding. "Where is Sam?"

Dean groaned, setting his coffee down. He didn't want to talk about that, damnit. "Off with Missouri Mosely – a psychic dad knew – to learn how to master his Sith powers."

There was a pause, one just long enough for Dean to start groaning well ahead of Cas's reply.

"I do not understand that reference."

"You know what? That's it," Dean announced suddenly, grabbing his coffee off the counter like a decision had been made and it was time to execute it. Cas had just given him the perfect excuse not to think about his brother, who'd rather be gallivanting off with psychics, practicing spoon bending and other bullshit, then in their kickass new home with his own brother. "We're fixing that, right now. What are you up to today?"

The angel seemed taken aback, blinking in surprise at the hunter. The abrupt switch of both topic and mood caused her to hesitate, like she thought this might be a test she was supposed to pass. "Whatever you are."

Well, it hadn't been a test but if it had, she'd have aced it. Dean grinned charmingly. "Great. I'm watching Star Wars."

Chapter Break

They started with Four instead of One. Dean had decided, no matter what Chest-Cas thought, that you just had to start with the originals. Unfortunately, they had to settle for watching in the library on a laptop; the Dean Cave had yet to be set up, though it was high on his list of Bunker-Fixing priorities. He'd learned the hard way the first time around that the Men of Letters had not believed in couches or

lounging when they'd built the place.

They had no excuse, Dean thought for the second time in his life. Television sets had existed in the fifties, even if they'd been in black and white back then.

Cas made it through *A New Hope* , asking a thousand questions which Dean diligently answered (when he thought they were decent asks) or told her to shaddup and watch (when the answer would come up later on in the film and the angel was just being impatient). She enjoyed watching the first film enough that they started the next and eventually the third after a break for lunch and a switch from coffee to something stronger.

It wasn't until the credits were rolling, the day turning towards night with Dean nursing a beer, that Cas turned her gaze away from the screen and back to him.

"Why does Sam need training for Sith Powers?" she asked, her curiosity and proper reference helping to keep the question innocent enough that it didn't immediately raise Dean's hackles. "And why does he have Sith Powers, specifically?"

Dean sighed into the mouth of his beer, having almost forgotten all about what led them to a Star Wars marathon in the first place. "Sam… opened a door in his head, or so he says. Let all that psychic, demon blood stuff come flooding out at the Battle Royale, and now he can't put it back."

Despite attempting at least a modicum of effort not to sound grumpy as hell about it, he still sounded like a pouting child. Which, he supposed, he kinda was. He understood Sam's reasoning, about not being able to change who and what he was, and how trying to wouldn't go well. Dean understood, he really did. He just didn't *like* it.

"If he cannot undo what was done, then learning control is the next best thing," Cas offered her perspective calmly, all the while staring at him intently with those stupidly blue eyes. Dean did his best not to notice. Her words weren't anything Dean hadn't already thought himself.

"The Sith and the Jedi appear to have the same powers," the angel continued, her voice softening in a way only the man from the future would pick up. "How they use them separates them into good and evil."

The hunter sighed. He'd been kind of hoping Cas would have a magical fix to stuff that psychic cat back in the bag, even though he'd known it was wishful thinking. Now he was biting back a whole bunch of guilt at having called Sam's abilities Sith Powers in the first place.

Suddenly the Star Wars marathon wasn't so fun. Dean shifted in his chair, practically squirming with the uncomfortable emotions roiling around his gut and chest.

The truth was, Dean was still scared shitless of Sam going darkside. He just didn't know how not to be. How did you trust someone not to do what time and destiny and all of Heaven and Hell wanted them to do? Time alone was proving to be one hell of a stubborn, unchangeable bitch. Dean just didn't know if Sam would overcome her now when he'd failed so spectacularly the first time around.

"I know, I just… shit, Cas, am I breaking the damn timeline here? *Should* I be?" His angel tilted her head, but Dean carried on. "Sam's got demon-blood-based superpowers that he says are permanent, Bobby's house is gone and he's living in the bunker, which we shouldn't even have access to, and you're…"

Dean cut himself off, burying his gaze in his beer. The theme to Star Wars was still going in the background as the credits continued scrolling by. "Just tell me all that was worth it. Tell me it *worked* . That we stopped the Apocalypse."

"You stopped the Apocalypse."

Dean's head snapped back up. Because, *what?*

"You and Sam stopped the Apocalypse," Cas repeated in the face of his disbelieving, baffled gaze. "As far as I can tell, the first seal remains intact and Hell does not have a Righteous Soul under contract. The Apocalypse cannot occur with these two things as they are."

He couldn't breathe. His lungs kept trying, but all they managed was to lose what little air was left in there in staggered exhales of shock.

"Hell may find another way," the angel amended, head tilting every so slightly Dean's direction, as if acknowledging his not-unfounded disbelief. But she didn't think that was likely to happen, at least not anytime soon. Dean could tell, just by her eyes. "However, that will take time. For the moment, the world is safe. Sam is safe."

'You are safe ,' hung in the air between them, but Dean told himself it was just what he wanted to hear. He wasn't the priority here.

"Well, shit," the man from the future finally breathed out, managing to get enough air to reinflate lungs and vibrate some vocal cords. He let out a disbelieving huff, wiping a hand over his mouth.

He wasn't quite ready to believe it, if he was being honest. Life had taught him that being a Winchester meant not just constantly waiting for that other shoe to drop; it was a god damn guarantee that it *would* . So, no, he wasn't ready to believe it.

But, he supposed, it was a nice pipe dream. Just for a little while, of course At least until Hell figured out their next plan, Dean could pretend. Like taking a vacation, he thought, perking up a little. He could enjoy the peace while it lasted, until shit hit the fan again, as it inevitably would. Might even be nice, for a while.

"So… you just saved the world. What are you going to do next?" Dean leaned back in the definitely-not-a-theatre-seat-but-oh-well library chair and sent a smirk Cas's way. The angel, of course, did not get the reference. No, she took it literally and with all seriousness.

"You mentioned there were more films associated with this storyline," she replied with the heaviness of someone discussing next moves in a war.

Dean's grin grew more genuine and he sat up, grabbing the computer and pulling it to the edge of the table so he could find the next film. "You're supposed to want to go to Disneyland, Cas. But Star Wars is a pretty good backup."

"Why would I want to go to Disneyland?" Castiel asked with genuine curiosity. "Are you going?"

"Nah," Dean dismissed immediately without giving it much thought. He grabbed for his beer, taking a long-overdue sip. "Disneyland's for kids."

The angel nodded, as though she understood. "We will have to acquire a child, then, so that we can go one day."

The man from the future very nearly spewed beer all over the keys, managing to choke and hack it back with a rough cough. Cas sat upright in mild alarm, hand twitching on the table, itching to heal. Dean waved her off.

He was *fine* . Even if his brain was currently rebooting from Cas suggesting they kidnap a kid so they could go to Disneyland. Okay, that's not exactly what the angel had said. But the other way Dean's brain went – that the two of them would one day *have* a kid – was way more ludicrous.

No, no, it was far more likely that Cas meant a kid could eventually come into their midst. Which really wasn't that far of a stretch.

Between Clair, Alex, Krissy, that one baby monster he and Sam had spent a week taking care of….

Yeah, Dean supposed. They did occasionally run into kids. Some of which needed parents or, at the very least, guidance. Hell, maybe they could properly befriend Jody this time (once she stopped thinking of them as possible murderers) and go with her and Owen.

Dean had never been to Disneyland. He'd never really let himself think about it as a place he *could* go. Huh. Now that he was thinking about it, it could be fun. They could get Sam one of those ridiculous Goofy hats.

He was grinning at the thought, contemplating how he and Cas might find themselves a kid to borrow, when Bobby walked into the library. He came up short at the two of them camped out, leftover popcorn bowl and empty cans on the table suggesting they'd been there for some time.

"Well, don't you two look cozy," he started, a judgmental eyebrow climbing up towards his cap. Dean immediately blushed (though he wasn't sure what the hell for) and straightened up in his chair like he'd been caught doing something wrong. But the old hunter's gruff was aimed at the angel, not him. "Thought you said you were going to tell Dean about the case."

"Case?" Dean echoed, immediately alert and switching his gaze between Cas and Bobby. "What case?"

"You said it was not urgent," Cas parried, looking wholly unmoved by Bobby's grouchiness. She turned towards Dean. "And you wanted to watch Star Wars."

"Yeah, but not if we have a case," Dean immediately argued, glancing at Bobby and looking away just as quickly. The day of movies and light drinking was now taking on an aftertaste of guilt and slacking off.

At the same time, Bobby answered the angel with, “It’s not, but you said you’d tell Dean…” he twisted his wrist to look at his watch and then resisted rolling his eyes, instead sending the angel the stink eye, “twelve hours ago, Feathers.”

“ *Twelve* -” Dean was already climbing to his feet.

“Eleven hours and fourteen minutes,” Castiel corrected, still calm. Bobby just glared and Dean felt like a referee caught between the two of them.

“What case?” he asked again, putting more stress in his words.

“Couple of ghost sightings,” Bobby finally answered, looking at Dean. “Nothin’ much.”

The older Winchester felt himself deflate, though not entirely certain as to why. A case was a case. Still. With the Hellgate having opened less than two months ago, every hunt that wasn’t a demon felt like… not quite that he was wasting time, but there were more important things he should be doing. Like hunting down the mass of demons that had escaped Hell.

“What about demonic omens?” Dean couldn’t help but ask, already knowing the look Bobby would give him. And yup, sure enough, there it was. That searing, fatherly look that said, *‘I know what you’re doing, now stop it.’*

“The computers are doing their thing,” Bobby answered with the narrowed eyes of a challenge but the nonchalant shrug of ‘whatcha gonna do.’

They’d brought in Frank Devereaux – who was thankfully still alive in this timeline, or they’d have been shit out of luck – to bring the bunker into the twenty-first century. It had been a hell of a job, one he’d bitched about the entire damn time, of course, but he’d gotten the ‘central nerve’ of the system (or whatever he and Sam had called it) back up and working. The alert and early warning systems in the War Room were fully functional and, most important of all, they had bunker-wide wifi.

Granted, it was only 2007 so the signal *sucked* and the internet was dial up levels slow, but Dean couldn’t do anything about that except wait.

Despite having their system up and running, they’d only had two hits

so far. That was piddly squat in the face of a Hellgate opening and flooding the Earth with demons. It had stayed disquietingly quiet these past five weeks and Dean didn't like it.

"You know I'll tell you when a bigger fish pops up," Bobby added.

"Yeah." He did know that. The older Winchester sank back into his chair, still feeling deflated in the face of a nothing ghost hunt. "Yeah, alright, what's this case you found?"

Bobby huffed and walked up to the table, snagging the laptop which still had the Star Wars title page up, awaiting input. He exited the program and pulled up the internet, typing something into the search bar before swiveling the screen towards Dean.

"Like I said, it's not much."

"You should have told me we had a case," Dean scolded Cas, though there wasn't much heat in it as he started reading about the possible paranormal activity happening a couple hours away in an old mining town just south of the Canadian border.

"If Bobby made a point of mentioning the case was not time sensitive, should we not take time to do things we enjoy?" Cas was watching him carefully, blue eyes bright, and Dean wondered if she was testing him or checking if he was testing her. "Isn't that the human experience we are trying to preserve?"

The man from the future winced, remembering telling the angel that there were things worth saving, and he would show her all of them. Namely pancakes, at the time, but yeah, he supposed Star Wars counted too. Movies in general, actually. And a pop culture education for the angel was on his timeline-fixing To-Do list.

He looked at Bobby, guilt still gnawing at him for picking leisure over a case. But the old hunter just shrugged, looking fairly nonplussed about it.

"We did save the damn planet. At least far as we know," he offered, scratching at his beard. "A little R&R isn't much of an ask."

Dean tried to relax at what felt like permission – forgiveness at the bare minimum – but the tension remained in his muscles. There was a building itch he couldn't scratch, like he needed to be up and doing something. So he stood, closing the laptop, and turned to Cas.

“Well, now I want to work a case,” he declared. The angel merely nodded in acceptance and stood as well.

“I will join you,” she announced, much to Dean’s pleasure.

“Good,” Bobby groused with a nod of his own. He crossed his arms over his chest, stink-eye leveled Dean’s way this time. “Then I won’t have to call your brother for you.”

The hunter rolled his eyes, tucking the laptop under his arm. “It’s a standard ghost hunt, Bobby, if that. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“It wasn’t standard last time,” the old hunter grumbled back, stink-eye shifting into an outright glare. “Taking on the Seven Sins on your own. Damn idjit is what you are.”

The way that Castiel’s head whipped around to Dean, glare fierce, had the hunter immediately raising his hands. “In my defense… I ran away real quick once I realized who they were.”

And he had. He had *booked* it out of that town, calling Bobby in a damn panic because he needed backup. A lot of backup. How the hell the same seven demons found their way out of an entirely different Hellgate was a mystery to Dean and one he really hadn’t cared about when he was busy running for his life.

The admission hardly settled either friend, so Dean rolled his eyes and added, “And yes, I should have called Sam. Are you two mother hens happy now?”

“Hardly,” came Bobby’s immediate, growled reply. Cas, on the other hand, looked down at herself as if to check she had not sprouted feathers or laid an egg. Dean moved on before she could say as much.

“Well, with Cas on my six, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Right Cas?” the older Winchester said proudly, clasping a hand on Cas’s shoulder. She blinked at him.

“I don’t believe I am on any of your numbers.” She tilted her head. “Nor do I know how to be.”

Dean shuttered his eyes, trying his best not to roll them again. “I mean you have my back.”

Cas stared again. Then she opened her mouth.

“It means you’ll protect me, Cas,” Dean blurted out as quickly as he could, before Cas could get any more lost in idioms.

She closed her mouth, blinked once, then nodded solemnly. “Yes, Dean. I will always protect you.”

Great. Now he was back to blushing.

“Let’s just go.”

He turned on his heel and aimed for anywhere but there, walking right past Bobby’s raised eyebrow and not-so-subtle smirk.

Chapter Break

It was a seven-hour drive to the old mining town just beneath the Canadian border, and Dean spent most of that time with the windows down, the music up, and Castiel in his passenger seat. It felt good. Damn good. With Sam off training his new powers and Bobby still dealing with the fallout of losing his home, Dean had largely been on his own these past couple weeks.

He’d gone solo before, of course – the longest stretch being while Sam was at school – but Dean had disliked each and every time. A shrink would probably call it codependence, but he’d never liked being on his own. Dean Winchester was always a better version of himself when someone was around to count on him.

So, of course, it was nice having a passenger riding shotgun with him once more. The fact that said passenger was Cas, finally free from Heaven’s influence – all of his brothers’ influence, actually – and there to stay was just the cherry on top.

“So tell me about this hunt,” Dean probed the angel after about an hour of comfortable silence between the two of them. Cas had been observing the world passing by her window, sun streamed across her upturned face, with something that seemed dangerously close to human contentment. It made Dean warm and fuzzy in ways he wasn’t going to acknowledge with a ten-foot pole.

Now Castiel turned towards him, that peaceful observation shifting to the more familiar seriousness of a Warrior of God. “There have been

multiple sightings of ghosts in the Livingston area. They are clustered in one area of town. The cause is unknown, but the phenomenon is recent. The sightings began three months ago."

Dean nodded along with the information. "What kind of sightings?"

"Benign, mostly." Castiel picked up Bobby's folder. Dean had tossed it on the seat between them when they'd first climbed in. The angel flipped it open now, combing the information inside. "An old woman whose clothing suggested she died in the early 1900s, a young boy from the 40s or 50s looking for someone to play ball with him. There have been nine individual sightings. Only one has been violent."

" *Nine* ?" Dean echoed incredulously, glancing between the angel and the road. He'd never heard of nine different ghosts manifesting in the same town. Not without it being a violent, haunted shit show like Cold Oak.

"That is what the article said," Castiel replied dryly, as if Dean was calling her a liar when the proof was right there in her hand.

"Which article?"

Cas glanced down at the folder in her lap. "The local newspaper: Rolette Weekly News."

At the side-eye she received and (correctly) interpreted, Castiel added dryly, "It is an exceedingly small publication, as the town population is less than five hundred." She further assumed the snort from Dean and his focus returning to the road was permission to continue on. "The writer indicated that none of the reports were taken seriously by the authorities and believes the town is being drugged as an experiment, likely by the government."

"Yeah, that's one of the go-to conspiracy theories when weird shit starts happening," Dean offered with a shrug. "Civilians will convince themselves of just about anything if it makes them feel better."

"The concept of a town being subjected to experimental drugging by their own government is more comforting than a supernatural occurrence?" Cas sounded doubtful and Dean just snorted.

"You bet it is." He grinned over at his angel. "Normal people, man. They're the real freaks."

"Noted," Cas clipped with such a deadpan expression that Dean ended

up laughing.

It felt good to laugh. Felt good to have a partner again. Hunting solo sucked in more ways than one.

Something brushed against Dean's senses, a feather-light tickle just behind his ear and the hunter suddenly wanted to rub that side of his head against his shoulder to dislodge the feeling.

"Did you say something?" he asked Cas, the right side of his skull and neck tingling.

Cas glanced at him, head tilted and expression puzzled. "No."

Huh. Weird. Dean dismissed it immediately and instead focused on the road. "So what's our theory?"

"The author believes the drugging is coming from a central location. 'Ground zero' is what he called it." Dean was nodding along again, so Castiel assumed he understood what the writer of the article was referring to. She certainly did not. "He believes each sighting started shortly after the victim purchased an object from a 'pawn shop.'"

Dean raised an eyebrow at the finger quotes, but didn't bother saying anything. He'd given up trying to get Cas to stop with those. Either the angel truly thought they were an important part of human communication, or she liked them enough to use them regardless of what he said. Either way, it was a losing battle and one not worth fighting. At least until she started using them with law enforcement.

"Pawn shop, huh?" Dean scratched at his cheek, thinking it over. It sounded like the article's author had done some pretty solid research for them. "That actually makes sense. This guy would make a decent hunter. Did he name the shop?"

Or researcher, at least. Sure, he thought someone was releasing some biological weapon inside a pawn store and that's how so many different people were experiencing the same hallucination, but the base idea was a solid one.

Someone was probably offloading haunted shit at a pawn shop, not even knowing the chaos it would cause. Meanwhile innocent people were purchasing the items and taking ghosts home with them.

"No, he merely suggested the theory," Cas amended but Dean shrugged. Finding it wouldn't be that hard, they'd just have to

interview a couple of the victims of the recent ghost activity, get the name of the store they bought the haunted object from.

Easy peasy, Dean thought. They'd be in and out for this one in a jiffy.

"Sounds like a solid lead. Let's check it out."

Chapter Break

They had the name of the pawn shop confirmed by the third witness. Two had named it right out, with the third having been unsure since the item had been a gift. However, since the two hunters had managed to bribe, buy, or lie their way into gathering each item, they decided to follow up with the rest of the nine sightings. They spent the whole morning and several hours of the afternoon visiting the rest of the witnesses, confirming it was just the one store selling haunted objects, and convincing the civilians to part with the item.

Most of them were pretty happy to hand over the necklace, earrings, engagement ring, money clip, or, in one case, a gaudy broach in the shape of a bejeweled peacock. Especially once Dean mentioned a possible biochemical component.

The whole thing actually went pretty smoothly, except for the mother who had bought her daughter a simple gold necklace with a heart locket. She had gone into detail of how her nine year old had sworn she'd seen an old lady while at school, dressed funny and able to walk through walls. Her teachers had called her a liar (in nicer words) and her mother had told her not to tell stories.

Which was when Cas had interrupted to defend the young girl, who had indeed seen a ghost due to the necklace being stolen from a cemetery and very likely linked to the ghost of its previous owner. She had also scolded both mother and teachers for failing to believe the young lady.

At that point, Dean had grabbed his 'partner' by the elbow, apologized profusely to the slowly reddening mother (he could see mama bear raising to her full height, getting ready to roar) and quickly left the house. The drive to the next witness was spent discussing *why* we don't tell civilians about the supernatural. Cas still wasn't quite onboard, but did promise not to go telling any more people about

ghosts for the duration of the case.

They made it to the pawn shop just before it closed up for the day. The guy at the register was less than helpful in naming his supplier until Dean pulled out his wallet. With the right monetary incentive, the shop owner pulled out a big binder of receipts and started flipping through it. They had the guy's name and address within twenty minutes of entering the shop.

Another thirty minutes after that, they were standing on the front step of Gary Willemsen, gardener and groundskeeper at the Nordland Cemetery just up the road. Which explained where he was getting haunted items, and why the majority of those sightings had been benign. They weren't angry spirits lingering, just ghosts of people who'd had their shit stolen before going into the ground.

Normal people were the worst, Dean thought as he introduced himself to the sleazeball as Insurance agents.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gary insisted, despite Dean holding up several of the items while wearing a deadpan face that said *'yeah right, pal .'* "I've never seen any of that stuff before."

"Funny," the hunter replied with a tight smile. "It was your name on the receipt of purchase at the pawn shop. Beaver Al's Pawnbroker, wasn't it?"

He turned as if confirming the question with his partner, though his tone said there was no doubt that was the right name. Beside him, Cas dutifully nodded, regarding their thief with a less than friendly expression. Dean turned back to Gary.

"Sound familiar?"

"Alright, look," the guy hedged, now shifting from one foot to the other. He crossed his arms over his chest defensively. "I might have come into some… stuff. Jewelry and things. I sold 'em to Al, but that's all."

"Sure, pal. You came into it." Dean tucked the necklace and ring back into his inner suit pocket. "Tell you what, we'll buy that. If you give us the rest of this 'stuff' and stop selling stolen shit to Al, or any other pawnbroker. Deal?"

Gary hesitated, eying the two of them with a look Dean knew well. The guy was considering rabbiting. Not that he'd get far, but it was a

look all liars got when they knew they were caught. Their only options were to dig in deeper or flee. Few ever actually confessed.

Mr. Willemsen was no exception.

"I sold it all, I swear," he said, eventually raising his hands up. "That's all I had. You can keep it and I, uh, I won't do it again."

Castiel took a step forward, crowding the man against his own door frame. Gary leaned back, unsure what was happening, but the angel still managed to get uncomfortably close. "You will not. Or we will be back."

Dean could see the guy's Adams apple bob as he swallowed roughly. He took an unsteady step back, as much as he could without retreating into his own house, and nodded.

"Sure. You got it, ma'am. I'll, uh, I won't do it again. Swear."

"And you're sure that's all you *came into* ?" Dean looked down at the little pad he was holding and the notes he'd taken. He'd found from experience that the stupid little notebook was an important prop. One pad of paper and civilians took you more seriously. "One gold locket, one set of emerald earrings, one set of gold hoop earrings, one silver money clip, one bird broach, one engagement ring, two wedding band, and-"

A partridge in a pear tree.

"Sixteen grams of silver." Dean looked back up with the kind of smile that suggested he was close to murder. Luckily, this wasn't the first time he'd come across recovered metal that had once been someone's fillings. The truth was, as fucked up as it could be, bodies went into the crematorium and sometimes there were… leftovers. This guy had poached those leftovers and sold them to Al who, thank fuck, had not resold them.

(Most civilians weren't interested in owning a dead person's *fillings* . At least not until someone melted 'em down and made something significantly less disturbing out of them.)

"That's everything I sold to Al," the guy confirmed, conveniently not answering the question he'd been asked. "I won't, uh, sell anything I come into again."

"See that you don't," Dean said sternly, easily falling into the

professional authority that could rain down consequences if not heeded. Gary glanced warily between the two of them, but it was obvious he found Cas far more unnerving than Dean. The hunter couldn't really blame him. "We'll be informing your boss of the recovered items. I'm sure he'll be interested in how they got from his client's coffins to a pawnshop."

The glare Mr. Willemsen sent his way told Dean they'd finally gotten the message through. The two left the thief staring after them as they headed down the walkway back to Baby, sitting at the curb.

"He's definitely hiding something," Dean said at the same time Cas announced, "That man is lying."

They glanced at each other over the roof of the Impala and Dean couldn't contain his grin as he opened the driver's side door.

"We'll stake out the house," he said to Cas, nodding. Mr. Willemsen was still staring at them from his front door and Dean made no attempt to avoid eye contact. Cas glanced over her shoulder at the man, who closed the front door closed shortly thereafter. The angel turned her gaze back to Dean as the hunter continued, "Once he leaves, we'll get inside and find whatever else that moron ' *came into'* ."

As they climbed into the car, Cas turned to him with a very serious expression. "Angela would like to tell you something."

Dean bit back the groan, staring at the angel and trying to decide how anything Dragon Lady had to say could be vital to a case. When they sat there in an extended silence, just staring at one another, Dean finally realized Cas was waiting for acknowledgement. He rolled his eyes. "And that would be…?"

Cas raised her hands, curling all but two fingers into a now painfully familiar bunny-eared shape and Dean was groaning before the angel even relayed the message. Which was delivered in a voice even deeper and more gravely than usual.

"She finds your lack of air quotes disturbing."

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Poor Dean and those damn air quotes.

Alright, I know that wasn't the most exciting introduction to Season 3 but I promise, it's about to heat up 😈

Quality: Apologies if the writing and editing are off. The Muse and I are having words about Season 3 (she is not cooperating, let me tell you) and I haven't had a lot of energy to do things (like edit), so this chapter only got a rough pass. I'll do another later when I'm feeling better.

Disney: Let's make this very clear. Disneyland is not just for kids! (Says the Disney adult with waaaay too much paraphernalia, multiple bounding outfits, and matching ears hanging in her nerd cave) Also, I had way too much fun imagining our three boys at Disney XD

Bunker Systems: Frank restored the bunker systems to the Standby Mode that pre-season 15 Dean knows. No comment on whether we'll see Mrs. Butters in this story, but Dean is unaware of her existence, so his goal is to restore the Bunker the same way they did the first time they found it :)

Next Up: Reminder for anyone who skipped the beginning A/N's, I will be on a **two week posting schedule** while I deal with some real life things. Thank you all for your patience and understanding and WELCOME TO SEASON 3!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 143: Season 3: Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Oh Chuck, guys, I am so tired I don't think I'll get much down for author's notes today. I'm on three hours of sleep and a whole day spent at Disneyland with friends. I was supposed to edit this chapter in lines but I couldn't get my eyes to focus on my tiny phone screen I can't keep my eyes open now! I'm so tired I'm starting to feel sick Which means it's definitely time for bed, even if this chapter didn't get a thorough edit from me.

Big Thanks to **forestpelt** for her edit of this chapter today so I could get it posted when I got home. Additional thank yous to **green kittens** and **Lyeundu** for their help editing, sanity-checking me, and read throughs as well.

Chapter Warnings: Things are gonna heat up on this little ghost hunt of ours.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Um…I legit can't think of how to warn for what's ahead without spoiling what's ahead. So. Uh…. enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 2

Gary Willemsen didn't leave for three long, boring hours. Dean and Cas passed the time with a food run, idle chatter, and a beer, all while parked down the street. When the guy did finally emerge, he strutted out of his house in a pair of dark blue jeans, a bright dress shirt, and an unbuttoned blazer. His hair had been gelled back and styled, and Dean could tell, even three houses away, that the man positively reeked of cologne.

"Looks like someone's hoping to get lucky," the hunter commented with a smirk before remembering it wasn't his brother riding

passenger. It was Castiel, an angel famously bad at picking up on colloquialisms.

“He intends to have sexual intercourse this evening?”

Dean choked on the last of his beer, coughing back what wanted to be spewed, and wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. He shot Cas an amused – albeit surprised – look. He managed to keep most of the sarcasm out of his voice as he asked, “You know about getting lucky?”

“Yes. Gabriel taught me about the Pizza Man,” Cas replied with a thoughtful nod, still watching their thief as he climbed into his car and backed out of the driveway. Dean was still staring at his angel, both brain and mouth having malfunctioned spectacularly at that statement and currently rebooting. Blue eyes darted towards him then away almost shyly. The human found himself unconsciously wetting his lips as Cas continued, “He said everything I ever needed to know I can learn from him. Is Gary going to meet the Pizza Man?”

Dean forced himself to turn away from the angel so he could instead stare out the windshield. The safe, blank, non-sexual windshield. “I’m not touching this one with a ten-foot pole.”

“I was not aware they came that long.”

This time Dean did choke, which was all the more ridiculous because he *wasn’t drinking anything* .

“Angela says poles are often much shorter than that. Although she also says it’s not about length so much as girth.” The look Cas adopted could be called adorably perplexed. At least, it might have been, had Dean been able to look her way at all. Instead, he was busy turning tomato red in the driver’s seat and staring so intensely out the windshield it was a wonder the glass didn’t crack under pressure. Castiel carried on, oblivious to the internal crisis that currently was Dean Winchester. “I am unsure how thickness would matter when the intent is to touch something with your pole, however.”

“And I’m out.” Dean climbed out of the Impala about as fast as he could manage without looking like he was bodily running away. He crossed the street at a similar pace, hopping up onto the curb and continuing the four blocks to the Willemsen residence. Cas followed behind at a more sedate stroll, most likely unaware of the awkwardness Dean was all but running from.

Probably for the best.

By the time the angel caught up to him at the front door, Dean already had his lockpicks out and was jimmying them around the keyhole. He kept his movements subtle and hidden by the bulk of his frame, in case any onlookers spotted the strange couple at Mr. Willemsen's door. The lock gave with a click and the two hunters slipped inside and closed the door before any curious neighbors could become suspicious.

The inside of the house was pretty standard. Gary lived within his means but had some sense of taste. There was a spattering of art on the walls, photos peppered amongst books and knickknacks, and a nice sized TV Dean could appreciate. Guy didn't really look like he needed the extra income that came from stealing from the dead.

Dean pulled an EMF meter from his jacket pocket, turning it on. It reared up for a moment – all four lights blinking – before they dropped back down and the device fell silent. Cas walked up beside him, also idly observing the dwelling they'd broken into.

"I'd say we should split up, but I only have one EMF," Dean started to say, but Cas was tilting her head before he'd finished.

"I should be able to sense any spiritual attachment if I am close enough to the possessed object," she announced and Dean blinked. He hadn't known angels could do that. Though, really, it wasn't a surprising talent, given their other additional senses.

"You're a walking EMF. I dig it," he replied with a grin, though Cas's head tilt got tilt-y-er. "You take upstairs, then, and I'll look down here."

The downstairs seemed larger, with Dean estimating a living room, kitchen, and at least two rooms (one of which was probably a bathroom) so he figured he'd take that. Which left Cas whatever bedrooms were upstairs. Most of the stolen items had been jewelry of some sort, and Dean figured most people kept jewelry in the master bedroom. So hopefully Cas would find what they were looking for while Dean cleared the downstairs.

Cas nodded at his suggestion and headed for the carpeted stairs that led to the second floor. Dean left her to it, pulling out the extendable antenna on his EMF and walking the perimeter of the living room. He moved the device up and down as he passed furniture and shelves. The four lights stayed annoyingly dead, the device silent, but Dean

wasn't all that surprised. If he'd stolen a bunch of shit, he probably wouldn't leave it lying around in his living room. Regardless, he opened drawers and cabinets, just to be sure their thief hadn't stashed something out of sight.

It took about twenty minutes for him to declare the downstairs possessed-object free. It wasn't surprising, but it was disappointing. Dean headed for the stairs, hoping that a lack of Cas coming back down was a good sign.

She was in the master bedroom, standing by a long dresser that lined one wall, hand held out and hovering above the surface.

"Any luck?" Dean asked as he entered the room, crossing over to the angel. Blue eyes turned his way, but Cas was already shaking her head.

"I do not believe the item is here," she intoned, but tilted her head towards her outstretched hand, "but it was, not very long ago."

"Think it's just one piece we're looking for?" There was nothing on the dresser's surface to suggest what the item was that Cas could sense.

"Yes," she replied, finally lowering her arm back to her trench-coated side. "This is the only residual spiritual energy I have sensed in the house. Gary Willemsen must have taken it with him when he left."

Dean blew out a huff of air, hands resting at his hips. "Well shit. He's probably selling it. Damnit, Gary."

"If he fails to do so and returns with the item, he will likely be in danger," Cas said with a grave tone. "The residual energy is that of an angry spirit."

"Of course it is." Because that was their kind of luck (not to mention that some dickhead had gone and stolen it from its rightful place. Dean would be ticked off too) and now they had to go find whatever it was their graverobber had taken before it hurt someone else.

"We should ward the room," Cas suggested, looking around. Dean raised an eyebrow and Cas shrugged one well-defined shoulder. "If Gary returns with the possessed item and returns it to this spot," she gestured to the blank surface of the dresser, "the ghost will likely attack while he sleeps."

Which also sounded like their kind of luck. Shit always did attack in the bedroom, so warding it would solve their problem until they could get back in tomorrow. Assuming they didn't find the piece – or that piece of crap, Gary – first.

Dean looked around. The room was nothing fancy, though it kind of reminded Dean of Lisa's bedroom back in Cicero. Nice queen bed in the center of the room with a blue duvet and white pillows (colors Lisa definitely would have had in her house). There was the long dresser they were standing in front of, some sorta wardrobe thing in the corner, and some fancy floor lamp that arched over a single armchair currently covered in tossed-aside clothes.

There was a door to their left that Dean assumed was an attached bathroom. There was a robe hanging off the back of it. They could carve a warding sigil into that easily enough and hide it behind the clothing, and they could hide the other three sigils behind the available furniture. The only real problem would be the bedroom door itself. If their thief slept with it open, there could be a weak spot in the warding.

"Probably better than nothing," Dean said more to himself than to Cas, but nodded his approval of the plan.

Cas was already moving closer to the dresser, thighs pressing against the piece of furniture in her stretch forward towards the wall. Her blade was in hand and Dean had to catch her wrist before she could start carving into the wall.

"Dude's definitely gonna freak if he walks into his bedroom tonight and there's a bunch of symbols dug into the walls, man." He shook his head even as Cas lowered her arm and Dean released her wrist. He grabbed the edge of the dresser and pulled it away from the wall with ease. "Here, draw it back here and we'll move the dresser back when you're done."

Cas nodded her approval, moving around the edge and crouching down near the wall. Dean watched as she finished the symbol. It wasn't a ward he was familiar with, so he studied it for a moment more till he'd committed it to memory. Then he pulled a knife from his boot and got to work on the wall behind the bed. He pulled the artwork down and set it aside, confident it would hide the sigil nicely.

Between the two of them, they had all four sides of the room sigiled

up in under five minutes. Dean didn't even ask, he trusted her knowledge. His angel had always been the best at wards.

A flash in his peripheral – something tannish that made Dean immediately think of Cas – caused the hunter to turn towards the bedroom door. When nothing was there, he took the few steps necessary to stick his head out into the hall. But there was nothing there, either.

"Huh." Dean pulled back inside the bedroom, but the sound of the front door opening and closing had his head whipping back to the hallway. Voices were filtering up the stairs followed shortly by footsteps. A woman's laugh followed and Dean spun back to Cas only to find her eyes wide and locked on him.

"Shit!" he swore, ducking further into the room. The voices had reached the top of the stairs and were now headed their way. Gary had a lady friend and Cas and Dean were in his *bedroom* . He had gotten lucky after all. Or, he would in a minute, so long as he didn't walk into the room and see two strangers standing smack dab in the middle of it. " *Shit* !"

He grabbed Cas by the wrist, frantically searching for a place to hide. He pulled the angel towards the door they'd warded earlier. A bathroom was not exactly a good hiding spot, but it would give them a few more seconds to figure out what to do next. Dean opened the door and pulled Cas inside. Gary and his date tumbled into the room, all over each other already, the woman giggling, before Dean could shut the door completely. He released the handle, afraid to try his luck at closing it completely without making any noise, and backed away from the cracked door.

Right into Cas.

"Wha-" Dean managed to cut himself off, keeping the exclamation fairly quiet despite his surprise. Cas was at his back. Not just at his back but pressed right up against him. Keeping his voice way lower than before, he hissed, "What the hell, Cas?"

"There is nowhere to go," came her calm response. Her breath was warm against the base of his neck and Dean fought off a shiver, inching forward as much as he dared. Beyond the door, the couple had already made it to the bed and certain, erm, sounds were making it through the not-nearly-thick-enough-or-closed-enough closet door.

Because that's what Dean had shoved them into. The closet. The

surprisingly *small* closet. Dean's left shoulder was brushing wall, but his right was buried at least an inch deep in hanging clothes. If the human pressed as close to the door as he dared, he and Cas had about two inches of space between them.

Not ideal. Especially not with the activity currently underway – *loudly* underway – on the other side of that door.

"What are you waiting for?" Dean hissed over his shoulder, but he couldn't make out much more than the angel's silhouette in the darkness. "Zap us out of here!"

He could just make out the blue of her eyes in the darkness, faintly lit. "We warded the room, Dean. I cannot ' *zap'* us anywhere."

The hunter's eyes widened in disbelief. "Why the hell did we do that? We just needed to keep a murderous ghost out, Cas, not *angels* !"

Her eyes narrowed in the darkness and when she replied, it was with the tone of a Warrior of God. The one that threatened to throw rescued souls back in Hell.

Another shiver raced up Dean's spine and he started thinking real hard about baseball stats and cold showers. He closed his eyes and tried to do the same thing with his ears, to no avail.

"The sigil we used wards against all harm."

Dean's eyes snapped back open and he whipped his head to the side, turning into Cas as much as he could manage in the small space. His bicep ended up pressed against her chest and he was *not thinking* about it.

"What the hell do you mean, *'all harm*'?" he whispered furiously, Cas making a soft shushing noise as his voice grew precariously loud. Still wasn't loud enough to drown out what was happening just outside their little hidey hole, damnit. "How the hell are we harming him? We're trying to get away from him!"

"We are intruders in his home intending to steal from him," Castiel explained like this should be obvious and Dean was being foolish. "Harm is not limited to the physical plane, Dean."

The man from the future slid his eyes shut, turning back towards the door so his back was once more flat against Cas's chest (which he *was*

not thinking about) and groaned. Cas shushed him again.

How was this his life?

A particularly loud moan had Dean shifting his weight awkwardly, trying once more to put some distance between him and his angel. At least they weren't pressed face to face. God, Dean might just die from embarrassment.

"Oh, I see," Cas whispered behind him, and Dean startled at the warm breath puffing against his neck once more. She had moved closer. If he turned his head, he could just see her in his periphery, pressed close enough to almost lay her chin on his shoulder. Her eyes were locked on the sliver of space left by the door. "Gary found a Pizza *Woman* ."

If he'd had the room, Dean would have buried his head in his hands. *How* was this his life?

"Stop watching them," is what he snapped instead, body tense from the close proximity. Jesus, Cas smelled good.

"Look at the woman."

Dean closed his eyes all the tighter. "Really don't wanna see two strangers getting it on, Cas."

He felt the angel shake her head. Silk-smooth hair brushed across his skin with each toss and Dean thought about ghouls and witches and shooting Adolf Hitler.

"No, Dean," Cas whispered, this time incredibly close to his ear and *how was this his life?!* How did he have the one angel in the universe who didn't know what she was doing? "Look at her neck."

'I don't want to look at the woman-who's-currently-having-sex's neck right now, Cas, ' he thought snappishly. Green eyes cracked open anyway and Dean leaned forward – putting some blessed space between himself and the angel – to squint past the sliver of space.

He got himself an eyeful, which he tried desperately to ignore (entirely unsuccessfully. Gary hadn't just gotten lucky, he'd *scored*), but after a very confusing moment for his body, Dean spotted what Cas was talking about. Around the woman's neck was a simple but stunning diamond and ruby necklace set in gold. Wearing nothing but that necklace and straddling (what Dean now assumed was) her

boyfriend, she was absolutely gorgeous.

Dean shut his eyes again quickly. "I see it. That's gotta be our missing ghost object."

He felt Cas nod against his back, still pressed entirely too close to him. Another glance over his shoulder – and why was *this* when Cas forgot about that personal space talk they'd had? – revealed that intense gaze still locked on the crack and the activity happening beyond.

There was curiosity in those blue depths, Dean could see it before he forced himself to look away. Instead, he focused on some of those breathing techniques Sam was always trying to get him to do.

The next eighteen minutes were the longest of Dean's life, but finally the room fell silent – the satiated lovers having passed the hell out – and Dean could breathe again. He tumbled out of the closet as fast as he could without waking the bastards up. Cas followed behind far more calmly, giving Dean plenty of time to get himself presentable again. He was friggin' *sweating* for christ's sake.

"Make sure they stay asleep," was the only sentence he managed to get out, voice embarrassingly rough. Dean didn't dare clear his throat to fix it until Cas had knocked the two out. She did so with no fanfare, just two fingers pressed to their foreheads, the two lovers a tangle of limbs and sweat-slicked skin.

Dean very purposefully avoided looking at them. Cas unclasped the necklace and drew it off the woman's neck as the hunter stood at the foot of the bed, looking just about anywhere else.

"We good?" he asked, glaring at the bedroom door and his soon-to-be escape from this nightmare.

'At least he came home with a lady ,' Dean thought before he realized why he'd thought it and then turned tomato red all over again. *'Don't think about it. Don't think about it.'*

He still blamed Andy for the amount of times he'd caught himself thinking about it. One day when he got up to Heaven and saw the kid again, he was gonna shoot him. Somewhere non-vital, of course. Just a flesh wound. But damnit, he was gonna shoot Andy Gallagher next time he saw him.

"We're good," Cas responded and Dean risked glancing at her. She

gave a firm nod. If she was aware of the hell Dean had just spent twenty minutes enduring, she made no mention of it.

And Dean was fairly certain he'd only imagined those blue eyes drop down the length of his body right before he'd turned for the door. Pretty sure.

They made it downstairs and out the door without the couple stirring, not that they really had to worry. One dose of angelic Ambien kept a normal person out for at least an hour. Dean held the front door open for Cas, closing it behind them and taking a couple moments to relock it with his lock picks. He hurried after his angel, who was already at the curb and crossing the street towards the Impala.

Once Dean was safely back inside Baby, he allowed himself to breathe. Damn, that had *sucked* . He let out a literal sigh of relief, eyes darting to the rear view mirror as he turned the key and Baby's engine roared to life.

Blue eyes locked on his through the rearview mirror reflection. Cas – *Jimmy* – was sitting in the backseat of the Impala. Dean spun around, startled, only to find the backseat completely empty. He snapped back around to the rearview mirror, but it revealed a similarly empty car.

'What the hell?'

Dean jumped as the passenger side door opened with a creak of metal and Cas – *Angela's Cas* – slid into the seat next to him.

'No, seriously, what the hell?'

He stared at the angel, then glanced at the rearview mirror again. Then the backseat. And the angel in a very female vessel once more.

"Something wrong?" Cas asked, cute frown firmly pinching her eyebrows together. Dean stared at that furled brow and wondered if he was losing it.

"I… don't know," he stammered out. Something felt off, but he didn't know what. Could it be something to do with the case? A- a ghost or something? "You got the necklace?"

"Yes," Cas confirmed, though she was watching him carefully. There was worry in her voice (for an angel, that is) when she asked, "Did you injure yourself in the house?"

Her arm crossed the distance between them, the long flash of tan from her coat startling Dean for a second. He was definitely losing it, he decided as two fingers pressed to his forehead. He didn't have time – or desire, which was odd in and of itself – to tell Cas he was fine before the cool blue of her magic was washing over him.

It was a calming wave washing over him, like water rushing over sand. Or maybe river rocks. Clear and cool, it took all the tension and confusion with it as it retreated and Dean found himself relaxing into the touch. Curious, but in a detached way Dean couldn't say he was particularly fond of, he glanced over at his angel. Those blue eyes were so damn blue.

Dean stiffened slightly, realizing he was all but leaning into Cas's hand against his forehead, those two fingers holding his head up while he stared at the angel. Once again fighting off a blush, the hunter eased away from the warmth of her touch.

"I'm good," Dean declared, then had to clear his throat and repeat the words in a sturdier voice. "Uh, thanks."

"You are welcome, Dean." Cas lowered her arm, turning back into her seat and looking out the windshield at the dark street stretched out before them. As if nothing weird had just happened. Maybe it hadn't. Dean blinked slowly, his thoughts a haze of confused serenity. What an odd feeling to have, he thought. Cas was talking again, and the hunter had to actually focus to tune back in. "We should burn the necklace as quickly as possible."

Right. The job. Dean cleared his throat again and some of the fog lifted. The hunter shook himself free of whatever the hell was going on in his head and put Baby in gear, pulling away from the curb. They needed to burn the necklace. Dean was definitely starting to think it was doing something to them.

Hell, maybe it had done something to that couple and that was the reason for all the… you know. Not that Dean was thinking about that. Or Cas. In relation to that.

Definitely not.

"We passed the cemetery the dude worked at on our way here," he said instead. *Focus on the job* . He could practically hear Dad's voice in his head and Dean's shoulders squared up like a soldier coming to attention. He had a job to do. "We can find a quiet corner there to burn it."

Castiel nodded her agreement and Dean turned the Impala that way. He couldn't help but check the rear view mirror several times on the way, but there was never anything there.

Chapter Break

They got back to the bunker well after midnight. The necklace had burned without fanfare, though Dean hadn't been able to let go of the residual apprehension – muscles bunched and tension coiled, just waiting for something to go wrong – until he'd climbed back into the Impala and checked the rearview. No flash of tan, no ghost of Cas sitting in his back seat. It had taken another minute after that, but as the real Cas slid into the car beside him, Dean felt the last of his unease slip away.

The drive back had been quiet but not uncomfortable. Dean even rolled the windows down to enjoy the pleasant May night and turned the music up. Unlike Sam, Castiel had no complaints about the selection, even bopping her head along to one song (the movement had been so minuscule that it took three glances to even confirm Dean wasn't just seeing things, but it had been there).

Bobby was already asleep by the time they made it in. Or at least, the door to the room he'd picked as his own, room 15. It had been a little more tucked away from the other bedrooms, and Dean figured the old hunter had wanted the additional privacy. He probably already felt like the only chaperone at an overnight camp, and neither of the Winchesters had pushed him towards increased socialization or participation.

Guy was mourning the loss of his house, after all. And while it did Dean's heart damn good to see Bobby in the Bunker, something he'd have killed to see the first time around, he wanted to respect the guy's need for privacy and independence.

It was weird having the tables turned, and Bobby relying on their hospitality (not that Dean thought of the bunker as his and Sam's specifically. In his mind it was as much for Bobby as it was for them, but he was sure that's not how Bobby saw it).

Dean stopped by his room first, dropping his duffel bag and trading it for his shower basket. Sam had given him so much shit the first time

(and the second first time) he'd seen Dean making his way to the communal bathroom with his little white basket of toiletries, slippers sticking out of the side and his robe neatly folded on top. But Sam could fuck right off, because this was *the life*.

Cas was lingering in his doorway when he turned right back around, shower supplies in hand, and ran straight into the angel.

"Whoa, hey, uh… I was thinking I'd go take a shower," Dean stammered awkwardly, feeling completely unbalanced and once more in way too close proximity. He hadn't realized Cas had been trailing him to his room. "You know, uh, wash off the hunt."

Awwwkward.

Castiel just nodded, not moving out of the way. After a moment, Dean decided maybe she didn't realize she was in the way. So he kinda reached out and laid a hand on either shoulder, guiding her a couple steps to the side. Castiel followed his prodding until there was enough room for the hunter to squeeze past. Dean did so, only hesitating once he was fully in the hall and Cas was still just standing there, watching him.

"So, uh… I'm pretty beat," he said, once again feeling both awkward and incredibly self-conscious.

'What is going on with me tonight?' he thought, only to quickly amend that thought to *'I was stuck pressed up against a friggin' angel of the lord for an eternity while two horndogs got it on* ***vocally*** *ten friggin' feet away*.' When put that way, Dean decided feeling 'off' really wasn't all that odd. Which wasn't a cure for the brain-to-mouth disconnect he was currently experiencing, but everyone around him (which, yeah, was only Cas, but that's so not the point) could forgive some residual awkwardness on his part, alright?

Cas still hadn't moved, those penetrating eyes locked on his. Dean was starting to feel twitchy under that gaze, like the angel wanted something from him but he had no idea what. Jeez, he was seriously off his game tonight if he was having this much trouble reading the angel.

"Night?" he offered weakly.

"Goodnight, Dean," the angel replied, but neither of the two actually moved.

'Oh for fuck's sake, ' he thought, done with the Hallmark Movie that currently was his life. He spun on his heel and double-timed it down the hall towards the showers. He refused to look back to see if Cas was still standing just outside his door, watching his retreat.

(Which meant he only looked at the very last possible moment as he rounded the corner. She was gone. Dean did not know what to do with the twist of something in his gut. Couldn't even figure out if it was relief or disappointment.)

(Not that it could be disappointment, of course. Why would he be disappointed that Cas had stopped being a stalker-y weirdo with no personal space boundaries? He wouldn't. Being disappointed by that would be weird.)

Dean might have been a little aggressive turning on the shower, if such a thing was possible. He had to dial back the hot water several times after cranking the knob as hard as he could into the 'on' position. Just what the hell was going on with him?

He ducked under the still scorching stream, trying to force tight muscles to relax. There was something… off about the whole day. Ever since they'd gotten to that mining town and started on the case. But Dean couldn't put his finger on what. He just knew it was something.

As much as he wanted to sweep it under the rug of *'Awkward Cas Things I don't Think About* ,' he couldn't quite manage it. Because yeah, getting stuck pressed up against Cas for half an hour while listening to the live rendition of (what had arguably been damn good) porn *was* awkward as all get out and did belong under that rug. But there was something else. Something… underlying the normal rug stuff.

Usually, Dean didn't go looking. Not when Cas was involved. Yeah, yeah, everyone else wanted to call it denial or homophobia (Dean was *not* homophobic, thank you very much, he just wasn't… well, he wasn't- It wasn't homophobia, okay! It was just… homo… not… interested. Yeah. That.) but this was different. Dean didn't know how it was different, just that it was.

A heady and less-self-critical part of his brain suggested turning that shower a little colder, but the man from the future couldn't bring himself to turn the knob. He was *tense* and he didn't understand why, and the heat and the steam seemed to be helping. At least until he

started thinking again and then he was coiled right back up like a boxer waiting to jab.

That was it, he thought begrudgingly. It felt like he was rearing for a fight. But the case was over (at least until that dipshit went and stole more crap) so all that was left was the *'Awkward Cas Stuff We Don't Think About* .' Which, as the name might suggest, Dean was *not thinking about.*

Despite the Awkward with a capital 'A' – and their long relationship had *plenty* of Awkward, even if this most recent example was particularly ridiculous – Dean never tensed up about that shit. Not like this.

"So why am I now?" he muttered aloud, scrubbing shampoo into his scalp like he might be able to find the answers if he worked at his head enough.

No answers came, however. Dean didn't get it.

"Maybe cuz Cas's a girl now," he muttered half-heartedly, already knowing as he said it that there was no truth to that.

Dean was a Ladies Man. Always had been; he'd never shied away from that before or felt even the slightest shame in it. Getting turned on by a hot chick could be embarrassing at times, sure.

(Try all the time when that hot chick was your best friend slash Angel of the Lord. Dean was pretty sure that was covered somewhere in the ten commandments: thou shalt not get a boner when talking to a messenger of God. Not like he was all that good at following the other nine, though, so suck it.)

But Dean had already done plenty of that around Cas since she'd become a she – both the getting turned on and the embarrassment – and they'd managed through it just fine. Mostly with Cas cornering him and telling him to get his shit together, and Dean taking lots and lots of cold showers and private time.

That was the routine and they'd been doing fine. He hardly even popped a stiffy around her anymore (the events of that evening notwithstanding. Those didn't count: there were *extenuating circumstances* , damnit.)

Dean shut off the shower, snagging one of the fluffy towels he'd splurged on in the same shopping trip as his mattress and foam

topper. There were a couple things Dean had learned were worth the money and now he'd never go back. He draped the damp towel over his shoulders and grabbed his dead guy robe, taking a moment to appreciate the small things in life. Like fluffy towels, mattress toppers, and dead guy robes.

Life was good, he thought with a grin, heading back through the maze of halls in his slippers, shower basket swinging at his side. Confusing as fuck, sure. Awkward and sometimes still tense (seriously, what the hell was going on with him?) But overall, life was good.

Dean returned to his room still toweling off his head and short hair, but drew up short as he realized he wasn't alone. Castiel was in his room, sitting on the edge of his bed. Dean stared at the angel, brain not quite computing her presence, and dropped the towel back around his neck with a flush of embarrassment he still didn't understand.

"Uh…"

He should have taken that cold shower, damnit.

Dean nervously fisted his hands around the ends of his towel, pulling it tight against his neck for lack of anything else to do with them. Cas was in his room. Still. She was on his bed.

'Not thinking about it, ' Dean reminded himself. *'Just a normal night in the bunker. Nothing more.'*

Cas's eyes were once again locked on him with a level of intensity that was always unnerving, no matter how frequently it was aimed his way.

'This is normal ,' Dean repeated again to himself. Totally normal. Even if it didn't feel normal at all.

"Did you pick a room yet?" he managed to ask, wondering if maybe that was the reason she was in his. She may not know where else to be. Cas was new to Bunker Life, after all.

"I was not aware I was supposed to," the angel answered easily enough, voice deep and even just like always.

See? Totally normal.

"Well, you can have any of 'em 'cept number Seven. That one's Sammy's." And the younger Winchester would be back to use it. He

would. Dean just had to be patient. And understanding. And patient.

Dean awkwardly came to a stop in front of the seated angel. There wasn't really anywhere else to go in the small room, except to sit at the desk. Which Dean really didn't want. What he wanted was his bed, which he now eyed enviously. He hadn't been lying earlier; he really was beat.

"So… uh…" Dean kinda flapped his elbows like a chicken, hands still wrapped around the ends of his damp towel.

Which turned out to be an unfortunate choice, as he was suddenly very aware of just how little clothing he was wearing. He only had the dead guy robe and a towel around his neck. Not a lick of coverage underneath. Dean hadn't needed to bring anything more to the showers; he'd planned on passing out afterward and since he rather liked sleeping in the nude now that he had his own room back…

Well. That was a habit he was seriously rethinking.

"The offer is appreciated, but I do not need a room as I do not sleep," Cas said, startling Dean back to the present, where he was standing, naked beneath his robe, in his bedroom with an angel sitting on his bed.

'Not thinking about it ,' warred in his head with the simultaneous reminder of, *'This is totally normal.'*

Dean had no idea how to respond to that. He was caught between irritation – he just wanted to go to sleep, damnit – and irrational hurt. Cas was supposed to want a room. This was supposed to be her home, too, and homes came with a space that was yours, just yours. A space to belong, that made it yours. She should *want* that. Rationally, Dean knew it was a little early to expect everyone else to consider the bunker their home, but it *was* . They just didn't know it yet.

For Cas, too. Dean would make sure of it this time.

"Uh…" None of that actually helped his current dilemma. Dean gave up any attempt at subtly and said, "Well, I do. And it'd be nice to get some, Cas."

That intense gaze, locked on him as it always was, followed Dean's as the hunter glanced very purposefully at the bed and back to the angel. A little frown pinched her brow as she looked back down at

the bed again, and Dean thought maybe she'd finally gotten it.

'Totally normal.'

Then Cas scooted a whole foot and a half further down the bed, now perched near the foot of the mattress. There was space for Dean, uh, *technically* , and she stared expectantly up at him, as though he couldn't possibly have any complaints about the compromise. Dean fought the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose and instead just gave up entirely. He sat on the bed next to his angel, perched as awkwardly on the edge as Cas was.

Before he could figure out if he was really going to climb under the covers with an angel sitting right there like a parent waiting to tuck their kiddo in for bedtime, Cas moved. Dean had barely settled his ass on the mattress when Cas was turning towards him. She tucked one leg up onto the mattress so she could square her torso fully towards the hunter. Taken aback by the (frankly *human*) move, Dean scooted a little further away before, rather naturally, resettling himself against the headboard. Mirroring Cas's legs, they were now facing one another.

'So normal. So completely and utterly ***normal*** *.'*

"What's on your mind?" he asked mostly satirically, wondering if they'd start braiding each other's hair next. He didn't say any of that, though. Not when Cas was looking at him like she was.

"There is something else Gabriel showed me," Cas announced out of nowhere and Dean was suddenly all new levels of tense. "A human thing."

The man from the future could only nod, completely unsure where the angel was going with this or what the right response could possibly be.

'Normal. Normal, normal, normalnormalnormal. Perfectly normal, no need to freak out.'

"It is something I would like to try now." Cas almost seemed hesitant, which was *not* normal, and Dean realized with a jolt of surprise that she was uncertain about whatever it is she wanted to try. Cas was never uncertain.

Except about human stuff, he reasoned. That would make sense. Maybe she needed help with something embarrassing. Something…

er… maybe lady… related?

Dean's eyes darted down without his permission before snapping *immediately* back up, a sense of pure panic welling in his stomach.

Those blue, blue eyes weren't quite meeting his own anymore now. At least until they were. And then Dean's lungs forgot how to function.

"With your permission," Cas added and Dean's mouth went completely dry. Sahara Desert in a drought dry. He swallowed reflexively but it was work.

He had no – none, zip, zero – idea why he was reacting so weirdly. This was totally normal, right? So he should be reacting *normally* .

'Be normal! '

Dean tried to swallow past a mouth full of sand that tasted like exhilarating terror. Like that second just before you dropped on a roller coaster. The hunter managed to nod – again, just about the only thing he could do – before he realized that Cas was still staring at him imploringly. She was expecting a verbal acknowledgement.

"S-Sure," Dean stammered out. He tried to shape his mouth into a smile, wondering if it was as shaky as he felt. What the hell was going on with him? Cas probably wanted to practice, like, sleeping or something. This was going to be so normal and then he'd feel real stupid. Way more stupid than he already felt now. "You know I'm all for practicing the human stuff."

His heart was friggin' *pounding* but why?! Maybe he had taken too hot a shower. That could be it. Had to be. Unfortunately, thinking of the shower left Dean once again ridiculously aware of his current level of dress. As inconspicuous as possible, the hunter tugged together the two sides of his robe, which had split apart dangerously high up on his bare thighs.

Cas's eyes flickered down at the movement and Dean froze. He waited for his angel to look back up but it didn't happen. The blue lingered and *holy shit what was happening?*

'Not normal! Not Normal!'

Dean was completely and utterly incapable of movement or response, which was a problem because Cas took his words as the permission it

(probably) was (without Dean knowing, in so many words, what he'd just agreed to) and closed the distance between them. Dean reared back in startled disbelief, but with the headboard at his back, there was nowhere to go. His eyes widened – probably bulged right out of their sockets – but that was all Dean managed before Castiel's mouth was on his.

It was a chaste thing, really. More the kind of first kiss a thirteen-year-old would find exciting – there wasn't even tongue – and yet Dean was sure his heart would pound right out of his chest, *Alien* style, any second now. Cas's lips were full and soft against his, her skin hot to the touch. Or maybe that was all him. He certainly felt like he had a fever right now. Maybe he was hallucinating all this. If he was, it was *detailed* . He could feel the light chapping of Cas's bottom lip as it dragged across his own, the angel finally pulling back.

The sound that left Dean's throat, chasing after her, was a damn near whimper.

'What is ***happening*** ?!'

Cas retreated slowly, settling her weight back on the bed but still bent forward at the waist, as though she was reluctant to withdraw entirely from Dean's personal space. For his part, Dean could only stare.

And stare.

As his lack of a reaction stretched into a less-than-comfortable silence between them, Cas sagged with resigned defeat. Her body language barely shifted by human standards but, for Dean, someone might as well have been screaming it from the rooftops. The way her shoulders drooped, the slight pinch of those depthless eyes, the devastated slant of her lips.

"Holy shit," Dean breathed out, still only capable of staring at his best friend who had most definitely just kissed him.

"I… apologize," Cas stated, but her words were hesitant, like she wanted to say the right thing but didn't know what that was.

'Why? ' Dean thought, unsure if he said it aloud or not. His brain must be broken. Cas had completely broken him this time because, for the life of him, he did not know what the angel was apologizing for.

"Perhaps I should not have…" Cas struggled for another moment, the

weight of her failure pulling down at her like an increase of gravity. Dean wanted to make it stop, he didn't like seeing his angel that way, but he still hadn't figured out the whole movement thing.

Then she was visibly pulling herself back together, that Angel of the Lord descending over her features like a suit of armor, cloaking any trace of the friend he knew. Dean blinked at the shift and his brain – his poor, abused, three-steps-behind brain that would really like to know what was going on right now – cried out at the change.

"I misread the situation," Cas acknowledged with a nod, as though confirming it as fact more for herself than for him, and something in Dean's head finally clicked.

He managed to breathe out one more, "Holy *shit* !" and then Dean's mouth was on Castiel's.

Unlike the angel, Dean kept absolutely nothing chaste. It was clear this was Cas's first time (and thank *fuck* for that, because for a minute back there, Dean had been fighting off a god-awful vision of Cas getting it on with Gabriel's constructs while his sleazy brother gave notes and Dean was so not onboard with that mental image). But that was okay, because Dean was nothing if not a good teacher and this had always been his favorite subject.

First lesson: self-restraint was overrated. No Pizza Man in the history of porn had ever kept it *chaste* .

He slid a hand up the length of Castiel's neck till he was cupping her cheek, brushing his thumb across her skin. Dean trailed the back of his fingers down the length of her jaw, curling beneath her chin and lifting to slot her mouth against his all the better. With the pad of his thumb pressed to her chin, Dean applied a little pressure, just a playful tug, and Cas, realizing his request, opened her mouth.

His angel made a breathy little sound as he slipped inside, unlocking a whole new level to the kiss, one now open for exploration, and Dean struggled not to grin against her lips.

That same hand slid down her neck, wrapping around to the back so he could bury his fingers in that damn taunting hair he'd wanted to touch since Cas first came back wearing Miss Fucking Hawaii. He curled his fingers at the base of her scalp and felt his angel turn to putty in his hand. This time, he couldn't resist the smile that pressed against Cas's lips.

Everyone loved the nape. It was one of the most popular erogenous zones, actually. He'd learned that courtesy of Susie Nickols in the ninth grade. She'd been a senior with dreams of dropping out and becoming a masseuse, while Dean had been a newly minted enthusiast of the human form and had the benefit of looking a good two years older than he actually was. He hadn't had a single note about her technique; girl had had real potential.

Cas was a quick learner, taking some of the best tricks Dean had up his lengthy sleeve and turning them immediately back on the older Winchester. Dean had never quite had a make out session like it. The angel was a blank slate, eager to learn and reciprocate.

Real eager.

It wasn't until his back started to hurt that Dean realized they were both still sitting a full foot apart, leaning towards each other, connected only at the mouth. Like preteens who'd been told touching was a no-no so this was their solution. With a thrilled noise, Dean curled his hands around the lapels of that damn trench coat and pulled Cas towards him. It took a moment for the angel to get her knees beneath her without face-planting right into Dean's crotch (which wouldn't exactly garner complaint from him, but he was trying to keep this classy, man). Then she was shimmying forward until Dean could wrap his arms more thoroughly around her hips. As soon as she was close enough, he bodily hauled the angel into his lap. There was a sexy-as-hell little hiccup in her breathing as she settled her weight across Dean's thighs, legs pressed tight to either side of him, and Dean could only beam up at her with lecherous delight.

"That's better."

Cas's returning smile, tentative and still finding itself, went straight to his loins.

The following however-long-it-was that they sat there making out – could have been only a handful of minutes, could have been an hour – found Dean re-evaluating Cas from fast learner to *very* fast learner. It took all of one hand on her hip, thumb slipping beneath the hem of her shirt to brush circles over her skin, and the other pressed to the small of her back, for Cas to realize she had hands of her own that could be participating too.

At first, she only mirrored whatever Dean did, absorbing his ministrations like a sponge. Her hands settled on his waist first, which

was an awkward stretch, so she shifted to his shoulders instead. She clung to his robe, tried slipping her hands beneath, then back on top, fisting the fabric. She trailed her hands up his neck, burying them in his hair. Most of it was clumsy and exploratory, but as Dean nipped at her bottom lip, catching it between his teeth and pulling playfully, Cas curled her fingers right into his scalp, gripping at the short hairs, and Dean let out a moan that came all the way from his toes.

Cas pulled away, lips red and kiss-abused, chest rising and falling with heavy pants, to stare at the hunter. The grin that slowly lit up her face as she hovered just inches from his lips spelled nothing but absolute trouble for Dean. He knew, right then, that he was so screwed. So very happily screwed.

From that moment on, Cas took it as a challenge to find every other spot on Dean's body that would result in a similar noise. The human was a pile of putty beneath her hands in a frankly embarrassingly short amount of time.

Which was when Dean's brain, that little bit of him that still had a functioning brain cell, realized that Cas was totally topping this train. Which, *hot* , but he was supposed to be the one showing her the ropes. There'd be time later for Cas to get her Dom on (which, again *hot* . There was definitely a secretive part of Dean – the same part of him that had liked Rhonda Hurley's satin pink panties – that was more than just a little excited about that), but this was Castiel's first time and Dean wanted to make sure it was all about her.

With an impish smile all his own, Dean rolled them. Cas let him, which was something of a privilege, since he knew an angel that didn't want to move wasn't going *anywhere* . But she let him roll them until she was spread out beneath him, one wrist pinned next to her grinning face, the other wrapped around Dean's wrist as he slid his palm up her stomach, dragging her shirt up with it.

Cas's eyes were so blue. So, so very blue.

Dean hesitated, unable to move as he stared at those glowing irises.

'Not normal ,' a distant little voice whispered from deep in his mind and Dean's head twitched, as though to be rid of it. But still he remained frozen.

Beneath him, Cas's smile started to fade, worry taking over her expression. "Dean?"

“Should we be doing this?” The question came out of his mouth before he’d had time to actually process it. But now that he’d said it, Dean couldn’t shake the feeling in his gut. Something about this wasn’t right. Something was weird, but he didn’t know what. He didn’t really want to stop, though.

“Is this… bad?”

The confusion in Cas’s voice immediately pulled Dean’s attention back to the angel beneath him. His angel, who was looking up at him with such resigned disappointment that Dean’s stomach tightened so suddenly it felt like a cramp.

“What? No! No, uh, sorry,” Dean offered up a rough, apologetic smile and shook his head. The worry – the *wrongness* – remained, but he tried to push it back. There was nothing wrong with two consenting adults having a good time. *Nothing* . Even if one of those adults was actually an Angel of the Lord. “I’m uh, just wondering if we should, you know… slow down. A bit.”

Even as he said it, the majority of Dean’s very invested body screamed back in resounding and avid disagreement. He tried not to listen – wouldn’t be the first time he’d had to shove little Dean back where he belonged to respect it not being the right time or place – and focused on the angel beneath him.

Cas blinked owlishly up at him before a frown overtook her face that could only be described as *pouting* . Everything about that expression said she thought slowing down was a terrible idea.

God, Dean wanted to kiss her so badly.

So he did. With giddy abandon, because he’d just realized he *could* . He kissed her and grinned against her lips and *holy shit* , was he happy.

“Dean.”

The deep and gravelly voice – not just familiar but so ingrained in his memory, in his *being* , that Dean would know it anywhere – did not come from below him, but the other side of the room. Cas was standing in the bedroom doorway, in his usual tax accountant getup: crumpled shirt, blue tie askew, black hair a windblown mess. His ocean blue eyes were ablaze with such righteous fury that Dean scrambled off the angel beneath him. The speed at which he tried to disentangle himself from Cas resulted in very nearly rolling off the

mattress altogether. Managing to get his feet under him in time, Dean stumbled upright beside the bed, hands already raised in protested innocence.

"It's not what it looks like," he insisted, because he definitely wasn't taking advantage of Cas without Cas's approval. And he definitely wasn't cheating on Cas with… Cas. Which is somehow what this felt like?

Which… *what* ?

Slowly, Dean looked from the angel in his doorway to the debauched one leveraging herself upright on his tousled bed. What *did* this look like, exactly? Because suddenly, Dean didn't have a damn clue. Lady Cas was watching her future self, face unsettling blank. Chest Cas, on the other hand, was staring her down, every inch the avenging Warrior of God.

Dean felt like he was stuck in the middle.

The man from the future slowly turned back to Cas – *his* Cas – standing in the doorway. That was Chest Cas; he knew it with complete certainty. But he had only ever been with both Chest Cas and Lady Cas in the same room once.

When they'd been in his head.

The first wave of realization was like a hit of Novocain to his bloodstream. It spread across his body like a paralytic wave, leaving nothing but numbness in its wake. It was followed by a second surge of pure ice, carrying with it the dread of a man who knew the deep ache splitting his chest in two was just the beginning.

"None of this is real, is it?"

Cas shook his head slowly, eyes trailing away from his counterpart and to the hunter standing in the middle of the room. "I believe you are under the power of a djinn, and it is feeding on you. You must wake up, Dean."

"Or you could come back to bed."

Dean closed his eyes, fighting off the shudder of *shame* and *wrong* now flooding his bloodstream. It came with the distinct taste of failure and John Winchester's voice in his head.

Worse yet, the voice wasn't wrong. Because he… he wanted to stay. Wanted it to be real. All of it. No apocalypse, Cas at his side. Even…

Dean opened his eyes. It didn't matter what he wanted.

"You're not real," he said to the angel sitting on the bed, legs folded beneath her and hands folded in her lap. She was leaning back against the headboard, expression perfectly befitting a rejected lover.

"But I could be." She drew up to her knees before sitting back on her calves, regarding Dean imploringly. And damn but did he want to hear her out. He'd hurt Cas enough times in real life to know what it looked like on his face, no matter who's skin he was wearing.

Dean looked away. This wasn't real. Her hurt wasn't real. And he *couldn't have this* .

"You could stay here, with me," she continued, voice soft and filled with a longing Dean now knew had been pulled straight from his own damn head. "For as long as you wanted. You could be happy. We could be happy."

"We could be a family."

Dean spun at the sudden addition of his brother's voice, coming from the bedroom door. Chest Cas stepped into the room and away from the door at the sudden appearance of Sam. Or a djinn's construct of him, at least. The sasquatch of a man smiled at his older brother as a second figure joined them from the hall.

"Jess," Dean breathed out, heart aching for an imaginary brother as Sam curled his hand in hers.

"Don't we deserve to be happy?" Sam asked, looking over at the love of his life. "Don't I deserve to go back to school and have a family of my own?"

Dean staggered back a step, looking around at the faint sound of children laughing that seemed carried on a non-existent wind. He'd make a damn good uncle.

"We'd be together, all of us," Jess said sweetly, smiling at him like they were family. They might have been, one day. In another life. "We know that's what you want, Dean."

"It's all you've ever wanted," Sam added, his eyes in full puppy dog

mode. Like he was telling Dean he could have this.

Dean turned his head away, staring at the floor beneath his feet, not trusting himself to look anywhere else. A hand on his forearm, nothing more than the brush of fingertips, drew him back to the angel on the bed.

"We could be a family, Dean."

Through blurry vision he watched as that same hand retreated to her own belly, sliding beneath the telltale sign of a developing bump.

"We could *have* a family."

The hunter stumbled away from the bed with a painful gasp, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the fake angel. But he couldn't stop himself from looking down at that hand, curled protectively beneath her belly. He was simultaneously horrified and so, *so* crushed. Because for half a single, solitary second, before the rest of him caught up, Dean had believed it was real.

I'm going to be a father. I'm going to be a dad, and this time, I'll do it right.

Her blue eyes (and now he could see it so clearly; they were the wrong color blue) tracked his movement with such understanding – *acceptance* – and Dean realized he couldn't be here. He had to get out, get away, find a place he could *breathe* . But there was nowhere to go.

"You're so tired, Dean. So tired, and all you want is just a sliver of happy. A slice of apple pie. Don't you deserve that?"

"It wouldn't be real," he managed to whisper, the words nothing on his lips but razor blades to his soul. He spun away from the illusion of an angel that wanted a kid with him – the illusion that he'd make a good dad when he knew he wouldn't – and found Cas, *his* Cas standing less than a foot away.

His eyes had the same understanding, the same acceptance, but they didn't make Dean want to run away. Instead, he was overwhelmed with relief, so much so that he could feel his legs shaking beneath him, turning to Jello.

Cas held out his hand and Dean's eyes dropped to his gun, the one Dad had given him with the ivory inlaid handle, resting in Castiel's

palm. Gabriel had broken that gun in his pocket dimension and Dean hadn't seen it since.

Now he knew for certain he was in a dream and Dean was all the worse for it.

Cas nodded at him, as if he knew. As if he understood. He probably did. He was in Dean's head too, after all.

The hunter lifted his chin, uniquely heartbroken for the second time in his life, and took the gun. Without hesitation, he raised it and aimed directly for his angel, who met his harsh gaze with steadfast blue. The right color blue.

When Dean killed himself to leave this place, he couldn't risk leaving Chest Cas behind in the dream. If his mind was poisoned by the djinn's magic, that meant Cas's sliver of grace could be too. And Dean wasn't taking any chances leaving the angel behind.

He shot Cas in the head, watching the angel's body crumple with the sort of detachment only a dream could provide, then tucked the gun to his temple.

"Dean, don't."

He ignored his brother, he ignored Bobby, who appeared behind what could have once been his sister-in-law, and he ignored the devastated cry of a false angel just behind him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered anyway, unsure why he was apologizing to a family that wasn't real. To a life and a hope and a dream he couldn't have. A dream he had to let go of.

He pulled the trigger and woke up.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Told you it would heat up real quick XD I just didn't mention the bucket of ice water that was coming right after. (Say it with me: No good, dirty rotten)

Djinn Wish: That's right, it was all a dream!! None of that destiel ACTUALLY happened! (please repeat: no good, dirty rotten)

(Omg, guys, it felt *so* out of character. Dean's not there yet. Cas isn't there yet! They will be, I promise, I will get them there, but if I've spent this much time and effort building them up, I'm not gonna just blow it all so they can have a friggin' makeout session Only, apparently, yes I am because that's exactly what I just did. The Muse kept waving destiel-colored pom poms in my face while I had a damn panic attack while purposefully writing OOC characters. Good god, it nearly killed me.)

But back to that Djinn dream! I love djinns in the Supernatural universe and had to get it into this story and in a way that wasn't obvious at first. Also, I loved hte idea of using a Djinn wish to get Dean to finally accept that he wants something (which he would only acknowledge if he thought he could actually have it). Now we've taken it away, but it's too late for Dean to shove the 'I want that' back in the closet. Oh, how the Muse and I love to torture that poor, poor boy.

(Don't worry, Sam's got our back. He's gonna get Dean through his emotional constipation. It might take another 300,000 words but he'll get him there!)

If you all enjoy djinn dream fics, you should check out one of my favorites, Ruination by Aini NuFire. After Dean kicks Cas out of the bunker, the newly humanized angel walks right into a djinn den. The angst is lovely

Relationship Content Rating: While I did purposefully lean hard into the cliche of explicit shower time, this story is going to stay at PG-13, maybe venturing into R territory, but it will not get Explicit. There will be no sexy shower times, I'm afraid. As I am mirroring the show as closely as possible, all content will remain within the limits of what TV can show.

Dean Shooting Chest Cas: I am sure a lot of people are gonna be like "Wait, what?" at this, so I'm gonna take a minute more to explain the reasoning behind it. I have a slightly obsessive love of the movie Inception, and there's this moment in the first dream sequence where Dom gets a hold of a gun and shoots Arthur, the dreamer, in the head in order to wake him up and dissolve the dream. But I don't think that was his only motivation. Arthur is in pain at the time, with a heavy threat of more pain to come, and

this scene is the *only* time in the entire movie that we see Dom actually care about Arthur, a man who is willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. It's one of my favorite scenes, so the minute I had Dean taking a gun off of Cas, the Muse popped up over my shoulder with a damn megaphone and demanded we recreate it □

Season 3: Okay, now that we're *actually* into Season 3 and I can admit the 'off' writing last chapter and this chapter were completely on purpose, WELCOME!! (well, like, 90% on purpose. 10% really was pure panicking chaos at the OOCness, then trying to lean into that OOCness, then panicking because how far does one leave before one topples over?!?) Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed starting off the season with a djinn-shaped bang

Update Next: It's Sam to the rescue, since Dean may have killed himself to escape the dream, but he's just gonna wake up chained to a ceiling and seriously weak. Lucky for him, little brother is on the way!

I am going to stick to my two-week posting schedule for now. I have not written at all in the last two weeks (it's been a rough two weeks), so the stockpile is pitifully low. Hopefully this extra long and fun chapter (fun? Is that the right word? I think it was fun, but maybe it was just cruel) tides everyone over. Thanks everyone for your understanding, see you in two weeks. Happy holidays!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 144: Season 3: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Oh. My. Effing. CHUCK, guys. This last month has *sucked.* It had some amazing roller coaster highs in between some of the worst weeks ever. Lemme recap. I look forward to imagining your 😱 expressions. (I promise, it's predictably verbose but worth the read 😁)

My first dog and best friend, Kodak, passed on Dec 14th. Dec 21st I got Norovirus (it's the sickest I think I've ever been) and was in quarentine, alone for the whole week of Christmas. Jan 7th, we could see flames from my front yard and had to evacuate for a week. I've been doing toxic ash/soot yard cleanup ever since.

It has been a *hell* of a month. I will now enjoy envisioning your 😱 faces.

(On a more serious note, since not everyone is quite as comfortable as I am using humor as a coping mechanism: many, many, *many* people have lost their homes this week and it has been an absolutely horrifying, terrifying, astounding natural disaster that is *still ongoing*. If you are able to donate, please consider doing so to the Red Cross, Animal Shelters in the affected areas, World Kitchen which is feeding evacuees completely for free, and gofundme pages for those who have lost everything.)

Last Chapter: Alright, back to the far-less-depressing stuff. Emotionally traumatizing Dean Winchester (and possibly my readers)! I am so proud of all of us for making it through the Djinn dream! One of the reasons I was panicking the entire time I wrote it was that it was so not my normal writing, it was purposefully off, and what if people thought I'd lost my damn mind (or my talent). I initially wanted the dream to be one chapter, so no one had to wait through two weeks of "wtf is going on" but it just got too long (because of course it did 😁). So thank you all for trusting me long enough to find out what was really going on!! There's something so special in knowing you've built up that kind of relationship with your audience □ And, of course, the reward is now all the angst 😈 Because that, my friends, is my jam and we all know it □

(It'll take a couple chapters to resolve, because this is me and Dean has to be in "I'm fine, back off Sam" denial first, but the resolution is coming)

Chapter Warnings: Off-screen violence. No graphic descriptions, but there's no beating around the bush for what's happening, either.

Translator Warning: For those using translator's to read the story, none of what Dean tries to say in the first part of the chapter will translate properly. Honestly, I think that's just fine and I'm not gonna write it out correctly in A/N's because he's not supposed to be particularly intelligible anyway 🧢 If it bothers anyone, let me know and I'll add the full sentences to the end notes.

UPDATE 05/01/2025: Due to a chronological error on my part (math is hard, y'all), I have gone back and adjusted Sam's time at Missouri to 3 weeks. Just in case anyone catches the change and is confuzzled cuz they remember different :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 3

"Dean!"

A slap to his face had the hunter coming to, gasping for air. His chest was tight - too tight - pulled taught by arms strung up over his head for far, *far* too many hours. He could just scrape the ground beneath him with the tips of his toes. Not that he'd have the strength to stand even if he could reach the ground.

"Oh, thank God," Sammy was saying, voice flooded with panic.

There were hands cupping Dean's face, tilting his head back, tapping his cheeks, and Dean wanted to tell his baby brother to back the hell off. Only, his tongue was too fat in his mouth. There wasn't any room to form the words. His throat was so parched that just swallowing hurt – like trying to drink glass shards – and he couldn't

peel his stupid, fat tongue off the roof of his mouth.

“S’mmy,” he managed, the barely legible sounds tumbling past chapped lips.

“I’m here,” his brother replied frantically, reaching above him to where Dean’s wrists were tied together painfully tight with old, dried out rope that bit into his skin. Sam was tall (no one anywhere denied that fact) but even he couldn’t reach the hook his brother hung from. “Hang on, I’ve gotta find something I can stand on.”

“S’a sh’n,” Dean mumbled in warning, hoping his brother knew he’d been hunting a djinn before he went off grid. Like the idiot Bobby had been accusing him of being for weeks now, he’d left on a solo hunt without calling Sam for backup. Bobby must have done it for him when Dean hadn’t come back or picked up his phone.

Shit, how long had he been strung up? He couldn’t feel his arms, he could barely breathe. His chest muscles were pulled tight by his raised shoulders and the weight of his body hanging useless, the combination compressing his lungs and his breaths painfully shallow. Given his thirst and the general weakness of his body, not to mention the pounding in his skull, he’d guess it had been a whole lot longer than a couple hours. He’d probably been hanging there, being sucked dry by a djinn, for days.

Sam came back with a rickety wooden crate, which he hastily placed at Dean’s dangling feet. The older Winchester managed to crack his bleary, aching eyes open to slits as his brother climbed up, quickly blocking any view of his captivity. Not that he needed to see the decrepit barn to know where he was; he remembered checking every abandoned building in the area, suspecting a djinn.

He’d been such a damn idiot to let the thing get the jump on him.

“S’mmy, s’a sh’n,” Dean tried again, speaking into his brother's stupidly broad chest. Did Sam know how much danger he was in? Maybe the djinn wasn’t around right now. Dean couldn’t possibly have much blood left in him to drink. Maybe the monster was on the hunt for his next victim.

“What?” Sam asked, but he was distracted trying to get Dean’s bound wrists off the rusted hook he hung from. It was a futile endeavor and Sam quickly switched tactics, pulling a hunting knife from his boot instead. He started sawing into the thick, crusty rope.

“S’a *shin* !” Dean repeated emphatically, straining to form the words with his fat, dehydrated tongue as he hung there.

Sam pulled away suddenly, arms still above his head, knife poised between the ropes, to stare at his brother who was struggling just to meet his eyes, head lolling back. “Djinn? Dean, it’s a *djinn?* ”

“ *Y’s!* ”

The younger Winchester immediately looked around, a new fear gripping him, just in time to see a tattooed humanoid charging from just a few feet away. His eyes were glowing an electric blue. Sammy swore, turning into the charge as the creature tackled him around the waist. The hit toppled Sam off the crate and the two fell into Dean, who had not seen the attack coming. The ropes holding him up, almost cut through by Sammy’s knife, snapped and the three hit the hard ground in a pile of limbs.

Dean’s breath, what little he was getting at the moment, was fully knocked out of him and his head cracked against the hard cement. The world spun, stars danced across his vision, and his stomach twisted towards rebellion. As much as he needed to be in this fight, he already knew he was out. Sam was on top of him, struggling with the djinn. He’d had to drop the knife to grab both of the creature’s wrists, keeping those glowing hands from closing in on his face and neck.

Sam didn’t know much about djinn; he had never hunted one before. He’d read about them, heard they granted a wish as they fed on you, but there’d been scarce details on what that actually meant. Lucky for him, the fact that the monster was desperately trying to make physical contact with *glowing* hands was a pretty good indication of how it had gotten Dean.

It was also immediately obvious that djinn were a lot stronger than humans, as Sam struggled with all his not-inconsiderate strength to keep the creature’s hands off his face. He was not going to win a physical fight with this thing. So Sam kneed the djinn in the groin, breathing out pure relief when it went down with a groan, stiffly rolling off the hunter. Thank God monsters had dangly bits just like humans. Sam scrambled to his feet, immediately going for his knife, several feet away.

“S’mmy!”

Dean’s slurred cry was the only warning Sam had before the djinn was

on him. Apparently, they recovered from a kick to the dick faster than humans, too. Thanks to his brother's warning, Sam managed to turn into the tackle, knife in hand, when the djinn collided with him a second time. Sam buried his knife deep into the creature's guts, but the djinn just kept charging. The younger Winchester caught the wrist aiming for his face once more, just barely keeping out of reach as they wrestled across the barn floor. He was lucky he was wearing long sleeves because the djinn's hand circled his wrist and pushed his arm back, removing the knife from its stomach through sheer strength.

It was *really strong* , Sam realized with a flash of panic as the bones in his wrist ground together beneath that glowing hand. With a cry, the knife fell from his grip, fingers spasming and losing function. Desperate, Sam threw himself away as much as he could, releasing the djinn's wrist so he could turn his body away from the creature slowly crushing his bones in its grip. He managed to put a couple feet between them, though the monster refused to release his right arm, so Sam utilized his long legs to deliver a vicious kick to the djinn's knee.

Bone crunched beneath his boot, the monster howling in pain as it went down. He tried to take the hunter down too, refusing to loosen his grip, so Sam struggled out of his jacket. Throwing himself back as hard as he could, Sam slipped out of the fabric and just barely slid out from under the punishing hold on his arm.

"How do I kill it?" he yelled frantically to his brother as he delivered another kick, this time to the monster's face while he was down. The djinn's neck snapped to the side, body toppling back with the force of Sam's hit.

"Br'n. Sm'sh h's br'n in," Dean managed from a couple feet away, still slumped over on his side, trying and failing to get his arms under him. Despite Sam fighting for his life just feet away, Dean was stuck breathing through the nausea, eyes shut tight against the pounding in his head. It was so fierce and all-consuming that he couldn't keep his eyes open. Even the dim light of the barn was too much. The floor and walls were swimming, with or without the visual. Dean was pretty sure he was going to be sick.

He needed to help his brother. The kid had never fought a djinn; the creature was way too likely to get the upper hand regardless of how competent a hunter Sammy was. And Dean didn't exactly have the time or capability to explain that somewhere in the barn was a silver knife dipped in lamb's blood. He'd had it when he first came in, the djinn probably still had it stashed somewhere.

But Dean wasn't getting any of that across anytime soon. Not in his current state. Which meant bashing the thing's head in was their next best option.

Luckily, Sam spoke beat-up-and-possibly-concussed-hunter. Understanding what he needed to do, the hunter turned and fled from the djinn, who would likely be back on his feet before Sam managed to smash his head in with just a foot. He needed a weapon, something that could do significant damage with one hit.

Sam frantically searched through the scattered objects littering the floor, abandoned stalls, and straw-strewn corners of the abandoned barn. He spotted an old shovel leaning against an empty barrel just a dozen feet away and took off for it. He heard the djinn stumble back to its feet, charging after him with rushed steps.

The younger Winchester had just gotten his non-dominant hand around the metal handle when the djinn collided with him from behind. He felt the hand wrap around his bare neck, cold immediately seeping into his skin everywhere those fingers contacted. Sam turned and swung in one frantic move, putting a little extra, *inhuman* strength into the hit.

The djinn went down hard from a shovel to the face and Sam stumbled back, immediately grabbing the back of his neck with the panic of someone quite certain he'd just been poisoned. Sam could feel it under his skin like a pool of ice water in his veins, but it didn't seem to be spreading. The hunter took a moment – hoping he had the time to do so without the djinn getting back up – and closed his eyes. His hands curled into fists at his sides, one still tight around the shovel. He put all his focus into that feeling swirling just under the skin at the base of his neck.

It was a frigid sensation that came without the associated temperature, but Sam could almost visualize the eddies of glacial-blue power working their way into his blood. It was trying to spread through his body through his veins, but Sam's inherent abilities seemed to be holding it at bay. The feeling was already fading.

Taking out the djinn must have kept him from getting a full dose, and what little had seeped through his skin was held in place, isolated just below his skull.

Sam couldn't have said how he did it – he and Missouri hadn't gotten much further than visualization of his psychic abilities and some basic

practice exercises – but Sam knew it had something to do with permission. His own intrinsic ability to fight the invasion of another's, like white blood cells attacking a foreign substance. Now he pushed a little more of that power towards the infected area, as much as he could with the limited control he'd learned so far. He wanted to make sure that ice didn't spread any further. Even though he was fairly confident the djinn's power was fading, the young psychic couldn't afford to take any chances. Not with Dean out for the count and needing help.

When Sam didn't go down – which was a good sign, seeing as Dean had been unconscious when he'd finally found him, a likely side effect of the djinn's poison – the young psychic tentatively approached the unmoving creature. It was sprawled out across the barn floor, blood dripping from its mouth and lower jaw no longer lined up right. Sam swallowed heavily, raised the shovel, and brought it back down on the creature's head.

Delivering extreme brain damage to any living being was an unpleasant job. Sam did his best to block out what he was actually doing until the deed was done, letting the fear and worry for his brother fuel his actions until he was pretty sure the djinn wasn't getting back up ever again. Once he was certain, Sam dropped the bloodied shovel and stumbled away from the downed monster. His jeans and shoes were splattered with the creature's blood, but Sam fiercely ignored that fact as he turned back towards his brother.

Dean was still conscious, thank God, but he was in bad shape. He'd been missing for almost three days, which meant dehydration, starvation, not to mention whatever damage was caused by a djinn feeding on a human. From the IV setup he'd pulled out of the backside of his brother's hand when he'd first found him, Sam suspected it was human blood the creature consumed. Which meant he could add hypovolemia to the list, too.

They always had a couple of IV bags in the trunk for hunts-gone-bad, but Sam would have to make a run for blood bags. That stuff had to be refrigerated, so they couldn't just have it on hand in the Impala. Fortunately (or not, depending how you looked at it), Sam was well-versed in breaking into hospitals and blood banks.

"Okay, up you go," he muttered as encouragingly as possible once he got his arms under his brother. The younger Winchester had to be careful of his own wrist, which was swelling up and turning ugly shades of blue and purple. He didn't think it was broken, but it sure

as hell hurt. Probably a hairline fracture. Maybe two. Keeping most of Dean's weight on his left side, Sam hauled the injured man to his feet. Dean managed to keep his legs beneath him, but only just barely. He had to lean heavily on Sam as the two stumbled for the exit.

"Sh'n dead?" Dean asked, still slurring, but he did seem a little more lucid.

"Djinn's dead," Sam confirmed, taking a moment to give his brother a more thorough once-over. He was weak, filthy and in need of a shower, but Sam didn't think he had a concussion. Dean clearly didn't want to open his eyes, but once Sam got him to, his pupils dilated with the change in light. So probably just extreme dehydration, which was encouraging. It probably came with one hell of a headache, though.

He wrapped an arm beneath his brother's once more and started them towards the barn door. "Let's get out of here."

"T'k w'rds r't o'ta m'th," Dean mumbled and, while Sam only got every other word, he was pretty sure he'd just taken the words out of his brother's mouth.

Chapter Break

Three Weeks Ago

Sam hadn't quite known what to expect, seeking out Missouri Mosely. Showing up on her front stoop, duffle slung over one shoulder, still trying to decide what he was going to say, had been as far as his plan had gone. Missouri had opened the door before he'd built up the nerve to knock, looking at him warmly through the screen.

"Come on in, honey," she said with no preamble, opening the screen door and standing to the side so he could slide past her into the house. "Took you longer to get here than I expected. Bad traffic?"

Sam grimaced but nodded. He'd forgotten what being around Missouri was like. It would take a while to get used to his every move being predicted again. "Yeah, accident on 75 south. It was a bad one."

“Well, you’re here now,” she said with a warm pat to his bicep. She guided them to her sitting room, the same one they’d filled the last time the Winchesters had shown up on her doorstep. Missouri settled into the sofa with a soft sigh of satisfaction to be off her feet. “So, Sam. What can I do for you, dear?”

It took the better half of an hour for Sam to explain everything that had happened, both to him and to the world at large, along with everything that could still be coming. Missouri took it all in with quiet contemplation, the occasional hum that followed a pause in Sam’s speech, or a gentle pat to his forearm when he got to their father’s death.

“A good man,” she muttered quietly, full of respectful mourning. “Taken from us too soon. He was so proud of you, Sam. You and your brother. So very proud of you both.”

Sam swallowed through a throat full of glass, mouth dry and empty of anything to say in response. So he just nodded and resumed his story. Missouri’s only other reaction, much to Sam’s surprise considering he was describing the potential end of the world, was Dean’s time traveling.

“I knew something was different about him,” she’d mused aloud after Sam had explained, briefly, about Castiel and the hopefully-averted-apocalypse. “I didn’t have the words to put to it, but that sounds about right.”

Sam just shook his head, quietly amused that this woman had sensed a man out of time and just didn’t have the context to understand it. He was glad they’d met her, glad he came to her for help. She was powerful in a way so very different from him.

Once Sam had finished his tale, ending it lamely with a sort of shrug and the *‘here I am’* expression of a lost puppy, Missouri leaned back against the sofa, crossing her arms over her stomach, hands folded together.

“Well,” she started with a couple of blinks and an air of amused awe, “you’ve certainly been through a lot, Sam.”

The younger Winchester offered a half-hearted chuckle to go along with his weak smile. That was an understatement. Hopefully, the worst was behind them but, really, Sam didn’t quite believe it.

“To be honest, I’m not sure how much help I can be,” Missouri

admitted not unkindly. "From the sound of it, your abilities are quite a bit different from anything I know, dear. But let's see what we can do. Tell me what you want to achieve here."

Sam opened his mouth, but didn't have an answer readily available. He honestly hadn't known what to expect, seeking out another psychic to learn from. Meditation, maybe? Practicing lifting things with telekinesis? Bending spoons? He really didn't know. It sounded stupid now, but he'd kind of been picturing a *Rocky* montage full of psychic training.

"I guess…" Sam started, but he still wasn't sure what the right answer was. "I want to be able to control my abilities."

Missouri hummed in contemplation, eyeing the younger Winchester in a way that made him immediately nervous. Sounding far more apologetic than the disappointment he expected, she mused aloud, "Control isn't much of a failsafe, Sam."

"Yeah, I know," the young hunter replied, head hung with a bitter grimace. "Control is an illusion."

"It is not," Missouri shot back immediately, the tone of her voice chiding. "Control *is* possible. But if you believe that you will always be in control, it might as well be that illusion."

Sam blinked, taken aback. But he nodded slowly, running what she'd said through his head and applying it to Missouri's original question. "So, I guess… I do want to be able to control my powers, but, um…. It's more than that. I don't want to… *lose* control of them?"

He didn't know if that made any sense. It felt poorly worded for what he was actually feeling.

"And you think you will?"

Yet again, Sam found himself blinking in surprise. Of course he would lose control. Hadn't she been listening?

Azazel was still out there. He might even be on Earth right this second if he'd made it through that hellgate in Arizona. Knowing their luck when it came to the yellow-eyed demon, Sam was betting that he had. Which meant they would be dealing with him - and demon blood - again.

Even if Sam and Dean had actually managed to stop the apocalypse by

skirting a deal, or at least stalled it for a good long while, Sam doubted Azazel would just give up his favorite boy king so easily.

"It's going to happen," he managed to get out, though it was about as painful and arduous as actually pulling teeth. The young hunter closed his eyes for a moment, taking deep breaths against the building panic. When he opened them again, Missouri was watching him closely but not unkindly. "Hell isn't going to just let me go. They're going to try to get me on the demon blood again. So they can control me."

Missouri nodded thoughtfully. "And how do you stop that from happening?"

Sam shook his head because he just didn't know.

The psychic across from him hummed. Then she vocalized Sam's biggest fear like they were discussing the weather. " *Can* you stop it from happening?"

He curled his hands into fists against his thighs to hide the way they trembled, the panic now threatening to overwhelm.

'PTSD,' his brain supplied. Which was helpful and needed to be acknowledged, but not in this exact moment.

"I don't know."

She nodded again, somehow still so calm and Sam wanted to ask her how she did it. This was the end of the world they were talking about. The end of *him* , for certain. But nothing about the psychic sitting across from him suggested fear.

"Well, despairing about the future certainly won't get us anywhere," Missouri announced firmly, and that was that. Sam almost laughed – like it could really be that simple – but didn't dare. "So what can we do about it today?"

Chapter Break

Present

Sam bodily dragged his brother's barely conscious body into the first

motel that had a lit vacancy sign. At that point, he wasn't entirely sure Dean would make it through the night without a trip to the hospital. But Sam could start by getting some fluids into his brother's dehydrated system, patch up what he could, and go from there.

He hauled Dean to the nearest bed, grunting as the shorter man flopped onto the firm mattress. His brother groaned at the sudden jostling, the sound muffled by the pillow smushed against half his face. Sam took that as a good sign and straightened him out on the bed. Next was the real fun part: wrangling Dean's dead weight out of his jacket and flannel so Sam could get at his elbow for the IV.

He'd managed half of one arm before Dean was awake enough to mumble, "Buy me dinner first, S'mmy."

The younger Winchester huffed out his most put-upon, kid-brother sigh but still ended up smiling. "Even unconscious, you're ridiculous."

"Not unconch'shush," Dean muttered with enough attitude to stay Sam's worrying when his eyes remained closed and he was absolutely no help whatsoever getting his shirts off. At least he was somewhat more intelligible than he had been at the barn.

"Sure you aren't." Sam shook his head, finally freeing his brother from his many layers, leaving him in just a t-shirt. He'd have to check him over for further wounds, but first: liquids. "Stay here."

"Not goin' anywhere."

Sam huffed again as he headed for the door. He popped the trunk of the Impala, quickly stashing the weapons he hadn't had time to store properly back at that barn. He'd left the car he'd 'borrowed' to find Dean back there too. Cleanup would be on his list after fixing up his brother and then finding him a couple bags of blood.

It was going to be a long night.

Sam had to dig to the back of the trunk for their duffle filled with medical supplies. Not the first aid kit, which he also swiped from its standard spot beneath the trick door; the duffel he slung over his shoulder was meant for times when a first aid kit alone wasn't going to cut it. It had IV lines, saline bags, and splints. Pretty much anything that was too big to fit in the normal kit.

Dean was unresponsive when Sam came back into the room, but the younger Winchester wasn't worried – well, at least not any *more*

worried. His brother had been in and out of consciousness the entire car ride over. Sam had already checked for signs of a concussion, and each time Dean came back to he was lucid (enough) for Sam not to worry about anything more than pure exhaustion as the cause.

He set the IV up, hanging the bag off a curtain rod near the bed, and stayed at Dean's side until he was certain his brother was getting liquids. Then he stripped the older Winchester down to his boxers and started checking for injuries.

There were surprisingly few for a hunt gone bad. Mostly scrapes and bumps and bruises, all minor. The spot on his left arm where the djinn's needle had stayed for two days was red and irritated, the vein a discolored mess of subdermal bruising, but it didn't look infected. Apparently, djinn took decent care of their victims. Probably wanted them alive for as long as possible.

Dean's wrists were the only major injury outside of blood loss and dehydration. After two days holding up his entire weight, they were a real piece of work. There were disturbingly deep gouges where the rope had dug into flesh, leaving behind an upsetting blend of purples, blues, and greys. Sam did what he could, cleaning and wrapping the damaged area. They'd heal, but he was sure they'd hurt like a bitch in the meantime.

The younger Winchester added some morphine to that IV drip, hoping it would help his brother sleep.

With nothing else he could do for Dean at the moment, Sam hovered, uncertain. Despite having already done it just a few minutes earlier, Sam impulsively checked Dean's temperature, peeled open one eye for pupil response, and pinched the skin on the back of his brother's hand. It sluggishly settled back into place, indicating dehydration but it was better than it had been when they'd first gotten to the motel.

Dean was getting fluids and was on track to recover. A blood transfusion was the only other thing Sam could do aside from wait.

Still, he hovered.

He should have been there. He should have been with Dean on that hunt. He was supposed to be there. Supposed to be hunting, supposed to be with his family. Not that he'd ever been very good at family. At least, not his.

The younger Winchester procrastinated another few minutes,

repeating his checks. Guilt wouldn't do anything for the situation but make Sam feel worse than he already did. He needed to leave, find his brother some blood, which was the only thing left he could do for the situation.

Still. The fear that had flooded him when he'd finally found Dean, strung up in that barn, was as paralyzing now as it had been then. Sam had been horrifically sure, for just a moment, that he'd been too late. Dean had looked like death warmed over. Even now, Sam knew how close it had been. How lucky they were that he'd gotten there as fast as he had.

The younger Winchester watched his brother sleep on for another minute before finally convincing himself to leave. Dean would be alright without him for the hour or so it would take to find some blood. He wasn't going to die while Sam was gone. The younger Winchester was at least pretty confident about that.

Chapter Break

Three Weeks Ago

"I want you to train me."

The answer was immediate. Sam knew what he wanted out of *this* , right here, with Missouri. Even if he didn't know if it could stop everything to come, he knew what he wanted today, and that was to learn. "I want to get better with these powers. If I can get strong enough… maybe I can stop it."

Missouri's face fell into something soft and sad. "Oh honey, what you're up against can't be taken on by one man. Not if he wants to stay a man."

The breath left Sam's lungs like he was suddenly in the vacuum of space. He couldn't breathe. The floor had dropped out from under him into an abyss of horror.

She was right. Missouri was right and Sam's entire line of thought, his assuredness of what he could do, what he had come here to learn to do…. It was all wrong.

He'd been thinking he could stop Azazel, stop Hell and Lilith and everything that could still be coming. He would protect himself and Dean and Bobby, like he hadn't been able to protect Andy.

If only he was strong enough.

But that… that sounded like the Sam from Dean's future, didn't it. That was *everything* Sam was trying to avoid becoming. Yes, it was Azazel and the demon blood and releasing Lucifer upon the world, but all of those things had happened because Sam had wanted to be powerful.

A chill ran through him, followed by a very visceral shiver of pure fear.

He couldn't become that man. He couldn't. But he *had* to be stronger to survive. Didn't he? Sam was already powerful, he knew that. It wasn't just a thought or belief, it was fact. He *knew* what he was, what he could be with a simple thought. He could lift the couch he was sitting on, he could throw anything in this house with a jerk of his head, he could command people with his voice alone.

'More like control people. Like Webber.'

Andy's voice filtered up from a memory and Sam closed his eyes against the familiar swell of grief that memories of the man always brought these days. But his memory had supplied those words for a reason, so the younger Winchester focused on that.

'Maybe it's not about control .' Sam had said that to Andy back when the kid had been so worried his powers would turn him into his evil twin. Ultimately, Andy had found a way to balance what he could do with what he was comfortable doing.

"Maybe that's it," Sam muttered aloud.

"What is, honey?"

Sam looked up to Missouri, who was sitting patiently across from him.

"I think…. Maybe control isn't possible for everything I can do." The younger Winchester shook his head, feeling like that was explaining it poorly once again. "The different abilities, they're not all… mine."

At Missouri's furrowed brow, Sam chewed on the inside of his cheek, trying to put words to what he was feeling.

“When my powers first developed, I could only see things. Deaths before they happened. But ever since the fight with Ava…” Sam shook his head and shrugged, unsure how else to say it. “I think some of the stuff I can do isn’t natural. It’s like… I’m pulling on the demon blood in me to use those powers.”

“But that’s not how you feel when you’re having visions?”

Sam shook his head. “No. My visions come without trying.”

He hadn’t had a vision since the Morton House and his additional power developments, but he knew he still could, like one would be waiting just around the corner if he went looking for it. He could feel it, that buzz under his skin that had always been there. The demon blood brought it out, made it so strong he could no longer ignore it. But it hadn’t been until he’d been running on empty that Sam had realized that buzz had *always* been there, his whole life, just a whole lot quieter.

Something in Sam’s gut told him he could push that. He could have a vision, right now, if he wanted. Not that he had any idea how to actually do that, but he knew he could.

The other powers though, they didn’t feel like that.

“I think…” he reasoned aloud, leaning forward, elbows resting atop his knees. “I think that accessing those other abilities would be like… taking a debt out of a power pool. A debt I would have to pay back.”

“With what?”

Sam didn’t know, not for sure. But he had a pretty good idea. Well. Not a *good* idea.

“My humanity.”

Chapter Break

Present

It took him longer to find an accessible blood supply than he hoped. The djinn had been camped out pretty much in the middle of nowhere. The nearest town was decently sized, but a good twenty-

minute drive from the old barn. It was big enough to have a hospital, but not much else. Unfortunately, it was way more difficult to steal blood from a hospital than it was a blood bank or a doctor's office. Even an Urgent Care was easier to sneak into than a hospital.

So it took a while longer to get the supplies he needed, but Sam was nothing if not determined and he had learned from the best. So a little over three and a half hours after he'd left his brother in the motel, Sam walked back into the room, two bags of type-O blood in his arms and a splinted wrist. Dean was still passed out on the closest mattress. At least until the door clicked shut behind Sam. Then he was bolting upright, eyes wide and unseeing, hand frantically searching under his pillow then his persons for a weapon.

"Whoa, Dean!" Sam tossed the blood bags on the little kitchenette table beside the door and hurried to his brother's side. "You're okay, you're safe."

Green eyes frantically searched the room, taking a moment too long to focus on Sam's face. "Did we make it out?"

"Yeah, the djinn is dead," Sam reassured him. "You're okay. You're safe."

"This is real?"

Something cracked in Sam's heart at that question, sounding more like a scared kid than an experienced, hardened hunter. He didn't know what Dean had seen under the djinn's influence. They were supposed to grant wishes, so he must have been in some sort of… perfect dream world. Which probably made determining reality from that place unnervingly difficult. So Sam nodded quickly, wrapping a hand around Dean's forearm, trying to anchor him back to reality.

"This is real. I'm real, I got you out. You're safe, Dean," he repeated, trying to recall what he knew about speaking to trauma victims. Dean would tear him limb from limb if he was aware enough to realize Sam had pulled out the puppy eyes. Luckily, he wasn't and he actually let Sam talk him off the edge.

The tension started to slip out of his stiff form, Dean all but collapsing back into the bed, at least until he bolted up again, or tried to. Sam had to catch him as he all but toppled onto his side, body lacking the energy for the panic his mind was supplying. "Cas? Did Cas make it out?"

Righting his brother, Sam hesitated to respond, unsure what to say. Cas hadn't been in that barn. Hadn't been seen since Gabriel took her away. So Dean must be referring to the wish-world. But he didn't know which way to play it.

He didn't want to tell Dean that he didn't know if Cas was okay. At least, not any more okay than they'd had to assume she was in her brother's captivity. But how would Dean handle that reminder right now? Not well, Sam guessed.

On the other hand, if he lied and Dean caught him in it, would his brother question if this was all real or if he was still stuck in his dream world? The younger Winchester hesitated before nodding reassuringly again, giving his brother's arm an encouraging squeeze.

"Cas is safe, okay? She's not here right now, but she's safe, Dean."

They were the older Winchester's words echoed back at him. That's what they'd believed before Dean had gone missing. There was nothing to suggest that had changed and, if Dean was just confused, there was no reason to complicate the matter.

He was doing better than he had been a couple hours ago, that was for sure, even if he wasn't completely lucid. Some color had returned to his face and his eyes were focusing, pupils properly dilating. He was more or less with Sam. Just… confused.

Finally, the man from the future relaxed. He started to slump towards the mattress once more, so Sam caught him by the shoulder and helped lower him down slowly.

"What happened to your wrist?"

Sam glanced at his dominant hand, now splinted from forearm to palm and bandaged professionally. It had been the fastest and easiest way into the hospital: become a patient. He'd let them probe at his wrist, declined an X-ray, and went for a pretty simple splint-and-wrap, 'hoping,' as he'd told the E.R. staff, that it would heal on its own. They hadn't exactly approved, but it was his choice, and Sam used that system to his advantage.

Getting into the rest of the hospital from there had been significantly easier than starting in the lobby. Most people didn't stop to question the guy with a clear injury, wandering some halls. Especially one behaving like he belonged there.

The younger Winchester shrugged at the injury, remembering the feeling of his bones grinding together beneath the djinn's powerful grip. He clenched his jaw against a flash of pain that followed. Phantom pain, he told himself, because he refused to be any more injured than the hairline fracture he suspected. "Djinn banged it up. Might be sprained. Nothing worth worrying about."

Dean seemed to accept that, already closing his eyes. Face half-smushed by the pillow, he mumbled an apologetic, "Sorry you had to rescue my ass."

Sam just grinned, not that his brother could see it. Which was probably for the best, as it was way shakier than he had been going for. "I'll always rescue your ass, Jerk. Next time, call me first so it doesn't take two days."

Dean groaned something of an agreement, clearly already falling asleep. He managed to get in a final, "Bitch," before he was once more out.

Chapter Break

Three Weeks Ago

"Hmm." Missouri sank back into her chair once more, nodding slowly as she thought through everything he'd told her. "Knowing that…. You said you wanted to be more powerful. Does this make you less powerful?"

It did, technically, Sam reasoned. If he couldn't access those other abilities, then he was weaker. Wasn't he?

The funny thing was he didn't feel weaker, because utilizing those powers would change him. Like they had changed Ava. She had surrendered herself to them, to all of them so she could use whatever she needed to survive, but it had cost her soul. He could still see that darkness - that oily sludge - that had coveted her once bright light.

If he continued accessing those abilities, it would cost him too.

"No," Sam finally answered Missouri's question with a light head shake. "It doesn't make me less powerful, because accessing them

would change me. Make me less human. So I *can't* access them."

Not unless the situation was dire, Sam thought. He knew that there was a little wiggle room there. He'd used them back at the Morton House and didn't feel less human. Not yet, at least. He was pretty sure he'd be able to tell. Just like Ava, he'd start craving those powers.

No, he would crave *power* .

'I want to be powerful .'

That was what he'd thought, how many times? Facing down Azazel, trying to save Andy, fighting Ava.

'I need to be more powerful .'

It was Ava who had acknowledged that they already *were* . They just had to stop fighting it.

"I want…" Sam hesitated, knowing what he needed to say but still lacking the words. "I want to protect my family. It's not that I want to be more powerful… I just want to be powerful enough to protect the people I love. To protect them and… and not let them down."

"What does that mean for your abilities?" Missouri asked without much of a pause. Sam wondered if she'd had that question primed, ready for the right opportunity. "What does not letting Dean down mean for your power, Sam?"

He didn't even question her naming Dean specifically. That was pretty much a given. Didn't stop his hackles from immediately rising, of course.

"Dean doesn't want me to have any powers," Sam said through gritted teeth, despite his best attempts *not* to get defensive. "But that's not an option, not anymore."

He'd unlocked that door, opened the floodgates, and now he couldn't put back what had come out.

"That's not what I asked, dear," Missouri replied calmly, nonplussed by his anger. Then again, she knew it wasn't aimed at her. "What does not letting Dean down mean for the abilities you have?"

The younger Winchester tried to let go of the anger coiling his

shoulders like springs up around his ears. He took in and let out a calming breath and reminded himself that neither Missouri nor Dean were the enemy here.

"I don't want to be ashamed," he worked out, realizing with a jolt of shock that it was true. Deep-down kinda true. "I want to be able to use these powers and not be judged."

"Judged by who, hun?"

Sam resisted snapping out the obvious answer – ' *my brother, that's who'* – and instead thought it over, giving the question some actual consideration. Missouri wasn't dumb; she'd asked it for a reason, so Sam would take the time to find that reason.

"It's not just Dean," he realized. "It's everyone. You, Ellen and Bobby, Jo… I don't want to be judged for having these powers, period."

Missouri nodded with an approving smile. "Good. But as you know, you can't please everyone, Sam."

He did know that. Unfortunately.

"Some people won't ever want you to have these gifts at all. Like your brother." Missouri was still regarding him kindly (*proudly* , Sam realized and had to shove down a surge of warmth). "What then?"

That happy little feeling went right the hell away as all the tension returned to his body. His hands, having ceased trembling some time ago, were curling into fists once more.

Alright, they'd found another sore spot, apparently.

She was right, though. Dean was never going to want him pursuing these powers. If his brother could, he'd probably strip Sam of those abilities entirely. He'd think he was doing the right thing, too.

'No one can make you feel inferior without your consent .'

The quote popped into his mind without conscious thought. Eleanor Roosevelt, he was pretty sure. They taught that one in school a lot. Sam had never really gotten it as a kid, and given it no further thought as an adult. His family had made him feel inferior throughout his entire childhood and he'd never felt like he had any say in that, at all. He sure as hell hadn't *consented* to it. That had

been one of the primary reasons he'd wanted to get away from them. He never figured out how to stop feeling that way around them, so why would he stay if it meant subjecting himself to more?

But for the first time, Sam was almost comfortable in his own skin. It was the closest he'd ever been to feeling good about himself without denying where he came from, be it a hunting family or a yellow-eyed demon. That was the consent, wasn't it?

Sam had spent his whole life feeling inferior, all on his own without anyone helping him. He'd always been different from everyone else: from his classmates because he was smart and interested in learning and also hunted monsters as an extracurricular. From his family because he had no interest in hunting. From humanity because he had a buzz under his skin that he had never understood. That wrongness had fueled his own insecurities, his own feeling of never fitting in. So of course others adding to it only ever rang as truth.

Not anymore. For the first time in his life, save his four years at Stanford, Sam felt *right* . More than that, he was starting to like who he was. His powers were a part of that, no matter what Dean had to say.

Sam suddenly felt lighter than he had in… well, maybe ever, but definitely the last two years. Developing these powers was entirely his choice, and he *wanted* to. So he would, without shame.

"I don't want to go darkside," Sam announced at the same time his brain drew the conclusion. Before Missouri could further prod (he was starting to recognize her pattern), he continued, "I need to be able to use my powers, my… gifts-" it was harder to call them that than he'd hoped, but changing the way he thought about those abilities was a good first step forward- "without being manipulated by them. That's what I think I mean by learning to control them."

Missouri nodded encouragingly. "Learning to control them so they don't control you. Well alright, then, we have our heading. But first, lunch."

For a moment, Sam thought she was joking, but she hauled herself off the sofa, pausing in the doorway to the kitchen when he didn't follow.

"Boy, if you want food you'd best come help. I'm not feeding you for free."

Sam's eyes bulged at the implication of impertinence and couldn't scramble to his feet fast enough.

Chapter Break

Present

Sam watched his sleeping brother, on edge in a way he couldn't seem to release. This whole ordeal had scared the crap out of him and, just like his brother, he was still pretty jumpy. Dean was going to pull through, Sam was confident of that now, but he really hadn't been sure when he'd first found him strung up in that barn.

Who knew what the djinn had actually done to him. Knowing Dean, he wasn't going to talk about or ever deal with whatever had gone down in that wish dream.

Suddenly weary and exhausted, Sam dragged himself to the bathroom and a hot shower. Dean needed one as well – two days strung up and being snacked on would do that to you – but it could wait till morning. He wasn't so bad off that he needed an assist with personal hygiene tonight. Besides, Sam was pretty sure Dean would be improved enough come morning to handle things on his own, and they'd both prefer that scenario.

The water felt good on his muscles as he stepped under the stream. Sam knew he would have his own aches and bruises come morning; he could already feel them stiffening up. His dominant hand was swollen beneath the bandage (which he was careful to keep out of the spray) and his wrist ached fiercely, despite the splint. It was definitely a break, he was sure of it, regardless of what he'd told Dean. Sam just hoped it wasn't more than a fracture. He really didn't want his dominant hand out of commission for a month or two.

There was nothing he could do to change that injury or speed up the healing process, though. Hopefully the hot water would help ease some of his other tensions, at least. The better he'd sleep and the less he'd hurt tomorrow.

The hospital had given him a prescription for some mild painkillers, the kind that more knocked you out than actually blocked the pain. But no hunter ever passed up an opportunity to restock on painkillers,

so Sam had swung by a pharmacy on his way back to the motel. Popping one of those before bed probably wasn't a bad idea, either.

He was exhausted, bone-tired, with sleep loudly calling, but as Sam shut off the shower and toweled off, he decided to grab his laptop on the way to bed. Maybe a little research before passing out would help him deal with Dean's emotional constipation in the morning. The more armed Sam was going into that conversation, the more likely he was to get through to his thick-skulled brother.

If Sam was busy working on himself with Missouri Mosely, then Dean could do the same. Of course, the older WInchester was never going to do any emotional processing on his own, not without kicking and screaming. Luckily, Sam was a master class in and of himself at getting Dean to do things he didn't want to do, usually without realizing he was doing them.

With pain pill in hand, a glass of water from the tap, and his computer tucked under his arm, Sam settled in for at least an hour's worth of research. Or however long it took the meds to kick in.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Sammy to the rescue! And also Missouri Mosely is just your friendly neighborhood psychic therapist 😁 I always loved her as more of a guiding character than an influencing one. Meanwhile poor Dean's going to have some lingering Reality-vs-TheDream PTSD (he's so lucky he gets to sort it out without Cas around. Oooh, if I coulda had Cas around for it…)

Up Next: In case you skipped the opening author's notes, life is just a *teensy* bit chaotic at the moment. I don't know when I'll get the next chapter up, and it is the last chapter I have written (sigh). So I may end up delaying if I don't get writing soon (I'm not even gonna give the Muse a hard time for this one. It's been a shit couple weeks 😞) Hopefully I'll be back sooner rather than later, but I'll keep my profile, this chapter's end notes, my tumblr, and the discord server up to date with progress posts.

Speaking of:

DISCORD SERVER: The wonderful **GreenKittens** has set up a server for anyone on Discord that wants to chat. There are rooms for discussing TRSF(tta), SPN, fanart and fanfics, and chatting with me. Hope to see you all there! https://discord.gg/sDB7ZAwMAS

TUMBLR: https://www.tumblr.com/8yearsofsilence

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 145: Season 3: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A/Ns: Hello again, dear readers! Life is just starting to settle back into something resembling normalcy (it sucks. It still sucks so much But it's getting better) and the good news is that I've been writing a ton (FRIGGIN' FINALLY!!!) Not enough to resume weekly posts, unfortunately, but now next chapter isn't the only thing I have written

Chapter Warnings: We're still jumping between Now and Then, learning what Jedi Sam was up to with Master Missouri while also tackling Dean Winchester and his Emotional Trauma that Never Ends (yes, you should have read that in song form)

Actual Chapter Warnings: More mind fuckery. Be prepared to question everything your dirty rotten author is throwing at you (or don't question it all, and maybe you'll be all the better for it! [insert maniacal cackle here])

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 4

The room was dark when he came to. At least, Sam was pretty sure he came to. He was groggy as hell, brain swimming in a thick fog, eyelids almost too heavy to keep open. But something had woken him, his sluggish mind supplied, and in his line of work it could be something deadly.

It took a moment to get his senses together into something resembling functionality, but once he managed it, Sam realized there was someone next to him, sitting on the edge of the bed. He turned his head lazily to the side, taking in the silhouette of long hair and soft curves in somewhat of a drunken stupor.

“Jess?” Sam mumbled, smile lifting the corners of his mouth. Which was dry as a desert, he now noticed. Cotton mouth. A pretty normal

side effect of pain meds. He licked his lips, which didn't feel dry, but he didn't know how they weren't. Man, he was thirsty.

Jess hummed in acknowledgement, and then there was a glass of water at his lips. Sam drank greedily, tilting his head up as much as he could to get at the thirst-quenching liquid. He collapsed back down with a relieved sigh.

"Is this a dream?" he asked sleepily, still smiling up at her silhouette in the darkness.

Jess didn't answer, just ran her hand through his hair in response. That was okay, Sam thought, closing his eyes and enjoying the touch. Damn, it had been a long time. They weren't really like that, anymore, but this was nice. A nice memory.

"Miss you," he mumbled, the call of sleep already dragging him back towards its depths.

The hand paused for a moment and the small part of Sam's brain that was still functioning worried he'd blown it, crossed a line they'd never completely discussed but both knew needed to exist. But the bed gently rocked beneath him in a drug-induced sway and, since Sam was convinced this was all a dream anyway, he let it go and drifted.

"Go to sleep, Sam," she whispered, soft and sweet and everything he missed.

"Going," he whispered back, words slurred by that very thing. Sam slipped back into the darkness and a different dream.

Chapter Break

Two Days Ago

Sam pulled the eggs off the stove just as Missouri shuffled into the kitchen and the toaster popped, right on time. He used the spatula in hand to gesture to the coffee pot, which had finished its first brew of the day ten minutes earlier. Her favorite mug (that read, 'Best Grandma Ever' in bold, pink letters) was already waiting beside it.

"Earning your keep, I see," Missouri announced with an approving

nod as she shuffled over to the counter in a fuzzy pink robe and matching slippers, which had seen better days.

“Trying,” Sam replied with a grin as he brought two plates of eggs, breakfast sausage, and toast over to the kitchenette table.

Missouri followed in her poor, flattened slippers, coffee in hand. They tucked into breakfast in content silence. Missouri had made it clear the first day he was there, after they’d made sandwiches for lunch, that there would be no psychic talk at the table. Meals were for conversations about your day, not your work.

Sam had fallen into quite the little domestic routine over the past three weeks staying with Missouri. He cooked breakfast, they ate together while he did the crossword and any other puzzles the paper offered, and she mentally prepared for her day. Then he would do the dishes and spend the rest of the morning practicing the things he and Missouri had worked on so far, while she saw to clients and appointments.

Today he had decided to practice the Other Vision. Missouri had been surprised to learn he could change his physical sight to another plane. It had come up that first afternoon, after lunch, as they’d discussed what abilities came naturally to him, felt like him, and which ones didn’t.

They had actually gone through them one by one, Sam demonstrating the ability and Missouri asking him to hold that power as long as he could. It had proven invaluable. It wasn’t just that Jake’s strength or Max’s telekinesis felt borrowed at best, stolen at worst; the longer he held onto them, the harder they became to control. After just six minutes of holding up furniture as Missouri vacuumed beneath (she was nothing if not opportunistic), Sam found himself shaking under the weight, head pounding and fingers itching for a boost of power, like the kind that demon blood would provide.

He'd dropped the psychic’s hutch on top of the vacuum the second that thought registered and he’d had to scramble to access Jake’s strength again to pick it back up. He had been shaking as he set it back down – gently, this time. He’d gotten quite the look from Missouri for that and, though not the sort to hold it against him, Sam had found himself taking the next twenty minutes righting everything inside the hutch. Luckily, nothing had broken, including the vacuum.

Conversely, Sam had kept his vision switched over to the other plane for almost fifteen minutes before he'd started to get a headache. Even when his vision had whited out entirely and he'd had to release the ability due to head pain, there hadn't been a craving for demon blood. Missouri handed him an ice pack from the freezer and said they'd found their baseline.

Since then, Sam spent each morning practicing his Other Vision (a name that had stuck for lack of anything better to call it) until the headache overtook him. He was up to almost thirty minutes. Twenty-seven was the current record. At least, without a nosebleed and a headache bad enough that he blacked out for thirteen seconds.

Missouri had made it very clear he was not to push that hard again. If there was one thing Sam had learned staying with the psychic for three weeks, it was that when Missouri spoke, you listened.

Today he managed twenty-six minutes before he had white spots dancing around the edges. Sam released the hold he had over his eyesight, sagging into the couch cushions with relief as his vision switched back to the normal plane. It hadn't been as long as he'd hoped, but he also knew now not to keep going. Missouri had been right. Pushing beyond his limits caused damage, like pulling a muscle during a workout. He had time, time to build that muscle, gradually, so it wouldn't tear.

It was methodical and boring and not at all what Sam had imagined, but there was something cathartic to be found in the tedium. He enjoyed the routine, enjoyed having a to-do list to go through each day, crossing items off the list, a visual promise of progress when there otherwise wasn't any to track. He'd missed that since leaving Stanford. Traveling the country with Dean, averting the end of the world wasn't exactly boring, but it lacked structure. The nomadic hunting life always had. It was one of the reasons Sam had always excelled in academia.

The younger Winchester wiped the back of his hand beneath his nose, relieved when he didn't find any blood. He could hear the muffled words of Missouri and a client on the other side of the living room wall. She would probably be another half hour at least before joining him. That was plenty of time to try something new.

Sam climbed off the couch and circled the coffee table to settle cross-legged on the carpet in front of it. It was his usual spot for anything that required serious concentration or, generally, meditation. They'd

discovered fairly quickly that Sam's control peaked when he was calm. His powers might spike when he was emotional, but his control was scrapped. So meditation had become a large part of his new routine.

Unfortunately, no amount of meditation so far had allowed Sam access to a death vision. Despite numerous attempts, the younger Winchester had yet to find a way to trigger one. Still, the feeling in his gut that said he should be able to did not abate. The younger Winchester was convinced he could control the visions, he just wasn't sure *how* to do it. Yet.

Most of his visions had happened while he was asleep, which meant the logical step was to try to control one while sleeping. He hadn't had a waking vision since they'd sent Azazel back to Hell, but he hadn't dreamt since Castiel gave him the Persian sleep coin. Even after he'd given it to Andy to keep.

Hazel eyes dropped to his open palms, lying face up in his lap. Andy had put that coin in his hand and afterward… Sam hadn't wanted it. It was Andy's, it belonged with the kid. So that's where it had remained.

"Focus," Sam said aloud, closing his eyes and straightening his back with a long, deep inhale. He let it out slowly, counting as he did and releasing the grief and distraction with it. "Visions."

Sam had a theory about why he hadn't been able to force a vision so far. For starters, he'd had two different types of visions to date. All previous premonitions had been death omens, all linked to Azazel's psychic kids.

In his own timeline, Dean and his Sam hypothesized that Yellow Eyes was the cause of the visions, leading Sam from hunt to hunt like a damn pet on a leash. But the younger Winchester didn't think they were all on purpose. At least, not in this timeline and version of events.

For one, he was pretty sure that vision of Persephone in Gomorrah hadn't been part of Azazel's plan.

Which led Sam to the realization that there was a second type of vision. The trip to Gomorrah hadn't been a premonition. At least, Sam didn't think it was. Persephone had been able to sense him, which suggested it had been in real time. He'd been seeing what Azazel was doing at that moment. A sort of… observational vision.

Spying, if you would.

So back to his theory: he couldn't force a death vision because those were only going to happen if someone was, you know, about to die. He couldn't control when that happened (and wouldn't want to, considering the two people he'd been trying to have visions of were Dean and Bobby. Sam had stopped pretty damn quickly when he realized what having a death vision of them would *mean*). Those visions, he figured, would come when they came and that was about all he could do about it.

(Figuring out how to open himself to them so maybe they hurt a little less, or block himself from them if the need arose for some reason…. Well, figuring out both of those things were on his new to-do list, just further down.)

Which now took Sam in the direction of observational visions (he really needed to figure out a less cumbersome name for it. And Other Vision, too). The majority of all his visions had happened while he was asleep. The only problem was, trying to control something while out for the count had proven particularly difficult for the younger Winchester.

There was a lot of debate about why sleep either heightened psychic awareness or actually increased it. Some said it was the loss of mental control, opening your mind to let things in you would otherwise fight to keep out, consciously or not. Others thought it had to do with the changes in brain waves as you slept, tuning in to frequencies not as accessible when awake.

(That same crowd were big advocates for meditation.)

All of which had led to extensive research, as only Sam Winchester could get into, on lucid dreaming. So far, no luck. He hadn't gotten to try, since he never seemed to dream anymore.

Castiel had warned him that using the sleep coin for too long could cause him not to dream. So far, Sam didn't see that as much of a consequence. Unfortunately, it meant he couldn't use lucid dreaming to experiment with his visions since there was never a dream to take control of.

Now, though, the burgeoning psychic had a new idea to try. There was a state that existed between awake and asleep, a transition from one to the other. The scientific term for it was hypnagogia, known for vivid sensory perceptions, like auditory hallucinations or the sensation

of falling. Those in the psychic world, however, considered the state to be somewhat of a doorway, opening your mind to the world beyond, much like sleep.

The theory was that in a hypnagogic state, one should be more vulnerable to psychic perceptions but still conscious enough to direct them. Sam was hoping to slip into that state and, from there, seek out Dean, just like his brain had subconsciously sought Azazel and followed him to Gomorrah. Of course, he had no clue how to do that on purpose and no idea if he'd be able to figure it out in the moment, but it was the next thing to try in a long list of psychic experiments.

The hunter closed his eyes and began a fifteen-minute meditation that he had practiced enough times he could now do it almost automatically. The first half-dozen times he'd tried, he'd had to use a guided version. But meditation was coming more easily now.

(Every day he went without seeing trackable progress with his powers, he had to remind himself that he was making some progress in other places, at least. It wasn't much, but it was something.)

As his breathing grew deep – slow and steady – his body began to disappear from his awareness. Sam could feel the space around him – not the physical space, but dimensional – expand. He let go of his connection to the world, of all somatic awareness. He could no longer feel the carpet beneath him or the coffee table at his back, smell the traces of Missouri's perfume or the bowl of potpourri she kept by the door to the living room. Sam wouldn't call it drifting; he still felt entirely rooted within his own perception, but that perception had expanded.

Now it was time to narrow it.

'Dean.'

Chapter Break

Present

Sam woke gradually, a beam of sunlight slipping past the motel curtains and nailing him right in the eye. He blinked a couple of times before blocking the offensive light with a raised hand and an

annoyed groan. His arm obscured more of the sun than he'd been expecting and Sam blinked at the extra wide silhouette of his forearm.

A splint. Oh, right, he'd gotten his bones ground together by a djinn the night before.

The younger Winchester let his arm fall to his chest with another groan, that one more dismayed than frustrated. He'd had a couple broken bones in his life and they were always a pain. This time it was his dominant hand. Hunting was going to be a bitch.

It didn't hurt much, which surprised him. The sun was high enough off the horizon for it to be at least eight. The pain meds should have well worn off by then. Sam held his hand back up and, expecting at least an ache if not outright pain, flexed his fingers gently.

Nothing.

"Huh." Sam lowered his arm back to his chest and stared at the ceiling. It must not have been as bad as he thought. He rolled his head to the side to check on his brother.

Dean was still asleep, but he'd rolled onto his stomach in the middle of the night, a sign that he was feeling at least marginally better. Luckily, he hadn't pulled the IV out in his sleep. Sam should get up and remove it, bandage his now-abused elbow, and check his other wounds.

He looked okay from Sam's distance. Still rough - the bags under his eyes had bags of their own - but his color had improved. His breathing was even. His sleep seemed restful enough. Until it wasn't.

Sam frowned as his brother bodily twitched, brow furrowing, fingers spasming against the mattress. The younger Winchester pushed himself up to his elbows as Dean made a noise. Sam didn't hear it clearly, but he was pretty sure it hadn't been a good sound.

"Dean?"

The older hunter didn't wake, but twitched again, harder this time. His chin jerked against the mattress and Sam sat all the way up. Dean let out a whimper and the younger Winchester was swinging his legs off the bed and moving to wake his brother.

Chapter Break

Two Days Ago

Careful not to regain control of his breathing, a surefire way to pull himself out of the hypnagogic state too soon, Sam drew his focus into a tight ball, then tapered that down even further until he was thinking of nothing, aware of nothing, but his brother. The sound of his breathing, the way that he moved, the reassuring presence in the driver's seat of the Impala.

Sam opened his eyes and found himself staring at the back of Dean's head and beyond that, the passing road through the windshield of the Impala.

"Dean," he breathed out, shocked and amazed.

Sam looked around almost frantically, already worrying that whatever connection he'd managed to achieve would be broken if he brought any real awareness to it. The young hunter stilled himself, recognizing the panic as a surefire way to break right back out of this dream state. Sam relaxed his body into the backseat, closing his eyes and allowing his breathing to return to the relaxed, rhythmic push and pull of a natural, unconscious state.

Once he was calm, the hunter opened his eyes again. He was in the backseat of the Impala, Dean was driving, and a woman – Cas! – was sitting in the front seat.

'Castiel is back!' Sam thought with a swell of relief and joy.

"So, tell me about this hunt," Dean said, reaching over to turn the music down enough so the two could talk. Sam grinned, not just at seeing his brother – and that's what this was, he was seeing his brother! – but at the elation of having successfully slipped into a vision.

He glanced out the back windows, looking for any identifying features or signs that would tell him where Dean was. They were in the middle of nowhere, far as Sam could tell. Lots of woodland, trees largely barren, so probably the northern half of the country. The scenery made Sam think Midwest, but that still left a lot of ground to cover.

“Nine?” Dean questioned loudly, his incredulity pulling Sam’s attention back to his brother. The older Winchester was glancing between the road and his angel, a look on his face that had Sam immediately more interested in the conversation they were having.

Sam leaned over the front seat to see one of Bobby’s files spread out in Castiel’s lap. The handwritten, meticulous notes easily gave away who had put the case together. Sam scanned what he could over the angel’s shoulder.

“That is what the article said,” Castiel replied dryly and, still scanning the file, Sam found himself grinning. He’d missed the angel.

Dean was laughing, too, and Sam could only imagine he echoed the sentiment (multiplied by a factor of, oh, the younger Winchester would say at least a hundred).

“So, someone’s pawning possessed items,” Sam announced as he finished reading the case file in Cas’s lap. He was surprised to realize that he’d missed hunting with Dean these past three weeks. There was an adrenaline rush to solving a puzzle, something he didn’t get much of at Missouri Moseley’s house.

“Did you say something?”

Still leaning over the front seat, elbows practically brushing both driver and passenger’s shoulders, the younger Winchester froze, staring at the side of Dean’s head. The older Winchester was glancing at Cas, but Sam got the distinct impression his gaze wanted to go further. To check the back seat as well. Like he might have heard something coming from back there.

Sam surged forward, gripping the back of the seat in front of him. “Dean? Dean, can you hear me?”

“No,” Castiel answered curtly and Dean shrugged off whatever it had been, just like that.

“So, what’s our theory?” he asked instead, eyes back on Cas.

Sam sunk back into his own seat, the thill of excitement running through him despite Dean not being able to hear him directly. He had, for just a second. Sam was sure of it. That opened up a whole world of potential and Sam was more than eager to explore it.

“You’re pushing too hard, Sam.”

Sam startled at the sudden grip on his arm, real in a world that he knew wasn't. Suddenly Missouri was sitting next to him in the back seat, hand curled over his forearm, eyes locked on his. There was a look in her eye that told him to stop. So he did.

Sam came back to Missouri's living room with a gasp of air, like he hadn't been breathing for way too long. He nearly toppled over as the physical world crashed down on top of him like a tidal wave. Missouri was there, kneeling on the carpet just in front of him, steadying him with a firm grip on a shoulder and forearm.

"Holy shit," Sam breathed out, still shocked that he'd done it. He'd had a vision - on purposе - of Dean.

Chapter Break

Present

"Dean, wake up!"

Sam shook his brother by the shoulder almost violently, still keeping his distance in case Dean woke up swinging. Whatever dream had a hold of the older WInchester, he was deep in it and worry started clawing its way through Sam's insides. Could whatever magic the djinn have used on his brother still be in his system?

"Dean!"

The older hunter bolted upright, eyes wide, and Sam quickly stepped back, giving him space. Dean's gaze was wild, searching frantically for things that weren't there, before finally landing on his brother.

"Sammy?"

"Yeah, it's me." The younger Winchester hesitated to move closer, despite his own protective instincts telling him he should. He took a shuffling step forward, watching Dean closely for any reaction. But his brother was more dazed and unsettled than coiled for an attack. "You're okay, Dean, you're safe. I got you out, the djinn is dead. We're in a motel. Do you remember?"

Green eyes flickered around the room, his breathing still too fast but

starting to come down. He nodded.

“This is… this is real?”

His gaze locked on Sam and the younger Winchester gave up caution and reached out, curling his fingers over his brother’s shoulder. Dean looked down at the physical contact, then back up.

“It’s real,” Sam confirmed with as much confidence and comfort as he could fit into two words. He looked around for anything that could solidify that promise. “I’m not sure how to prove it but… this is real.”

Another moment of uncertainty passed before Dean’s eyes hardened. He looked up at his brother, a challenge in that gaze, and Sam straightened expectantly. “Give me my gun.”

Confusion hit first, but the tight coil of apprehension in his gut told Sam he absolutely should not hand his brother a weapon right now. But Dean was testing him and he did not know the right answer. “Uh, okay. But… why?”

Biding time to figure out which way he should play it, Sam started to walk away, heading for the bag on the kitchenette table, which had a gun inside. He still didn’t want to give Dean a firearm, but maybe if the older man thought he would, he’d relax.

“The colt, the ivory one,” Dean clarified from the bed, watching Sam closely. “The one dad gave us.”

Sam paused, frowning. He looked back at his brother with a grimace. “Um, that gun… it, uh… We don’t have it anymore, Dean. The Trickster broke it. I can get you mine, if you want.”

That one was in the trunk of the Impala, but Sam would fetch it if that would somehow convince Dean this was real and he was no longer dreaming. He still didn’t want to hand over a weapon, not when the tight knot in his stomach had yet to release, but he’d show Dean that they had it.

Sam was about to head for the door to do just that when his brother visibly relaxed. Sam didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but all the tension draining out of his brother, a look of relief flooding his face, had not been it.

“Nah, it’s alright,” Dean said with a shake of his head, leaning back against the headboard and looking absolutely exhausted. “I’m good.”

Sam hesitated, unsure what to do next other than nod and stand down. What the hell had that djinn done to his brother?

Chapter Break

Two Days Ago

"Your nose is bleeding, dear."

Sam wiped at his face with the tea towel Missouri held out to him. It came back with a smear of red. Not too bad, but probably further than he should have pushed. Not that he'd meant to push. The young psychic had no idea he could reach out to someone in one of his visions and actually interact with them.

Well, sort of. With practice he probably could. It lent credence to his theory that these visions were happening in real time, though.

"Didn't mean to," Sam replied, words slurring together enough to surprise him. He felt okay. Well, mostly. Missouri righted him against the coffee table and Sam clasped her arms in return as his balance reestablished itself. He shook his head, clearing the rest of the dizziness. Yeah, mostly okay. "But I did it."

"You saw your brother, honey?" Missouri helped Sam get to his feet. He swayed unexpectedly, pain lancing through his head. He must have stood up too quickly.

"Yeah. Yeah, I saw Dean." Sam hissed as another lightning bolt of pain lanced straight through his skull. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He really must have pushed too hard. "He was, uh… he was-"

Sam stumbled backwards as the room swayed. His calves hit the coffee table and he practically fell atop it, managing to awkwardly sit down with a thump instead. From there, he slid back onto the floor. His head was killing him. Missouri was in front of him again, steadying hands on his arms, worried face sliding in and out of focus. Her lips forming a question of concern was the last thing Sam saw before his vision went dark and he was once more no longer in her living room.

It was dark. Not night, but so poorly lit that it might as well have

been. Only a thin sliver of light was sneaking in from somewhere up high. The air was musty, that streak of sun illuminating the dust in the air. There was dirt beneath his bare feet, a mix of fine powder, larger clumps, and straws of hay. Sam looked down at his toes, scrunching them against the loose dirt and straw.

Probably a barn, he thought, looking back up. His eyes were starting to adjust, but even then it was hard to see. He made his way out of what was most likely a stall, though long since used by any animal or person. As he rounded into the main room of the barn, looking for windows or doors and encountering only boards, Sam stopped in his tracks.

Dean was hanging in the center of the barn, strung up by his wrists from one of the loft rafters, swaying on his tiptoes.

"Dean!" Sam rushed forward, grabbing his brother's shoulder with one hand, cupping his cheek with the other, desperately searching for signs of life.

What the hell was going on? He didn't understand. Sam had just seen Dean in the Impala with Cas. What was this?

Sam looked frantically around the dimly lit space, searching for the angel. Had something happened to them on the case? Dean mumbled into his palm and Sam's attention snapped back to his brother.

"Dean? Dean, can you hear me? Wake up!"

The older Winchester didn't respond, eyes open slits but unseeing. They rolled back into his skull as Sam tilted his head to get a better look at his pupils.

Sam didn't understand. He had just been with Dean in the car. Maybe…. The young psychic's mind raced for an answer. Maybe that had been real-time, the present, which made this…

The hunter straightened, terror coiling in his gut like a lead ball.

A death premonition.

"No," Sam whispered aloud, fear hitting him like a bag of bricks to the gut. "No, no, Dean!!"

He doubled his efforts to wake his brother, shaking and even delivering a slap to his cheek, but the older hunter barely responded.

Whatever had taken him had him heavily drugged.

Sam took a step back, desperately surveying the creature's set up. Dean was strung up by his wrists and had been for a while given the dried blood and deep bruising there. An IV was taped to the back of Dean's hand, but the system wasn't pumping anything into him. It looked like it was pulling it out.

"Blood," Sam realized, the liquid filling the tube was viscous and so dark it appeared nearly black under the lack of light.

So a vampire, maybe? Holding onto his prey long term? But Dean and Cas had been investigating haunted – or cursed – objects. How the hell had a vampire gotten them?

"Cas."

At the moan, Sam cupped his brother's face again, trying to hold his head upright and alleviate the harsh angle of his neck. "I'll find her, Dean. I'll find you both. Just hold on."

For a moment, cloudy green eyes locked on his own and a flicker of hope lit the flame of adrenaline in the younger Winchester.

"S'mmy?"

"Yes, I'm here, Dean." Sam scrambled to stay in his brother's eyeline but the older man's gaze was already drifting. "I'm going to find you!"

Sam was growing increasingly concerned about his brother's condition. How long had he been strung up? He wasn't getting any fluids, clearly wasn't being fed. He looked bad, and Sam could count on one hand the number of times he'd thought that during a hunt gone wrong.

The edges of his vision started to flicker.

"No, not yet," Sam hissed, now frantic to find something – anything – that would tell him where his brother was. There wasn't enough light to see anything in the barn and the harder he tried to look, the more his head hurt. His vision was starting to white out from the building pressure.

Before he could step away, find something before this dream ended and he lost his only chance of locating his brother, Dean's half-lidded

eyes locked on something just over Sam's shoulder. The younger Winchester stiffened the same moment he felt a presence behind him. But it was dark, and his vision was blurring, narrowing down to a pinpoint. He was losing the connection; he could feel it happening like sand through a sieve.

"No," Dean groaned, trying to pull away but he had no purchase hanging as he was. He just ended up swinging back and forth, top heavy and weak.

The white enveloping his vision crept in further, Sam's head started to pound behind his eyes, and he knew his time was up.

His fingers curled protectively over his brother's shoulders, silently promising Dean (and himself) that he would get him out. As a shadow fell over his shoulder, the younger Winchester turned his head, ever so slightly, to glimpse the thing holding his brother even as the vision folded in on itself.

He caught a flash of something humanoid bathed in blue light before darkness overtook him and he was bolting upright in Missouri Moseley's well-lit living room, gasping for air.

"That's it, you're back, Sam. Just breathe." Missouri's calm, steady voice coached him back to reality and Sam forced his lungs to take more measured, even breaths. The woman's comforting hands on his back and shoulder helped him remain upright as the physical world once more crashed back in on him. "That's it. Just breathe, honey."

He was a shaking, volatile mess, but Sam did as he was told. Soon enough, the pain in his head began to ebb, his vision cleared of the spots and flashes that were as much from the headache as they were afterimages of another place, and his breathing calmed.

"Holy shit," Sam got out shakily, reaching up to pat Missouri's hand where it rested on his shoulder, letting her know he was with her once more. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

"But you have to go get your brother." Missouri nodded like she'd already heard the whole thing and Sam could only bob his head loosely.

On the coffee table behind him, his cell started to vibrate. Bobby's name flashed across the small screen.

Chapter Break

Present

Sam watched his brother from his peripheral as Dean dressed and packed. He knew that his brother was aware of him watching, and he also knew it was pissing Dean off, but Sam couldn't help it. Pretty much immediately after asking for a gun, Dean had demanded they get moving, pack up and head for the bunker. Since then, he'd been quiet and, if not quiet, curt and defensive.

So, pretty much exactly what Sam had been expecting. At least that much was right in the world.

"We don't have to get back right away," Sam said in lieu of the tense silence, slowly packing his own bag and the medical supply duffle. "I called Bobby last night, he's not expecting us anytime soon."

He'd phoned the older hunter the minute he'd gotten Dean into the Impala, safe(ish), and headed for a motel. Bobby had been waiting for the update ever since Sam answered his phone, already shoving his sparse belongings into a bag and heading for the car he'd 'borrowed' to get to Missouri's. Apparently Dean had missed his check-in the night before and, come morning when he still wasn't answering the phone, Bobby had summoned the cavalry. Stupid, stubborn-headed Winchester idjits and their self-sacrificing ideas of hunting solo.

The old hunter had been the one to tell Sam that Cas wasn't back, to his knowledge. Neither of them had known what Sam had seen – there was no hunt about pawned, haunted objects. At least, not one that Bobby knew about, let alone put together a file on. Neither of them had known what to make of it. At least, not until he'd found his brother and the older Winchester had named the creature.

Dean's shoulders, which had already been tense, were up around his ears now and he made a frustrated growl, throwing something into his duffle with the kind of anger that said, *okay, we're doing this.* Sam braced himself for the inevitable explosion.

"I said I'm fine," Dean bit out, turning to face Sam with a challenging expression.

"All I'm saying," Sam offered, holding a hand out in a deescalating gesture, "is that you don't have to be."

“I’m *fine* , Sam.” The older Winchester snatched up his bag and headed past his younger brother for the motel door. “Let’s go, I want the hell out of here already.”

Sam watched him pull open the door, also with more force than was necessary, and sighed as his brother stomped off towards the car. Yep, emotionally constipated Dean Winchester, as predicted. He grabbed his own bag of clothes and the duffle of medical supplies and headed after him, ready for the next fight.

At least this one he knew he was going to win, no matter how fine Dean said he was.

“Fine, but I’m driving.”

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

A/N’s: I am actually still in the process of clarifying and defining Sam's powers for myself/this story, so you're sort of in this experiment with me 🧐 Y'all let me know if A) something doesn't make sense, B) you have cool ideas because I'm still very much doing that defining bit and C) you notice I start drowning in the deep end of the psychic pool but call it swimming.

Next Up: Dean and Sam have a talk, and then another talk, the bunker makes everything better, Dean’s a sucker for mangy mutts and Sam’s an Herbal Essence Commercial.

Delay Update: Apologies for disappearing on you all. I promise, the story is still ongoing, I've just hit a couple snags. The majority of them are RL related, as the craziness of 2025 continues. This week's episode involves a new foster dog! Which is wonderful(ly chaotic 🤯).

The Muse also did me dirty, turning some plans on their head, then throwing a huge number of blueprints out the window (after setting them on fire). To finish it off, she walked right back out of the crisis she created, leaving me to, uh... Well, let's be honest. Bury my head in the sand and pretend it wasn't happening.

Update 05/12/2025: Guys, guys, guys, guys, guys, I'M WRITING AGAIN!!!

After the worst, unexpected, last minute turnaround the Muse has ever put me through (and again, damnit, she was right to do it, I just wasn't *ready*) I am BACK! And it only took five months -_-

Posting won't resume just yet, I'm afraid. I need to get a little stockpile going in case this resolution is short lived (□□□□ that it's not) But I can at least say that I'm writing again, I've gotten past the worst of the rut, and I have lots of fun stuff to get through before I have to confront the next potential hangup. SO BRING IT ON!

This would be a good opportunity, if you have the time, to reread Season 3 (all three chapters of it <.<) as a re-read really will be necessary once I get posting again (hopefully in a couple of weeks or so)

Chapter 146: Season 3: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: WELCOME BACK, EVERYONE!!!!

Oof, am I so sorry about the unexpected delay. The muse did me a dirty and decided to include something entirely not planned for, that changed the *entire* dynamic of the planned Destiel. I was not ready for that and it took me months to come to terms with it, figure out all the changes it entailed, and tackle an identity crisis I thought I had *years* to figure out. Just oof.

It's for the best - even as she took over and started writing it, I *knew* it was the right call. But OOF, I tell you! Anyhoo, none of that is in this chapter, but I knew it was gonna slow me the hell down, so I didn't want to post anything until I had it sorted.

So, yeah, in short, WELCOME BACK!!!

Chapter Warnings: Dean isn't taking Sam's advice, Sam's not pushing, Dean's not talking about it, and 90's shampoo commercials were something else.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Brief and undescriptive mention of stomach illness and worshiping the porcelain god.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 5

Dean sat in the passenger seat of his own damn car because *someone* wouldn't let him drive.

(It was absolutely the right call; he was in no condition to be driving. His head was pounding, his eyelids felt like sandpaper every time he blinked, and he ached everywhere. But that wasn't the point. Being grumpy about it was the point.)

As Sam got them onto the highway headed for Lebanon, Dean slouched down, arms crossed over his chest, and angled his body into the door, forehead pressed to the window. All he wanted to do was sleep. The spring sun was warm on his face, the glass contrastingly cool, and closing his eyes helped with both the headache and the sandpaper problem. But the last thing he wanted to do was dream, so there was no way he was falling asleep. Maybe ever again – time would tell on that one. Dean bet he could make it at least four or five days before his body gave out. Maybe then he'd be too tired to dream.

The thought triggered a long, angry rumbling through his stomach and he shifted around it. That was as good a distraction as any, he supposed.

"Pull over at the next greasy spoon, will you? I'm hungry."

Sam looked over at him, eyebrows raised. Then the road, then him again. Dean just slouched down further, hunching his shoulders and ignoring his brother completely.

"Really? You think that's a good idea?"

Dean looked over at him like he had grown a second head. Sam gave the look right back.

"You haven't had solid food in, like, two days, man. Maybe longer," the younger Winchester reasoned, tone matching his expression. "Your stomach isn't going to handle greasy diner food well."

"Pffft," Dean scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Don't tell my stomach what it can and can't handle. It has an *iron* constitution."

Sam turned back to the road with a disbelieving laugh. He spotted the telltale, colorful sign of an upcoming roadside diner and flipped the Impala's blinker on. "Alright. It's your funeral."

Chapter Break

Once in the diner, Dean hunkered down in the booth, arms crossed over his chest once more, steadfastly ignoring his brother again. Sam had been looking at him since they'd sat down, so Dean was looking

anywhere else. Like the smattering of four- and two-seater tables between them and the bar, which ran the length of the small restaurant. It wasn't a bar so much as a breakfast counter at the moment, but Dean could easily see the switch over once the night crowd came out. Was probably a pretty decent dive bar after dark.

Sam was still staring.

Dean hunkered down further, shoulders up, body screaming, *'Leave me alone, Sam,'* in as close to a bitchface as the older Winchester ever made. The waitress came over and took their order: a coffee and strawberry pancakes for Dean ("See, Sam, I'm getting *fruit*. My stomach'll be fine.") with a side of sausage (Sam's returning bitchface was a solid mix of #3 and what would be a future #5), a Denver omelet and orange juice for Sam.

Who resumed watching him once Beverly left to put their order in.

"You got something to say, Sammy, *say it* ."

He got a pair of raised eyebrows in return, damn near climbing towards that stupidly long hair. Sam held his hands out in the universal sign of innocence. "Dude, I'm not doing anything. I am just sitting here."

"Staring at me," Dean tacked on under his breath, purposefully turning in the booth to angle his torso as far away from his brother as possible. Sam had told him more than once what certain body language said about people. Well now Sam could figure out what he had to say without any need to say it.

"I'm fine not talking about it, Dean," the younger Winchester announced, apropos of nothing, as Beverly came back with their drinks. Dean shot him a glare around her arm as she set down his coffee. It perfectly conveyed just how much he believed that statement. Sam shrugged his big shoulders and thanked the waitress for his OJ. "We don't have to talk about it unless you want to."

"Well, I *don't,* " Dean grumped.

Sam nodded and said, "Okay."

But he kept watching. A few minutes later, Beverly returned with their plates and Sam started in on his healthy little egg white omelet, or whatever he'd ordered. Dean looked down at his own food, stomach both growling and turning, only to feel the itch of Sammy

eyes on him again.

“It was Cas, alright?” he finally spat out, glaring across the width of the table, a fiery challenge in his eyes. Sam just raised his eyebrows, the picture of innocence, *I-Didn’t-Say-Anything* .

“What do you mean?” Sam asked, sounding genuinely curious before Dean could get angrier.

“I mean she was *there* . Back. Here. She was back here, with us.” Dean’s cheeks were turning red with what Sam assumed was frustration at not having a proper connection between his brain and his tongue. “And we were on a hunt together.”

Sam hesitated, wondering if he should ask what the hunt had been about. If they had been in the Impala, driving north, discussing pawned, haunted objects. He wondered if he should tell Dean that he’d seen him. Them. Together, hunting. But he hadn’t known it was a dream at that point.

“And when it all got too good,” Dean continued, missing Sam’s internal debate entirely, “that’s when I realized it was…. That’s when Chest Cas showed up. Saved my ass.”

Sam lowered his fork, watching his brother with a combination of caution and sympathy. “He kicked you out of the dream?”

“What?” Dean blinked, momentarily confused, before remembering that this Sam had never encountered a Djinn. A vague memory – distorted by pain, roiling nausea, and spinning vision – came to him like a brick to the side of the head.

Sam, in a dark space that smelled like straw and dirt, asking frantically how to kill a djinn.

“The djinn’s dead, right?” Dean asked, voice empty and hollow. Fear was rising through him, from his gut, overtaking his chest, overwhelming his throat, until he almost couldn’t breath. He immediately recognized the warning signs. He was in for a new bout of PTSD. Great. Like he needed more of that.

“Yeah,” Sam confirmed, surprised by the question but solid in his answer. “He’s definitely dead.”

“Kay.” The response was lackluster for the older Winchester, eyes glazed over and mind somewhere else, but Sam didn’t push. Dean

was still recovering from the ordeal, not just physically but mentally. Sam itched to ask but had decided last night, while researching Djinn, that he wouldn't pressure Dean to share before he was ready. At least, not until the stubborn hunter refused to deal and it became a problem.

(Which it would; it always did. So Sam had a plan for that, too. But for now, he would let Dean pick the direction of his recovery.)

"Uh, no," the older Winchester suddenly answered Sam's earlier question, eyes clearing as he gave himself a little shake. He was back in the present. Still, Sam didn't push. "Chest Cas didn't get me out. The, uh, the only way to escape a djinn dream is to, uh… kill yourself.

Sam's eyebrows climbed back into his hair with a jolt. "What?"

"Yeah." Dean grimaced. It was supposed to be a smile, sardonic at best, but it fell short. There was nothing funny about a djinn. Even less about waking up from one, if you were lucky enough to in the first place. "Only way to free yourself from the wish is to give it up. You know: if you love something, let it go, or some other psycho-babble bullshit."

Sam wanted to ask. He wanted so very much to know what his brother's wish had been. What had caused him so much turmoil in such a short period of time. Sam's academic mind and tendency towards puzzles had wanted to know the second Dean named it a djinn, and only more so after the quick read up he'd done last night. His mind went back to Cas, riding passenger in the Impala, on a hunt with Dean.

But he didn't ask.

Instead, he thought over the new information, the part that hadn't been in the research. His brother had believed so wholeheartedly that he was in a dream that he had been willing to kill himself to escape it. He had risked being wrong and never waking up. Had trusted, completely, that suicide was the only way to live.

Fuck, Sam thought. Djinn really were a whole other level of monster.

But it hadn't been their only run in with another level, lately. It hadn't been so long ago that Dean was stuck in a pocket dimension, killing himself over and over and over again.

"Jesus," the younger Winchester muttered, troubled by just how often

his brother was backed into a corner where death was the only way out. And Dean made it seem like just another Tuesday. That didn't bode well for their future.

"Yeah." Dean went back to staring at his food, which now seemed utterly unappetizing. Still, he'd been the one to insist they stop, and he *was* hungry. In a purely physical way, at least. He managed a couple bites of syrupy, strawberry pancake as his brother continued to watch him.

"So, uh…" Sam cleared his throat, digging back into his own food as soon as Dean tensed. This was where *Samantha* would start pushing, expecting him to share his life story along with his feelings. And Sam knew it, which is why he adopted his most innocent, shit-eating little brother expression, and asked, "Your phone broken?"

"What?" Dean pulled his head back, instantly offended by the seemingly-casual-but-entirely-not tone, even if he didn't know what it was he'd done now.

He pulled his cellphone out of his back pocket, only to find it completely fine. It had been sitting on the motel dresser that morning, charging next to his go-bag of clothes. Dean didn't know where Sam found it (probably just laying around the djinn's lair, battery long since dead or switched off), but it had worked just fine when he powered it up.

He looked back up, still confused (defenses rising), only to find Sam wearing a look. A very telling look, framed by his stupid hair. Dean's face dropped into a neutral, deadpan expression. Sam ignored the warning completely.

"You forget my number, then?"

"Shut up," Dean grumbled, tucking his phone back into his pants and grabbing his fork once again. "Is sass all you learned at Missouri's?"

"No. Although that would be a master class." Sam actually laughed and Dean felt a smile tug at his own lips. He fought it off with well-earned grump. When Sam sombered, his words weren't nearly as scolding as they could have been. Insistent, but not admonishing. "You should have called me. I want you to call me."

"Yeah… I know." Dean sighed, begrudgingly appreciative of his brother's approach. He pushed a mushy strawberry around on his plate. Finally, he put his fork back down and actually met Sam's

earnest face. “You were right, okay? You and Bobby. I should have called. It’s just…”

His brother waited him out, still staring, but Dean knew (even if he didn’t want to admit it aloud) that Sam was waiting him out supportively, not expectantly. He just wished the kid would quit while Dean was behind and stop waiting entirely.

(Only no, he didn’t want that, no matter how much inner, grumpy Dean said yes, yes he did want that. Because he was glad Sam was here. Damn happy about it, actually. He was just… the rest of it sucked. The circumstances sucked.)

“I was angry, alright?” Dean admitted, almost defensively, but he managed to reel it back in at the last moment. Sam wasn’t pushing, he was asking Dean to share. And the older Winchester had promised he’d… you know. Try. “I’m still… I’m just *grumpy* , okay?”

Sam snorted, which earned him a glare, but he gestured for the older Winchester to continue. Dean swallowed, looking away, because now he had to continue. God, this *sucked* .

“I don’t like that you’re off pursuing your powers.” He held up a hand when Sam opened his mouth to defend the choice. The words of a fake Cas – about Siths and Jedis – were echoing around his skull. “I get it, alright? I do. I know why you need to do it, and I don’t even think it’s the wrong choice…”

The younger Winchester’s eyebrows climbed slowly back towards his hair – Dean found himself oddly distracted by it – but Sam didn’t dare interrupt.

“I just don’t *like* it.” Dean turned away, staring absently at the rest of the diner. It was easier than facing his brother through this particular conversation.

The truth was he’d been angry that Sam had left. Everyone he loved, everyone who loved him, they always left. But Dean knew he had to be supportive of Sam’s decision. He *wanted* to be supportive; he just didn’t know what that looked like. So he hadn’t called, under the bullshit reasoning that he was being *supportive* , not taking Sam away from his training. When, really, he just hadn’t wanted to call. He’d wanted his brother to be stuck with the silent treatment, wanted him to make the decision to come back rather than be asked or told, because Dean had been hurt and angry. And, apparently, he could only express those emotions like a friggin’ nine-year-old.

But he should have called. Because being strung up by a djinn, dying from blood loss and dehydration, was a pretty shitty way to go. A phone call and some swallowed pride was a small price to pay.

"Sorry," Dean added, going back to playing with his food. He managed a few more bites, knowing he needed the fuel.

Across from him, Sam smiled. "Yeah, I get it. And I'm sorry it has to be this way, because it sucks."

Dean glanced up at that, gauging how serious Sam was or whether he was just telling him what he wanted to hear. But his kid brother looked honest and Dean relaxed a little further, something inside him uncoiling from the fear of being left behind.

"I'm not running away, okay? That's not what this is," Sam reassured his brother. And it wasn't. This wasn't Sam trying to get away from his family (or the family business) this time. "But I have to do this. It's my best chance of not going down the same path as your Sam."

Green eyes dropped back to his pancakes and Sam felt a flicker of regret even bringing up that other version of Dean's brother. But they couldn't shy away from these conversations, no matter how hard they were. Not if they wanted to change their future.

"Seriously, though," he continued, tucking his hair behind his ear. Dean's eyes followed the motion, narrowing. Sam waited until he had his full attention; he wanted his brother to see how much he meant what he was about to say. "I'm still a hunter. I'm still your brother. So *call me* ."

Dean swallowed roughly but nodded.

"I'll spend whatever downtime we have training up with psychics, but just the downtime," Sam added, feeling some of the worry drain out of him as the tension slid off Dean's frame one promise at a time. "Soon as we've got another case, we go. You can pick me up on the way."

The older Winchester couldn't find words to answer – his throat was feeling pretty damn tight and his eyes were starting to blur damn suspiciously – so he just nodded. And then the finer details of what Sam had said registered and his brain latched onto the distraction.

"What do you mean, psychics? Psychics, *plural* ?"

Sam just shrugged. "Missouri doesn't think she can take me much

further. Her abilities, they're all sensory. She's pretty sure mine are more, uh… physical."

Missouri had actually warned him early on that she didn't know how far in his journey she'd be able to accompany him. She had been fairly certain he'd outgrow her ability to teach him quickly, and she hadn't been wrong. The last week had been a lot of practicing what Sam had worked out with Missouri, but she'd been running out of advice to offer.

Sam had known, even before he'd managed to trigger that dream-walk vision of Dean, that his time at Missouri's was coming to an end.

"She suggested a couple others," Sam added with another shrug, one-shouldered this time. He brushed his hair behind his ear, having dislodged it with the movement. "Bobby offered a few names before I left, too."

Dean, who had been thinking of Pamela Barnes and was about to ask if she'd been on either list, was sidelined entirely by his brother's hair. He stared at the floppy mess, trying to figure out what it was that had been bothering him ever since they sat down. Something was definitely different. Wrong.

"What's with your hair?" Across from him, Sam frowned at the non sequitur. His expression must have been a question enough, though, because Dean added, "It's long."

Sam only grew more confused. "Yeah… you've been making fun of that fact for half my life, Dean."

The older WInchester narrowed his eyes to suspicious slits, like he was trying to solve a Rubik's cube. Sam could only watch, bafflement increasing.

"Yeah, but… you usually cut it by now," Dean reasoned aloud, eyes all squinty, and Sam found himself running a hand through it self-consciously. He tucked it behind his ear once more and Dean's glare only got more glare-y. "It's long-long. Longer than you ever let it get before. Not yet, anyway."

Sam's eyes widened at the *'not yet '* bit. That was new information.

"I don't know, you kept talking about how long my hair was," he replied with a shrug, shifting in his seat, "so I just kept letting it grow."

His shoulders brushed the bottom of his hair with that shrug and Dean's gaze hyper-fixated on it. See, that. That was what he was talking about. It shouldn't be doing that yet.

"At first it was to annoy you more than anything," the younger Winchester admitted with a grin and a shake of his head that just accented the brown mop. "But, I don't know. I kinda like it."

Dean's eyes went from slits of suspicion to bulging saucers of disbelief. He sat straight up, startling Sam with the abrupt change, and leveled a finger at his brother warningly. "Oh, hell no. No, no, nope. No. You are not growing your hair out ten years early because of *me.* "

Sam was laughing by then, loud and carefree.

Despite his gruff tone and his adamancy, Dean was smiling too as he insisted, "It's not happening, Sam. I quit. Send me back to the future, man, we're doomed."

The young hunter kept laughing, right up until Dean's grin turned into a very different expression and he was bolting for the bathroom, holding his stomach like it might get left behind in the hustle. Then Sam was still laughing, just for a different, slightly-more-concerned reason.

Sam called after his brother's quickly retreating back, "Told you!"

Chapter Break

Dean left the diner several shades paler (and a couple greener) than was strictly healthy, holding his stomach like he might empty some more of it real soon.

"Seriously. Let's stop at a Quick Clips," he was saying as he pushed the door open. Seeing a woman coming towards the restaurant, Dean stepped to the side, holding it open first for his brother and then for her, as he continued, "You look like an Herbal Essence commercial."

"Thank you?" Sam said, expression incredulous as he came out of the diner, side-stepping out of the woman's way.

Instead of immediately walking through the open door, she eyed Sam's lengthy hair. And then the rest of him. With rosy cheeks and shy grin, she darted inside the diner, leaving a surprised, somewhat baffled Sam in her wake.

Dean cackled, releasing the door and heading into the parking lot. "She's totally picturing it."

"Picturing what?" Sam asked, following with a frown.

"You, in an Herbal Essence commercial."

To help Sam picture it himself, Dean mimed shampooing his hair beneath the spray of a shower, moaning obnoxiously as he did. Sam turned bright red but rolled his eyes, pulled the Impala's keys out of his pockets. As revenge, he made a point to beat Dean to the driver's side.

Chapter Break

"Ohhhh," Dean moaned into a toilet a few hours later, far less theatrically now but no less dramatic. It was their third rest stop so far on the drive back to the bunker. "Kill me now."

"I did warn you," Sam said with a sympathetic chuckle and another head shake. He was leaning against the front of the stall, watching his miserable brother worship his porcelain god.

"Shaddup," Dean managed to get out right before another dry heave wracked his whole upper body. He spat into the bowl beneath him, sweat-soaked forehead pressed to the cold seat. "There isn't anything left in my stomach. What the hell."

Sam shrugged, feeling for his brother but also… he *had* told him so.

"K… think I'm good- nope." Dean leaned back over and emptied yet more nothing into the toilet. Sam sighed sympathetically and pushed off the stall door, fetching some paper towels for the poor man.

"We could stop for the day," he called over his shoulder from one of the sinks, wetting them beneath the tap. "Get a motel. At least you'll be closer to the toilet."

“I’m-” he hiccupped and groaned- “ *fine* , damnit.” Dean collapsed back against the stall wall, confident his stomach was finally done. He hadn’t even eaten half the pancakes; this was total bullshit. “And no, I don’t want to stop. I want to go home, Sam.”

The younger Winchester paused, wringing out the paper towels, before he resumed his journey over to Dean. He handed him the towels, watching his brother closely as the man wiped his mouth and then proceeded to press the rest to his forehead, relishing the cold, wet relief against his hot skin.

Sam had only ever known his older brother as a nomad. The whole of the Winchester family, the only life Sam had ever known before running away to Stanford, always moving from one town to the next, one hunt to the next. To see Dean now, so desperate for a home they’d never known as kids – or, hell, full grown adults – well…. Suddenly it seemed important to get his brother back to the bunker.

“Okay,” Sam said, holding out his hand so he could help Dean to his feet. “Let’s get you home.”

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: If you’re too young to remember the Herbal Essence commercials from the 90’s, do yourself a favor and go find one (sound on, maybe not in public, definitely not at work ;P)

Alrighty, we’re officially back! This chapter was originally much longer, but I decided to cut it in half, get back to our normal length chapters, rather than the double-length chapters. It means not a lot happened in this one, but it *also* means that I will post again next weekend, rather than a two week delay!!

[insert author dancing here]

See you all in a week!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 147: Season 3: Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: And we continue!!! I'm thinking a return to normal length chapters may really help me get a stockpile going as I keep trying to write. I am definitely making progress (I'm trying. I'm trying soooooo hard) but the Muse's fuckery lingers on. Plus, it's nice to post weekly again - I miss the weekly high of sharing the story with y'all

Chapter Warnings: Dean's got an itch (even if he can't partake), Sarge gets a burger because he is best boy, and both Bobby and Sam are asking questions that Dean doesn't want to answer.

There be more sharing of emotions ahead, best you be warned!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 6

It was another three hours, with one more stop to worship a porcelain god, but they arrived at the bunker before sundown. Dean was actually doing pretty good by the time they pulled into the garage. Whether the stomach thing had finally passed, the (reluctant) sleeping in between rest stops had actually helped, or the dopamine fix of being *home* did it, the older Winchester had a straight up pep in his step as he tossed his go bag onto the first table in the library.

Sam, following at a more sedate pace, set his bag next to Dean's and immediately noticed a piece of paper at the other end of the table. He walked over to it as Dean crossed the length of the library like a man on a mission.

"Yo, Bobby! Want some grub?" Dean hollered through the bunker as he headed directly for the kitchen.

"He ran an errand," Sam answered in the silence that followed, following after his brother, paper in hand. By the time he made it to

the kitchen, Dean already had the refrigerator open, head buried halfway inside. Sam lifted the note as proof when the older Winchester glanced over his shoulder, busy pulling a handful of items out of the fridge, including what looked like ground beef. Sam pulled a look immediately. "Really, man? You just stopped throwing up."

"Yeah, this ain't for me," Dean grumbled with clear regret. He set a carton of chicken broth down on the counter with an unhappy thump. "I will be having *this* for dinner. Yay me. You, on the other hand, gotta eat. And so does Bobby. No need for everyone else to be on a liquid diet. That note say when he'll be back?"

"A couple hours. So anytime now, I guess," Sam answered, watching with baffled amusement as Dean pulled an apron over his head and tied it behind his back. His chest now read, *'Mr. Good Lookin' is Cookin'* and Sam raised an eyebrow, lips already upturned. Dean's return look dared him to say something about it. The younger Winchester raised his hands in surrender.

There'd be plenty of time to bring that up later. Maybe in front of Jo. Or Castiel.

"Then he'll need food when he gets home," Dean announced loudly, pointedly ignoring the amusement in his kid brother's eye. He started moving around the kitchen, pulling out a skillet, cutting board, glass mixing bowls, a knife, and a spatula. He moved about with a level of comfort that left Sam agape. The younger Winchester slid into one of the table stools as Dean got to work. He didn't stop what he was doing or actually look at Sam as he asked, "You staying for grub?"

There was an edge to his words, trying hard to stay nonchalant, but Sam could hear the apprehension hidden beneath.

"Yeah," the psychic confirmed immediately and watched as the tension predictably eased out of Dean's shoulders. "I figured I'd stay a couple days, figure out my next move."

Dean nodded, pouring some oil into a skillet and getting the burner going beneath it. He turned to the mixing bowls next, chucking ground beef into one and following it up with a bunch of spices, none of which he measured. Dean didn't catch Sam watching him until well after he'd folded the flavors into the meat, separated the mass into four large balls, and started shaping individual patties.

"What?" he asked defensively, fighting the self-consciousness that clung to him like a real itchy blanket. "So I like to cook. It calms me

down, alright?" Sam nodded supportively, which only made Dean glare harder. "Shut up and appreciate that I'm cooking for you, Bitch."

"By all means," Sam responded with a grin, leaning back and making a grand, sweeping gesture for his brother to carry on. "Cook away, jerk."

Oh, he would.

"Bitch," Dean grumbled as he threw the burgers on the heated skillet, enjoying the sizzle and the smell of grease that filled the kitchen. He moved on, fetching buns from the pantry and digging condiments out of the fridge. "So. Who you gonna see next?"

"What?"

"Your next Psychic Master." Dean raised an eyebrow from over his shoulder, though the look was severely undercut by the apron strap across his neck and the perfect bow tied behind his back. "Who'd you pick?"

"Oh." Understanding crossed Sam's face before it smoothed over and he shrugged noncommittally. "I haven't yet."

"Any top contenders?" Dean effortlessly switched between slicing a tomato and flipping the burgers.

"Uh… yeah, I guess one," Sam answered, posture perking up a little as he started actually thinking about the question. He had a handful of names to pursue, but the closest psychic had come highly recommended. And after the djinn… well, Sam now had a vested interest in staying close. "She was on both Bobby and Missouri's list, so I thought… yeah, probably a good place to start."

"Her name Pamela Barnes?"

Sam sat straight up, eyes wide. "Yeah! How did you–" His eyebrows went up and he leaned in, excitedly, "Wait, did we know her?"

"Oh, we knew her." Dean couldn't help but grin at the excitement in his brother's voice. He started assembling the buns as he said, "You are gonna have a fun time with her."

Sam's eyebrows climbed into his hair and Dean cackled at the mix of surprise, anticipation, and boyish embarrassment turning the tips of

the kid's ears red. Dean decided to take mercy on him as he pulled the patties off the skillet.

"She helped us find Cas after I got dragged outta Hell with no clue who'd done the deed. She's, well… she's something."

He purposefully left it at that: no need to tell his brother that they'd gotten the poor woman's eyes burned out of her skull or later killed. The Pamela that Sam would be meeting *had* been something else and, hopefully, she'd stay that way. Full of life and mischievous joy. Besides, she wouldn't be running into any angels this time.

"Foods up," Dean announced, carrying a plated burger over to where Sammy was seated, another one left at the counter for whenever Bobby got in. Sam accepted the food with eyebrows raised in surprise (it actually looked edible. Not just edible, but *good*) and Dean returned a moment later with his microwaved bowl of chicken broth.

Yay him.

Sam's first bite was followed by a surprised moan and Dean grinned at his baby brother. "Good, right?"

"Holy crap," came Sam's response through a mouth full of food.

Dean just kept right on grinning as he picked up his spoon and willed his boring broth to be as good as he knew his burgers were. He failed, miserably, but that was okay. Seeing Sam enjoy the food he cooked was enough.

As they chatted about Pamela and some of Sam's plans – when he should leave, when he'd be back, and a reminder (several, in fact) for Dean to *call him* – the bunker door opened and closed with its signature clank and clunk. The thumps of Bobby's boots on the metal staircase were preceded by the scrabble of four paws.

"In here!" Dean called out before Bobby went looking for 'em. Sarge found them first, racing into the room with tail wagging furiously. Sam greeted the dog enthusiastically while Dean rolled his eyes and made face after face. Bobby came into the kitchen next, eyebrows raised at the scene. Dean gave him a look (which was returned in equal measure) and asked, "Hungry?"

"Smells good," Bobby answered with a nod even as Dean got up to grab the awaiting burger. "You make enough for Sarge?"

The older Winchester grumbled obscenities as he snagged Bobby's plate off the counter. He had, of course: an extra patty with no seasoning or salt, because it turned out he was a god damn sucker for *anyone* enjoying his food (including a mangy mutt) and sodium was apparently bad for dogs.

God damn *sucker* .

Dean served up Bobby's burger first, glaring at the man even as he went back to the counter and dug out a small bowl. The dog pranced up and down like a friggin' bunny and circled around himself several times as Dean grabbed the spare patty and started breaking the meat up into the bowl.

"Hold your horses, ya filthy animal," he muttered to the mutt as he added a scoop of the kibble they kept in the kitchen.

The ear-to-ear grins on both Bobby and Sam's faces – way too fond and way too pleased with themselves – had Dean resuming his grumbled obscenities as he set the bowl down. Sarge circled two more times, tail going so fast his butt was trying to outpace his front. But as Dean signaled the dog, the shepherd sat (tail still going a mile a minute) and waited for his release command.

"Alright, eat your heart out, you mutt," Dean muttered. The dog dug in with gusto.

The older Winchester shook his head, appalled as much with himself as he was with the animal, and went back to his seat at the table. He glared at his family, still grinning away, and dug into his soup with bitter vigor.

"You know, *my* bunker didn't come with a dog," he grumbled, slurping his broth as obnoxiously and loudly as he could.

"Well, our bunker does," Sam said with both tone and posture that could only be described as *perky* .

"What your brother said," Bobby groused his agreement around a mouth full of delicious burger. His boy was a damn good cook, as he'd had the privilege of discovering over the past several weeks.

Dean should be making fun of the both of them, or at least grumbling some more, but he was so damn pleased that they'd called the bunker theirs that he could forgive the inclusion of a furball.

He was still smiling when Bobby, in lieu of telling him he was adorable (which had been a close second choice – don't think he hadn't noticed Sarge's burger sitting aside from the rest, clearly made for the dog), gave his kid a long once-over. Bandaged wrists, circles under his eyes, pallor a couple shades too light, eating *broth* while burgers surrounded him. Once he'd caught Dean's eye – the kid's smile regrettably fading – Bobby offered a solemn nod and said, "You look like crap."

"Gee, thanks." Dean glared at his surrogate father as surely as he glared down at his soup, which really wasn't at all appetizing, despite his best attempts at pretending.

"It was a djinn," Sam announced without being asked. The older Winchester shot him a glare that, if looks alone could kill, would have made him an only child.

Bobby swore viciously and the man from the future flinched in turn. "Damnit, Dean. You god damn idjit!"

"I know, okay? I already got the lecture," Dean bit back defensively, shoulders up just like his hackles. He was tired of hearing this, and they'd been *right* , alright? Wasn't telling Sam that enough?

When his brother raised a challenging eyebrow – apparently he hadn't been lectured *enough*, in Sam's opinion – Dean snapped, "I gave it to myself when I woke up hanging from the ceiling being drained of all my blood, alright? Next time, I'll call Sam."

The silence that followed should have made him feel good. The shaded looks that fell over his family should have too. But it only made him feel worse and Dean once again stared into his soup.

"You alright?" Bobby's voice was softer but no less gruff. The silent *'son'* tacked onto the end of that sentence was not all that silent to either Winchester.

"Yeah," Dean answered immediately, then, almost as immediately, followed it with a completely unapproved, unintentional, and entirely too truthful, "No, not really."

Once it registered that he had, indeed, blurted that out to his family, Dean was about as horrified from the admission as they were surprised by it. He opened his mouth to hastily deny the words, only for nothing to come out. His brain was spinning but his thoughts were utterly empty, a contradiction that made him want to punch

something. Slowly, Dean closed his mouth.

Hesitantly but unable to stop himself, Dean looked over his shoulder at the kitchen counter. Cas had made him coffee there just yesterday. At least, he'd thought she had. He'd experienced, even if it hadn't actually happened. A shiver slithered its way from the back of his neck to the base of his spine. He could taste it on his tongue. Black, no room for cream or sugar. He could feel her skin beneath his hand as he helped her pour. Could see the smile on her lips.

Taste those lips against his.

Dean quickly looked away, head down, and tried to think of anything else. Like the fact that he'd just told his family he was absolutely not okay.

That did it. Instead of very nearly hyperventilating over a djinn dream, he was very nearly hyperventilating over that.

He could lie. He could tell Sam and Bobby that he was fine, make up an excuse for why he'd said he wasn't. But they'd both know it and he hated the look they always gave him when they knew. Knew, but didn't call him on it. It looked too much like disappointment.

"No," Dean repeated as he scrubbed a hand through his short hair. The truth sucked – every damn time – but there was also something to be said for that whole 'truth sets you free' crap. With a frustrated sigh, he raised his eyes to meet theirs. "No, I'm not alright. But I will be."

And that was the truth. He'd get over it; he always did.

The friggin' way that Sam's eyes lit up, watery with pride, made Dean's jaw clench (even if it did something entirely different to his stomach – something squirmy that he wouldn't be examining anytime soon). Bobby, on the other hand, gave a firm, manly nod that the hunter appreciated so much more than Princess Samantha's Anime Sparkle Eyes of Hope (no matter if that squirmy thing in his stomach came with a voice that whispered, *'you like it and you know it,'* which he would also not be examining anytime soon).

"So," Bobby started with a raised eyebrow and thinned lips, like he knew what he was about to ask wouldn't go over well, but he was damn well gonna ask it anyway. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Hell no," Dean answered immediately. This time there was no

second guessing his response.

Bobby nodded in complete understanding. Then shrugged a shoulder and said, “Yeah… you gonna anyway?”

Dean groaned and dropped his head again, tugging at his hair and wishing the ground would just open up and swallow him whole. “You know, my bunker didn’t come with the touchy feelies, either.”

“Well, ours does,” Bobby parroted Sam’s earlier words before the younger Winchester could repeat them with a predictably smug grin. Sam perked up once again, looking so damn pleased with himself and their surrogate dad that Dean’s stomach started doing the squirmy thing again.

He ignored it and scowled instead. The stupid thing just kept right on squiggling. He spent a good couple minutes trying to ignore its existence before sighing in defeat. God damn feelings. “Don’t even know where to start.”

“What was the wish?”

Just like that, all the good feelings were gone and all the moisture in his mouth dried up like a desert creek in the hottest month of the year. Dean swallowed past it. Took him a couple of tries, but he managed. He could do this. He’d volunteered for this, damnit. “I, uh… dreamed the Apocalypse was nixed. For sure, I mean.”

Sam’s eyes instantly turned puppy-dog-hopeful-sad-pittying-sympathetic-and-all-around-teeth-grindingly-annoying, so Dean maintained a probably-too-intense gaze on Bobby instead. He, like a *normal* person, pursed his lips in contemplation, then nodded in acceptance, like Dean’s admission was nothing special, made perfect sense, and didn’t need to be handheld, coddled, or supported to death.

“You know,” Sam started, voice already taking on that overly cautious, hedging tone that never failed to set Dean on edge anytime it was aimed his way, “if we have no way of knowing whether we stopped it or not, maybe you could, I don’t know… try to relax? There’s nothing we can do until…”

“Until it’s too late?” Dean added helpfully and not at all through a clenched jaw and a look that told Sam to shut up before he really ticked him off.

He looked at Bobby, begging him with a glare to take over before Sam

stepped in it. Unfortunately, for all Sam's smarts, that was one battle he never seemed willing to lose. For all of Bobby's, it was one battle the old hunter rarely got in the middle of.

Sam shrugged in response, eyes all earnest, and Dean kind of wanted to punch him.

(Which was usually, and most annoyingly, when Sam had a point.)

"What if it's never too late?" He reasoned. Beside the younger Winchester, Bobby glanced at him sidelong, like he wasn't sure this was the best approach, even if it was the right subject. "What if we really did stop it, are you going to stay this uptight and stressed for a whole year before you start letting yourself believe maybe it's safe?"

Dean leveled a glare at his brother that skipped right past suggesting a topic change and now demanded it. Bobby's skeptic glance switched brothers, now cautioning Dean, who steamrolled right past.

"You're the psychic, you tell me. Should I feel safe, Sammy?"

Dean knew it was over the line even as he said it. And if he hadn't, Bobby hanging his head with a huff and adjusting his ball cap like a disappointed dad at a kid's little league game, would have definitely clued him in. As well as the flash of hurt that crossed Sam's whole face before it smoothed out completely, eyes turning glacial.

"Low blow, dick," Sam bit out with an incredible amount of patience given the audible anger behind the words.

Dean knew it for a fact. He'd said it to start a fight, to end the conversation (which he had *willingly* entered, the little voice reminded him). With a frustrated sigh the older Winchester buried his head in his hand, elbow on the table, and scrubbed angrily at his scalp again. Why the hell was he so bad at this?

Sarge let out a distressed whine, nudging Bobby's thigh and looking between him and the two brothers. The old hunter offered a comforting pat to the dog's head, but Sarge backed away, whining once more and turning towards the kitchen door.

"We were *just* outside, you mongrel," Bobby complained, even as he climbed to his feet.

"I can take him out," Sam offered, probably looking for an escape just as much as Dean (but only if it meant helping rather than lashing out.

Because that was Sam Winchester in a nutshell, wasn't it?)

"Nah," Bobby shook his head, already on his feet with Sarge pacing anxiously by the open door. "You two figure this out-" he made a sweeping gesture at… well, both of them. "I'm hitting the hay soon anyway."

With that, the older hunter ambled out of the kitchen, Sarge taking off ahead of him. Sam turned back to Dean, who still had his head buried in his hand, pointedly ignoring everything around him. After a lengthy silence (which was giving him hives), Dean stood abruptly and gathered the empty plates and half-eaten bowl of broth, taking them over to the sink.

The clanking of dishware and running water was the only sound for several more moments before Dean made an aggravated noise and shut off the water with an angry jab at the knob. He spun, hands on his hips – which was quite a pose given that he was still wearing the apron – and anger in his eyes. Aimed at himself, this time, not Sammy.

"I'm sorry," he said, kind of forcefully for an apology. "It's just been a long-"

A long what: night? Try *days* . He had been in that dream – that other world, that had felt real, if only because he'd *wanted* it to be real – for *days* .

"I'm just tired, man," he finished lamely, dropping his arms at his sides. "And I miss-"

The man from the future cut himself off as soon as he realized where that admission was headed and instead turned back to the sink. He resumed doing dishes, soaping up the plates without running the water again, absolutely hiding from his brother.

He missed Cas. A lot. A stupid amount. Having her around, even if it hadn't been real…

(And a lot more than just *around* , holy shit. He was so not examining that anytime soon. As far as Dean was concerned, that part *hadn't happened* . That part had just been a normal dream – an *actual* dream – and a weird ass one at that. It hadn't been part of the wish. Nothing more to say about it.)

But a world where Cas had been with them, safe and free to do what

she wanted, safe and free to stay with him - them, well…. Dean knew Cas, even a younger version. She had been *happy* to be there, with him in the bunker and then on a case. And damn if that hadn't made Dean miss her all the more.

He didn't get it (and was *not* examining it, thank you very much), but it was starting to feel like an ache. Dean didn't have a damn clue what to do with that.

"Who do you miss?" Sam asked when Dean failed to continue. He was going for nonchalant, but there was too much puppy-dog-victim-voice buried beneath it for Dean not to notice.

The time traveler sighed, setting the now soaped-up dishes back in the sink and staring at the faucet like it had personally attacked him. Like most things that gave him the hives when he thought too hard on 'em, Dean did what he always did: decided not to think about it. He reached forward and turned the water back on.

"Tell me about your Jedi training," he said, equally nonchalant, as he started rinsing plates. Behind him, he heard Sam sigh as well.

"Dean-"

"Leave it, Sammy."

"No, I'm not going to do that," his kid brother announced loudly, easily heard over the running water. "I'm tired of dodging your emotional landmines, alright? Why do you act like you're not allowed to care about her?"

Dean balked, pulling his head back and turning to give Sam an over-acted side eye, like he had no idea what his brother was talking about. "Who?"

Sam's bitchface was the Ultimate variety (requiring no number, for it was *Ultimate*) and Dean knew he wasn't fooling anyone. At least he got bonus points for annoying his little brother into that particular bitchface.

"Castiel, Dean. You act like you're not allowed to have feelings for her-"

"I don't have feelings for her," Dean replied immediately, tone perfectly neutral and not at all freaking out, squeaky, or hysterical. Sam raised an eyebrow and Dean turned back to the sink, practically

hiding his head between his shoulders.

“I’m not talking about *love* , you blockhead,” Sam announced loudly, voice exasperated. Dean heard him stand from the table but didn’t turn to see if his brother was approaching. He really hoped he’d keep his distance. Lord knew he needed it. “She is your *best friend* , Dean. She gave up her whole life and family for you, died for you, and sent you through *time* . Of *course* you have feelings for her!”

Dean faltered, nearly dropping the dish in his hands. He set it down carefully on the counter before casting a furtive glance at Sam, who had resettled against the side of the table closest to the sink, perched on the edge with arms crossed over his chest. Confronting Dean without closing in on him. The older Winchester swallowed roughly and reached for the next dish.

“Emotions do exist outside of romance,” Sam said calmly. “And having them doesn’t make you less of a man.”

“I know that!” Dean erupted, face flushed red as he finally turned to face his brother. “That’s not-”

“Which means,” Sam continued on, right past Dean’s interruption, “that you are *allowed* to have feelings for Castiel. She can mean more to you than everyone else, Dean. You don’t have to hide that like it’s some shameful secret. She’s your best friend; you’re allowed to fucking miss her, dude.”

Dean wished he’d stuck to doing the dishes, back turned to this conversation, ignorant of the imploring (and exasperated) expression on Sammy’s face. The one that said, ‘ *you* can *have this, Dean* ,’ and somehow managed it with a straight face and friggin’ *sincerity* .

The silence stretched, Dean’s jaw torn between clenching tighter than a damn vice and shaking right alongside his trembling bottom lip, which he hid by sucking it between his teeth and clamping down hard. The hunter tried to keep a glare locked on his brother, but his stupid eyes kept looking away.

“You done?” he finally managed, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the side wall. It was supposed to be snarky and snappy, supposed to show Sam that he didn’t care about this sissy stuff, that he was *fine* , and definitely not moved by it at all. But what came out was meek and cracking and *desperately* hopeful. Dean cleared his throat out of sheer embarrassment. Worse yet, that little voice in his head – the one that had been getting louder and louder ever since he

traveled back in time – whispered, *'maybe it's okay .'*

Dean kind of wanted to break right then and there, but he couldn't because it *wasn't.* It wasn't okay. And it wasn't Sammy's job to pick up the pieces of his broken mess. Since there wasn't anyone else to do it (and no way in hell was Dean up to the task alone), he just wouldn't break. That was all there was to it.

"You done being an emotionally constipated idiot?" Sam countered.

"Rude," Dean responded immediately on rote, but actually noticed that his shoulders relaxed at least half an inch and his gut, which was clenching hard enough to cramp, uncoiled. His hands ended up on his hips before he even realized he was gearing up for a lecture all his own.

Just like that, Sam had broken all the tension when Dean hadn't even known where to start.

Annoyed (and yet incredibly thankful), Dean focused on that: familiar ground. "I was in that djinn dream for *days,* alright? Give a guy a break."

"I could," Sam responded with a light shrug. "I actually want to. But I can't if I don't know what that break is for."

Sam had walked him right into that one. Beautifully, painfully, expertly. Dean wanted to be annoyed, he did, but really, he was just tired. So he stalked back over to the table and sank onto the chair opposite his brother, glaring the entire time. Sam joined him, waiting it out, already secure in his victory.

"Cas was…"

The man from the future sighed, running his hands through his hair in frustration. How did he even start talking about it? Dean took a deep breath and decided plowing ahead, mindless of the path of destruction he'd be leaving in his wake, was the way to go. He'd clean up after or shove it under a convenient rug.

"Cas was there. In the dream."

Sam nodded with complete understanding he didn't deserve to have because he didn't *understand* .

Dean fisted his hands on the metal tabletop and tried to find the

words to make him understand.

“Cas was living with us. In the bunker. She was still an angel, I think, but, uh, she was… you know, making like a human for the most part. And it wasn’t…” He fell off again, struggling and hating every second of it. Dean ran a hand through his hair again to keep his fingers from curling into fists. He tried to find the words for what he needed to say without thinking too hard about what those words actually meant. “It wasn’t as hard for her as, um… last time. She was taking to it.”

His brother nodded again, not commenting – which was driving Dean up a wall he didn’t have a name for – but listening patiently. The older Winchester couldn’t decide if he was grateful or annoyed. Maybe that wall was both.

It wasn’t like Sammy would ever change the subject, even if that’s what Dean desperately needed his brother to do. The silence stretched and the older Winchester got fidgety. At least if Sam wasn’t asking questions, Dean wouldn’t have to figure out any answers, he supposed.

“She was happy,” he found himself, mouth moving while his brain was still panicking. Fan-freaking-tastic. This was why talking it out sucked. Now he was gonna say shit he definitely didn’t need Sam psychoanalyzing with puppy dog eyes and unearned sympathy. “Cas was happy. Or, you know, seemed happy. And I…”

…had been happy, too. *Fuck* . He’d been happy because *she* was happy, and he fucking *missed* that feeling.

Dean dragged a hand down his face, wondering what the ever-loving hell he was getting himself into here. Whatever it was, it was a place he was pretty damn sure he didn’t want to be. Had no right being, if nothing else.

“Look, it was just… a mind-fuck, alright?” he settled on, the words defensive but the tone absolutely exhausted. He wasn’t sure how else to put it and was too damn tired to look for more elegant phrasing. It was the truth. At least most of it. “It was-”

Everything I want her life to be.

“R and R,” was what came out of his mouth as his stomach clenched and his throat tried to swallow glass and his heart was doing something real damn painful in his chest. There was a soft flare alongside it, a gentle brush of that sliver of grace in his chest. If

anything, his heart ached all the more for it.

Sam was looking at him a little funny – maybe because his brother was having a damn heart attack across the table from him while trying to joke away the whole conversation – but the older Winchester shook his head.

"I'm serious," he insisted, trying to make sense of what was going on in his brain. He'd never been great at putting any of that sorta stuff into sensible words. "It was like taking a vacation from all-" he gestured around them. "It was nice. And I, uh… I didn't want to leave."

Sam stiffened at the quiet admission, which he knew had to be as painful as pulling teeth for his brother to admit out loud. The younger Winchester was glad Dean was trying to open up – seriously glad – but taken aback to see his stoic, always-has-to-be-fine, older brother admit that he wanted, even for a second, to give up. But Sam understood, entirely too well. If it had been Jess….

"I don't think I would have been able to," he whispered his own admission, imagining for an all-too-real moment what that would have been like. To believe it was real, to feel that you'd finally gotten something you wanted – so desperately that it was no longer a want so much as a need – and then to have it all pulled out from under you. Worse yet, it wasn't taken away from you; no, it was represented as a lie that you could still have, if you were okay knowing none of it was real.

Having to choose to abandon your own deepest desire…

Sam closed his eyes. Any remorse he had for ending that djinn's life, especially as it had been a particularly gruesome death, evaporated as he realized just what the creature had put his brother through.

He preferred the monsters that just outright tried to kill you. They were somehow simpler. Fairer. Just the circle of life, food on the food chain, predator and prey alike, both trying to survive.

When he opened his eyes again, Dean was staring at him. Sam cleared his throat. "If it had been Jess," he clarified, "I don't think I would have been able to leave."

His brother's green eyes fell to the table and Sam could read shame there, but more so he saw loss and maybe even grief. Like Dean was starting to accept that it was okay to feel he'd lost something these

past few days, as illusory as it may have been.

“I didn’t want to,” the older Winchester added, clearly still uncomfortable sharing. A swell of pride filled Sam as he watched his brother keep at it anyway. “God, I really didn’t. But I knew it was fake and… I had people waiting for me out here.”

“I’m glad you came back,” Sam said just as quietly, reaching out to lay his hand atop his brother’s arm. Dean’s eyes flickered to his for a second before dropping. Sam withdrew, not wanting to push ‘chick flick territory’ any further than he could get away with. Instead, with a smile he added, “Even if the world could be falling to shit.”

It got a laugh out of his brother, which had been the goal.

“But,” Sam continued with a casual one-shoulder shrug. “Since we don’t know that it is, maybe until then…”

Dean’s smile morphed into a good-humored glare. “Chin up?”

“I was going to say why not take some R and R?” Sam said with a chuckle. When Dean’s eyebrows went up, he offered another simple shrug. “I know it won’t be the same, because you’re still worried about Cas, but… you’ve been going nonstop since 2016, Dean. You’re going to burn out if you don’t take some downtime.”

The older Winchester glanced away, familiar guilt clouding his expression once more.

“You’re confident that Cas isn’t in any danger,” Sam added, pushing a little harder now for his brother to hear the truth in his words. “And we’ll figure out how to get Gabriel to release her, okay? We’re not just giving up there. But in the meantime… you’re no good to anyone dead on your feet.”

Or stuck in your own head .

Sam didn’t say it, but Dean heard it. Or maybe that was just that new voice in his head.

The younger Winchester stood, grabbing his cup. “Get some rest, okay? Dinner was great. Thank you for cooking.”

The compliment was given with such genuine appreciation that Dean found himself blushing. Not trusting the lump in his throat or his brain-to-mouth connection, he just nodded as Sam headed out of the

kitchen, leaving his older brother with a lot to think about and a lack of energy for doing the thinking.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Oof, it has been a JOURNEY to get this boy to a point where he can share without cracking a tooth. I mean, he's not doing his teeth any favors, let's not get ahead of ourselves, here, but we are making progress!!! Phew. [insert sweat flick here]

Up Next: Get ready for the chapter where the Muse burst into the room and took over. I even sat there cheering her on, realizing with both terror and delight where she was going with it. Then that delight started to settle and I was left with only terror as it became to clear to me she hadn't just thrown the Destiel blueprints out the window, she'd set them on fucking fire.

Guys. Romance is not my thing. I'm not *good* at it. And she made me REPLAN ALL OF IT. And that's why I was gone for 6 months

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 148: Season 3: Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Alright, here we go. The completely unplanned-for, hard right turn the Muse decided to take without consulting me at all first. (It's not going to seem like a hard right for most of you, I imagine. But it was a hard right for me and my copious blueprints)

Chapter Warnings: The Destiel pairing is the thing taking that turn (que 90% of this audience: FINALLY)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 7

He didn't dream of Cas right away. Not the real one, at least. Not the one currently taking up residence in his chest cavity. No, Dean spent a good two-thirds of his night slipping in and out of nightmares. First came the predictable replay of the djinn dream, only this time Sam grabbed him before he could shoot himself, leaving him stuck in a world where a fake Cas looked at him with so much grief that Dean had jolted awake choking on his sobs.

He almost gave up on sleeping after that. There had to be something in the bunker that needed doing. A case to find, storage rooms to go through or organize. Something.

He'd gotten all the way out of bed when Sam's words – about rest and burnout – came back to him. His kid brother wasn't wrong, much as it pissed him off. He could feel the exhaustion clinging to him, the edges of darkness starting to claw closer, that void of nothingness that used to sit in his soul, waiting to devour him. It wasn't the first time. Hell, not even close. Dean knew that oncoming feeling well. Knew where it led.

A spiral he'd never fully crawled back out of.

With a frustrated sigh, he sank back down onto his not-quite-memory-foam mattress and buried his head in his hands. He couldn't avoid sleep forever, no matter how hard he tried. And he'd tried aplenty in his lifetime. The dreams were going to come. Best to tackle them sooner rather than later and get it over with.

Grumbling about the bullshit that was his life and the things he didn't want to be doing – which included *sleeping* right now – and how Sam better be damn proud of him for this (not that he'd ever be telling Sam in the first place) – the hunter laid back down, stiff as a board. Unfortunately, it didn't take more than a handful of minutes to fall back under.

That new voice in his head (which sounded a lot like Sam right now) said, ' *Of course, your body needed it.*' Dean said, *'Bite me'* as he drifted fitfully into the waiting darkness.

The second dream left Dean rigidly upright, searching frantically for a weapon and tearing one off his wall of show pieces. He held it, trembling, against his own temple, waiting for reality and the djinn dream to separate into two distinguishable existences. It took time – way longer than he was comfortable with – as he sat alone in his room in the bunker, waiting for someone to knock at the door and tell him to put the gun down.

The knock never came and, after five excruciating minutes, Dean lowered the weapon and sagged back into the twisted, sweat-soaked mess of blankets and pillows.

Okay, fuck tackling things sooner rather than later.

Dean hauled himself up and out of bed, ended up in the kitchen making himself a glass of chocolate milk of all things (a solution he'd stumbled his way into when Ben had been having bad dreams and didn't want to go back to sleep), and grabbed a random book from the library. He'd learned the hard way that phones and laptops - internet access, in other words - were a no-go after bad dreams. They did *not* help.

The hunter took his little consolations and forced himself to go back to his room.

It wasn't exactly a calming place to be, given that the most recent memories of it included making out with his best-friend-slash-angel on

that same damn bed, but Dean wasn't a coward.

Or maybe he was, since the real reason he was back in his room was less about facing the aftermath of a djinn dream head-on, and more about hiding the fact that he wasn't sleeping from Sam, who might wander into the library at any time. He'd want to *talk* about it and Dean had had enough of that for one evening.

He settled back on the mattress, pointedly ignoring all sensory input, and opened the book. He sipped his chocolate milk for another fifteen minutes, mindlessly reading about mermaids of all things, until he was out of beverage and nodding off, book falling to his chest.

He didn't remember falling asleep. Dozing, maybe. Resting his incredibly tired, dry, and itchy eyes. But Dean jerked back awake as the mattress dipped beside him. His hand was already reaching for the knife he usually kept under his pillow (not currently there, he remembered, after his last frantic search for a weapon), but he froze when he met a pair of familiar, beautiful blue eyes.

The right color blue.

"Hello, Dean."

The man from the future swallowed roughly as Cas sat down on the bed next to him, hair wind-ruffled as always, tie askew, trench coat splayed on either side of him. His eyes were sad, but only in that way that Dean knew was meant for him. Cas was sad for him. The angel offered a small smile that crinkled the corner of his eyes.

"Cas," the hunter breathed out, completely unsure what came next. He glanced around the room – his room, the room he'd fallen asleep in – but couldn't make himself relax. "This… is a dream, right?"

"Yes," Chest Cas nodded, his hands folded in his lap, which Dean marked as odd. Like Cas was keeping to himself.

A flare of panic – guilt, shame, horror, appalment, the whole gambit – rushed through him, taking Dean's breath away.

"I'm sorry," he blurted, realizing only now that Cas had *been* in that djinn dream. That part had been real. The angel sitting next to him on the bed had walked in on him making out with a younger version of himself on that very same mattress in a *fantasy-granting* wish dream.

His chest was tightening up, lungs screaming for air he couldn't seem

to get, shoulders aching as they hunched forward, as though he could fold in on himself and disappear entirely.

Cas only tilted his head and Dean kind of wanted to start crying.

“What are you apologizing for?”

He looked away, unable to hold that piercing gaze any longer. When Cas said no more, eyes ever patiently locked on the human, waiting him out in the silence, Dean caved and grumbled, “Come on, you gonna make me say it?”

“Yes.”

Dean’s eyes darted to the angel, a little taken aback by the directness. His surprise only served to remind him just how accustomed he was to Cas giving him what he wanted. Or at least not putting up much of an argument.

“Because,” his angel continued, catching Dean’s gaze and holding it with the intensity of a physical force, “what you think you need to apologize for is rarely what I would like you to apologize for.”

Blinking, Dean shook his head a little as his brain tried to process that and pretty much failed. “Uh… what?”

The expression that overtook Cas’s face was overly fond, and Dean found himself blushing without knowing why. He looked away, then back, reminding himself he wasn’t a coward. He could do this.

“The things you blame yourself for, Dean, are very rarely the things I blame you for,” Cas explained, patient and understanding. It made some sense, Dean thought. Their friendship had always been rife with misunderstandings that he’d never really understood. Cas’s blue eyes were soft as he asked, “So, what are you apologizing for?”

“For… for, you know…”

The look Cas gave him, while still endlessly patient, was pointed. Yeah, yeah, okay, fair. Dean swallowed roughly and reminded himself he *could do this* . He *needed* to do this.

“I pictured you pregnant!” he burst out, the words tumbling from his mouth uncontrollably. Apparently, he only came with two levels of communication: absolutely zero and turned up to eleven. “In a *wish fantasy,* Cas! I made you pregnant in a djinn dream! That’s so- it’s

so- *skeevy!* ”

The angel tilted his head again, well aware that particular word was Dean’s go-to adjective for witches, his least favorite of all the creatures they hunted.

“Why?”

Dean did a double take, unable to understand how Cas *couldn’t* understand. “What do you mean, *why*?”

The pointed look returned and Dean felt like the world around him wasn’t functioning properly. Up was down, left was right, Cas didn’t seem to realize how friggin’ creepy it was that he’d pictured the angel pregnant by his goddamn hand, a choice she’d had zero say in and which Castiel had been forced to witness.

He’d say this was some sort of messed up dream, only…

“I don’t see how it’s as appalling as you’re describing,” Cas explained calmly – too calmly, in Dean’s opinion – and the hunter could only stare, flabbergasted.

“Cas, I- I… *used* you.”

The angel's damn customary head tilt was too friggin' *cute* for a conversation this devastating and that was that. This wasn’t a real dream, Dean decided. He wasn’t having a real conversation with Chest Cas. This was a dream all his own, where his best friend didn’t have a problem with what he’d done. What he’d *wanted.* There was no way Cas could actually be okay with… He couldn’t be this… this…

Stupid, is what Dean wanted to say, but there was that little voice in his head again, replacing that word with a much more understanding, far less possible one.

Accepting.

“I don’t feel used,” Cas confided, eyes open and honest. Dean couldn’t really argue with that, could he? How did you tell someone they were wrong about how they felt?

(You didn’t. Even Dean knew that much.)

“I have always known what you’ve wanted, Dean,” Cas said softly, openly, and Dean felt his shoulders draw back, his fingers curl into

claws that dug into his thighs, his every muscle tense as unbidden fear flooded his system. “Your greatest desire.”

He could feel the heat as it enveloped his whole face, from anger or embarrassment or loathing, who knew. What did it matter? His arms trembled under the pressure he was exerting against his legs, sitting there with a dysfunctional brain that could not put two words together. Those words would form a sentence that wasn’t true. It couldn’t be. He wouldn’t use his best friend like that. Would never use anyone like that, but especially not Cas.

Dean clenched his teeth to keep from voicing the denials. He didn’t deserve denial; Cas had *seen* him. He’d been caught red-handed, there was no getting out of this, no refuting what he was, what he’d *wanted.*

“A family,” Cas said, voice gravely and accepting and so familiar it ached.

Green eyes flickered to blue, confusion and incomprehension as obvious in that wide gaze as it was in his open mouth and dropped jaw. Dean couldn’t breathe. His chest stuttered as he tried to pull air in, because that’s- that wasn’t-

Fuck.

Fuck!

He wasn’t wrong.

Yes, Dean wanted a family. He wanted that so, so *damn* badly. But he was never going to get it. And hoping for it… *dreaming* about it when he knew he couldn’t have one… and now *talking* about it with Cas, like it was perfectly fucking acceptable, like it was even possible…

Fuck!

Dean couldn’t hold the angel’s gaze, cutting his own away to focus on his hands, instead. They were shaking. Full on *shaking* against his thighs. He turned the claws into fists and pressed as hard as he could against his jeans, hoping to cure the shakes he couldn’t explain and didn’t like.

“I am honored to be included in that family, Dean,” Cas resumed speaking softly and so, so friggin’ earnestly. “To be a part of that dream, of what you want more than anything else.” He looked away as well, eyes distant but there was a small, tentative smile on his face.

Although it was sad, it was also full of… something. Something Dean wasn't sure he could put a word to, even if he suspected what that word was. "I would have liked very much to have a family with you."

The man from the future startled at his best friend – *his* angel – and stared at him without realizing that his shaking had stopped. The tension that held his body rigid – like a string ready to snap – melted away, so effortlessly that he didn't even notice its absence.

Cas turned and smiled at him, eyes watery, and Dean couldn't have looked away if he'd tried (and he did try, because there was a voice – different from the new, terrifyingly supportive one; no, this one was old hat, a familiar friend named *panic* – screaming in his ear to run, go, go, go, get the fuck outta there). But he didn't. He stared, and stared, and stared, those perfect blue eyes drawing him into an embrace that was anything but physical, and Dean didn't want to pull away.

(*Home*.)

"Could- could that even happen?" he found himself asking before the words actually caught up with his brain and he slammed his mouth shut hard enough for an audible clack to fill the space between them.

Cas's smile turned far more amused, eyes practically twinkling with laughter. Dean could feel his cheeks heating up furiously and he kind of wanted to punch himself in his own face.

"It could," the angel replied, once more startling Dean with an answer he hadn't been expecting. "Were Castiel to fall, as I did, it might be possible."

The hunter clenched his jaw and looked away, feeling like an asshole for even *thinking* it, let alone allowing the small spark of possibility to turn into something that seemed dangerously close to hope.

'It's not for you,' that poisonous voice hissed. It was a lot louder than the new one, drowning out the soft, *'But what if it could be…'* whispered into a void of guilt and self-loathing.

"I would never ask for that," Dean said aloud, as much for himself as for his angel. He turned to face Cas, eyes imploring, desperate to be believed. "I would *never* ask you – even a different you– to fall for m-to- to fall."

The smile he got in response was so damn soft, so damn *loving,* that

Dean couldn't pretend anymore. He knew exactly what that emotion was as it stared him in the face (declaring, *'Have a friggin' baby with me, Dean Winchester.'*)

"I know, Dean," Cas confirmed, voice still soft and gentle and accepting; everything Dean wanted so, so very much but was so, so very sure he did not deserve. "For what it's worth, if things come to pass as they did for me… I doubt you'd have to ask."

Dean turned away for the hundredth time – bright red at his best friend all but confirming he would have had his baby if he could have (and *Jesus* Christ, how had they gotten *here* of all places?) – but for just a second, a *microsecond*, Dean let himself picture it. Let himself have the fantasy, knowing it was never going to be anything more than that. No matter what Chest Cas thought could happen.

Forget whether or not he deserved it, whether or not he *could* have it. Dean would never raise a child in a world where he was a hunter. He'd tried once, to get out of the life and have that family, and he'd ended up bringing Hell straight to their front door.

Never again.

Dean hung his head with a mirthless chuckle, then looked at the angel again, vision blurry through unshed tears.

"So… what were you hoping I'd apologize for?" he asked wryly, wiping at his eyes. Castiel didn't comment as Dean sniffed back all those pesky feelings and offered a smile that was at least two-thirds real.

Cas thought about it for a moment, eyes off towards the ceiling, before they returned to the hunter, full of mirth and painful honesty. "Perhaps for being sexist?"

"*What*?" Dean practically squeaked, choking on all the emotions he'd been busy swallowing down.

The angel smiled, but his words were serious as he continued, "Your ability to accept Castiel because she occupies a female vessel was… frustrating to witness after I had fought so hard and so long for the same acceptance."

"You had it." The words were formed before Dean had a moment to think them through. But he knew he didn't need to think about it; that was probably the whole point. "I know I was utter crap at

showing it, but you had it. Have it. Almost from day one, buddy."

The cynical look Cas gave him was like a punch to the gut. One he deserved, Dean reckoned. He started thinking of ways to prove it, because he wasn't lying. He *had* been crap at showing it, but Cas had had his trust almost from the damn beginning. Way sooner than he should have, given who he was and what he did for a living.

When had he decided Cas was on their side? When had he started thinking of the angel as a friend? It had been way earlier than had ever made sense. Something Dean was pretty sure Sam (among others) had spent years trying to tell him. That the two of them had just clicked in a way no one else understood. The sort of trust that had taken everyone else months - sometimes years - to develop with the angel.

Meanwhile, Dean had just… known.

"First time I met Uriel," the man from the future recalled, gaze split between his best friend and another time. "That's when I knew. You were special, Cas. You were…." Dean's breath caught as the words flitted through his brain and he realized how right – how *true* – they were. "You were meant to be with us. With- with me. That's why I can be so comfortable with her, Cas. She's *you*. I know you. You're-"

Mine. Dean swallowed back the thought and the spark of panic - and shame - it brought with it. Too possessive. Too… Shit, he didn't even know.

"With me," he amended, but the words were unsatisfying. They lacked something. Something permanent, something that… *meant* something.

Struggling, Dean finally looked back at Cas only to find the angel staring at him. His eyes were wide, but guarded and Dean knew, immediately, that he had put that wariness there. Through years of unintentionally pulling his friend in closer only to shove him away when he got too close. When Dean got scared.

The man from the future cleared his throat, blushing bright red as he realized what he needed to do. What he *had* to do. If he wanted to fix this – truly fix it – he had to go all the way.

Commitment. God, the word gave him hives. But it's what had been missing, wasn't it? So he couldn't half-ass it and leave the angel wondering, like he had so many times before, where he stood.

“Maybe it’s not, uh… not in the way that, uh, you would have maybe, um, preferred,” he stumbled and stuttered, clearing his throat several more times, cheeks on fire like some poor, pimpled teenager talking about sex for the first time. He pushed through, though, because that new little voice was nudging and prodding and pushing. “I knew, after meeting just one of your dick brothers, that you belonged with us. With humans.”

Dean licked his lips, that new voice getting louder and more insistent, because he knew he was beating around the bush. Knew he wasn’t saying what he needed to say. What dozens – probably hundreds – of allies and enemies had been saying all along.

“But, um… mostly with me.”

He met that watery, blue gaze filled with so much hope and pain and love and hurt that Dean felt his own eyes well up, too. With half a laugh – because it was that or cry – the man from the future smiled at his best friend. *His* angel.

“I knew it. I knew it the whole damn time, Cas. I just didn’t know how to…” He swore, laughing and wiping at his eyes again as the tears spilled over, because apparently it hadn’t been one or the other, after all. Today was a day for both, it seemed. “Acknowledging it was… fucking *terrifying,* man. Still is.”

He shook his head, but didn’t look away from Cas. Not this time. 'Maybe,' that little voice whispered into a void that seemed just a little less endless, ‘*not ever again*.’

Which was a damn scary thought, tinged around the edges with something equally terrifying but somehow way less scary, so Dean didn’t look at it too deeply.

“Needing you, like that, when I could so easily lose you. When-” his throat closed up as he realized- “when I *did* lose you. More than once.” Talking got downright painful at the realization that he still *could*. He looked at his best friend, heart on his damn sleeve, and confessed, “Cas, I still don’t know how to handle that.”

The angel just smiled, sad and sweet and heartfelt. “No one does, Dean. Love – familial, romantic, or platonic – is terrifying.”

The hunter laughed, aware of the irony. “Yeah, well… you all seem to have a better handle on it than me.”

Cas shrugged good-naturedly. "Some things take longer for others."

'There's still time, Dean.'

The man from the future straightened at the distant memory, the words that had hung over him for two whole years now, echoing from a cemetery years away. Once again, his angel was telling him he had time. Was *giving* him time. Time to fix things. To change the road he was on.

Dean was frozen to his core, both in fear and realization that once more (always), his angel was right. He could keep running from this… this *thing* between them, but he would be running from it forever. Until he decided to stop running. Until he *chose* it.

He locked his gaze on Castiel and felt instantly lighter (more hopeful, more optimistic) and simultaneously horrified (god, he could fuck this all up so, *so* much worse than he had the first time). "You think… you think she'll, um…"

"Yes." Cas was still smiling, so gentle, so friggin' *supportive* and happy in that secret little way he never seemed to want to share. Like he wasn't quite allowed, despite everything.

Dean just sat there, blushing, fiddling with the rough texture of his jeans, knowing there was something else he had to say. It couldn't be left unsaid. Not anymore. No more running.

"Hey Cas…?"

"Yes, Dean?"

He swallowed, fisting and unfisting his hands, and then met the angel's piercing eyes. *'Man up, Winchester.'*

"I know I never said it," he started, wetting his lips nervously. "And it's not, I mean… I don't know if you even want to hear it."

The smile on the angel's face shifted into something affectionately nostalgic. "I always want to hear what you have to say, Dean."

The hunter swore softly, still blushing bright red. "Not making this any easier on me, bud."

Cas's grin turned downright impish. He was enjoying himself entirely too much and Dean knew it. Worse, he was positive Cas *wanted* him

to know it, too. "If there is one thing I've learned during my time with you, love is not meant to be easy."

Dean practically choked on nothing and everything and then nothing once more. But, somehow, it was what he needed to hear. That Cas already knew what he was going to say, now all he had to do was say it. Because Sam had been right all along; Cas was more important to him than anyone else. Dean had spent too long fighting it, denying himself – and Cas by proxy – everything they could have been (*family*, that voice whispered again and Dean shoved down the flicker of want that came with it). His denial, his fear, had only hurt them both. For years.

Well, no more. Enough was enough.

Dean straightened up, looked his friend in the eye, and said, "I do. Love you, I mean."

Cas's smile dipped into the range of genuine happiness. Fond and heartfelt and *there*.

"I know."

The man from the future choked again, this time coughing on the spit he'd managed to somehow swallow the wrong way. "Did- Did you just *Han Solo me?!"*

After everything it took to say it – to say those words – and Cas just casually quoted Star Wars like it was nothing.

…And… well… maybe it was the best damn response Dean could have ever gotten. It did exactly what the older Winchester needed it to do: made it not a big deal.

Cas just smiled slyly, once more impish and mirthful and Dean found himself laughing, long and loud.

He loved Castiel. He really, really did. Maybe it still wasn't the way the angel loved him, not completely, but it was no less true. Dean let out another startled laugh, this one a little breathless, at what he'd just said aloud. What he'd just realized.

He *loved* Cas.

Still grinning, all he could manage was a stunned, "Holy shit."

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Cool, cool, cool. So, who just managed a love confession/15x18 fixit that wasn't REMOTELY in the blueprints?!

Muse: *raises hand* That would be me.

No, you put your hand down! You're the one that came in, set the Blueprints Room on fire, and STROLLED BACK OUT AGAIN.

Muse: …that's what I said. Me, I did it. I get all the credit here.

head-desk

Destiel: So, I bet for some people this seems like a totally normal progression for the pairing. And it is. It really is. It's just NOT WHAT I HAD PLANNED. Dean was going to be in denial until he practically shot himself in the foot. But then the Muse came along and was like "Nope! He's done with that. Been in that river long enough, time for a quick towel off and then a marathon chase after a certain angel, who may not be in a river, but is definitely wandering a desert called Obliviousness. You're okay with all that, right?"

I'm kidding, of course. She never asks me if I'm okay with anything -_-

And it's the right call. It makes so much more sense - and is far more poignant - to have Dean be the one chasing after Cas this time. "Tables Turned" is practically a tagline for this fic. But it WASN'T. IN. THE PLANS. GUYS. The EIGHT YEARS worth of PLANNING.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Cas Pregnancy: Fair warning that there are no plans for a Cas pregnancy in this fic. While it was important for Dean to realize that he wants a family and that family could be with Cas, I am not planning on that route. It worked well for the Djinn dream, but seeing as Jimmy-Cas is back by the end of this season, the

djinn dream was just a dream, no foreshadowing here. (There's also some moral complications about Cas getting pregnant in an occupied vessel that I'm not sure I want to get into…. Although I bet Angela would be down because she ships these two harder than I do 😁)

Up next: Cue the self-identity crisis and corresponding panic we've all been waiting for 😁

I hope you all enjoyed that chapter! I want to say it was worth the stress. I'm betting it was worth the stress. Y'all let me know, though. I'd love to hear from you :)

And yes, I know a majority of you probably wanted a kiss. ForestPelt was like "How about a hug? Just a hug!" and I was so scandalized: "WHOA, SLOW DOWN! What would Jane Austen say, you heathen!?!"

We'll get there. I promise, I will get us there!

….in another million words.

(Oh, also, HAPPY ONE MILLION WORDS!!! Can y'all believe you've read about 10 novels' length just to get to this point?!?)

(Cuz I can't believe I wrote 10 novels worth just to get to this point 🤦😁)

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 149: Season 3: Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: We're back! Sorry for the lack of chapter last weekend - that was totally my bad. I space-cased it big time.

Comments : Thank you everyone so much who left a comment last chapter! There was a lot of smiling and cackling as I read through them. I'm hoping to get some replies out this week

Chapter Warnings: Dean's good, he's real good, until he's not, and then he's bad, but then he's cooking!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 8

Dean woke feeling good. Real good. He opened his eyes to the bunker ceiling and drew in a long, measured breath before sitting up, practically vibrating with some kind of energy.

"Holy shit."

He felt amazing. Best mood he'd been in, in... Damn he didn't even know how long.

"I know."

Dean's eyes widened at Cas's voice, flitting through his head. The dream crashed down on him like a tidal wave. He'd confessed to Cas last night. Or, well, okay, maybe not confessed; that would be a lot. Or girly. Or...something.

But he had told the angel that he loved him.

"Holy shit," Dean breathed out, waiting for the panic. The barrage of denial, the judgement and disappointment, the *fear* of being… something he wasn't.

It never came.

"Holy shit."

Dean sat up, floating on a damn cloud. Which, of course, was when the panic finally hit. Reality – that they were in the middle of an apocalypse, that they didn't have time for this, that he was terrible at relationships and love and all the mushy stuff, that he'd just told an angel of the damn lord that he *loved* him – wrapped its ugly claws around him and brought Dean crashing back to earth. The sudden fear – that he couldn't take this back, he was only gonna mess it up, he never should have said anything in the first place – engulfed him one self-critical, disappointed accusation at a time.

"Holy shit," he breathed out again for entirely different reasons. His heart rate skyrocketed and he found himself rubbing at his chest, wondering if he was having a damn heart attack

He'd *confessed* to Cas. An actual friggin' *love confession* . That wasn't something you could just take back. That was... that was...

Monumentally panic-inducing.

Dean grabbed at his shirt, lungs working double-time to catch up to his racing heart. There wasn't enough air in the room.

He'd told Cas that he loved him. And now, the next time he saw the angel...

"It's fine," Dean ground out as the panic threatened to overwhelm him. He hunched over, fisting his shirt above his pounding heart and pressing his knuckles into his sternum harshly. "Sammy says it's fine, so it's fine."

Of course, that wasn't exactly what Sam had said. He'd said it was okay for Cas to be more important to Dean than anyone else. Which, yeah, not, uh, not *no* . Not after last night. But the kid hadn't exactly been raising the damn pride flag up the Men of Letter's flagstaff, either.

(They actually had one, too, those patriotic old farts. It was just behind the building, at the edge of the meadow, not too far from the garage entrance. Rusted, abandoned old thing.)

"I know."

Dean took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes, trying to picture Cas's expression from the dream. Fond. Affectionate. *Loving* .

"It's no big deal," Dean breathed out, trying to channel his inner Han Solo. That's what Cas's words had meant. That's what he'd said. "It's no big deal."

Which went a long way in keeping the panic from bubbling over completely, but it was doing jack shit for the buzz vibrating throughout his whole body. Dean had excess energy that would put a coke addict to shame, paired alongside a panic attack that hovered just around the corner, held at bay by two little words. That was not a good combination for lying around in bed. In the dark. In silence.

Dean rolled off the mattress and onto his feet, jittery and rubbing at his chest aggressively.

"Distraction. I need a distraction," he muttered, looking around the room. No way in hell was he going back to sleep. He was – in no uncertain terms – not ready to see Cas again. It was one thing to tell the angel he loved him spontaneously in dreamland. It was another entirely to embrace the truth in the real world, where there were so, so many more consequences and complications.

'Maybe you can take it back,' a petrified voice whispered in his ear. *'Pretend it never happened.'*

The very thought summoned every crushed, heart-broken, rejected expression Cas had ever made, more than half of which had been by Dean's own hand. It was a slideshow of misery and heartbreak across the backs of his eyelids. His chest pinched and pulled and *ached,* like he was having a damn heart attack. Dean's breath started to pick back up for a brand new reason.

He was not doing that. He was… just not. Not no way, not no how. Cas didn't deserve that, that cowardice shit, and Dean... Dean was better than that. He could be better than that. He *had* to be.

"Okay," the man from the future whispered, trying to slow his breathing. He nodded emphatically and held up his hand, thumb up to the sky despite the empty room around him. "Okay, no take-backs. Got it."

Which once again left him a jittery, vibrating mess with no outlet and a boatload of commitment he was in no way ready for.

"I need..." Dean looked around again, bunching his hands into fists and cracking his knuckles anxiously. He needed movement. He needed something to occupy his mind that wasn't *Cas Cas Cas* . Dean straightened up, the metaphorical lightbulb over his head turning on. "I need to cook something."

Chapter Break

Bobby ambled into the bunker kitchen around five thirty, Sarge by his side, and drew up short at the sight of Dean already inside, and busy at that. There were dishes piled high in the sink, flour and empty egg cartons on the island counter, and sizzling coming from multiple pans atop the stove. There was a plate loaded with pancakes already on the table, a kitchen towel draped over them to keep 'em warm. In the middle of all that was Dean, managing all of it like he was a contestant on Hell's Kitchen.

Bobby's eyebrows went up.

"We expecting company?" he asked as he shuffled over to the coffee pot, already filled with a fresh brew. Sarge headed directly for the table edge, sniffing curiously at the smell of fresh pancakes he couldn't quite reach and was too well behaved to try.

Dean fumbled the pancake he was in the middle of flipping – just barely managing to keep it from tumbling to the floor – as he startled and tried to spin towards the old hunter all at once.

"What?" he squeaked. Bobby's brow rose higher, and only partially at the apron the man was wearing, proclaiming him *Mr. Good Looking* . Dean cleared his throat and tried again in a voice much closer to normal, "No, just, uh, just us."

Now that he was closer to the stove, Bobby eyed what had to be a full pound of bacon, half of it already cooked, enough batter for at least another dozen pancakes, and – from the smell of it – something baking in the oven. He gave his boy a look and Dean shuffled nervously, avoiding eye contact by focusing back on the food.

"Felt like cooking," he said a little grouchily, shrugging defensively.

"Uh-huh," was all the old hunter said, filling a mug and leaning back

against the counter as Dean kept cooking. Sarge, either bored or content with his investigation of the food he wasn't getting, trotted over to his side. Bobby gave him an idle pat to the head as he started sniffing along the island counter instead. "Rough night?"

It was telling just how much Dean didn't look at him even after he scraped the pan loudly against the stove's grate and winced at the noise.

"Uh… no, not, uh, not really," he offered after a long pause, though he didn't exactly sound sure of himself.

Bobby kept his raised eyebrow to himself this time, not entirely sure what to make of that. Not a nightmare that had him up at ass-o'clock in the morning cooking up a feast, then. But if not a bad night… what had the kid so jumpy?

"Anything you wanna talk about?" Bobby asked, though he wasn't sure it was the right move. There was an undiscussed code of conduct between them, one that didn't always benefit from even well-intended poking. So he kept his voice gruff about it when he offered.

"God no," Dean replied quickly and with a whole breadth of confidence, horror, and just a smidgen of guilt. "Thanks, Bobby, but, uh… yeah, just no."

The old hunter shrugged and sipped his caffeine. "No skin off my nose."

Dean nodded, shoulders relaxing as it became clear Bobby wasn't going to push the issue. Sarge had left the island for the stove and now had his muzzle pointed straight up at the smell of bacon. He caught Dean's eye and immediately plopped down on his hind legs, head tilted to the side (in a way Dean was almost positive he'd picked up from Cas), and eyes turned gooey-levels of adorable (in a way Dean was damn certain Sam had taught him). The hunter glanced over to the pile of already cooked pieces, debated for a second, and then snapped off a section and 'accidentally' dropped it in Sarge's direction. The Shepherd snatched the bite mid-air, then sat back on his haunches to patiently wait for another.

"Mutt," Dean muttered under his breath, but there was a hint of amusement that betrayed him.

"Mongrel," Bobby countered, aimed entirely at the human and not the dog. Dean sent him an offended glare, scoffing at the insinuation, but

Bobby sent the look right back, taking another swig from his mug. "You're teaching him bad habits."

Bobby grabbed a plate from the counter where Dean had stacked three and rooted around a drawer for utensils, sipping coffee all the while. If the kid was going to cook up a feast to ignore whatever was going on in his head, far be it from Bobby to stop him. Might as well help him out, far as the old man saw it. The food wasn't gonna eat itself.

"What's the point of having a dog if you can't give him table scraps?" Dean grumbled even as he reached across the stove for the syrup and handed it to Bobby before he made his way to the table. "Isn't that the whole point?"

"Gonna make him fat," Bobby grumped, taking a seat. He wasn't going to fight the kid on it, though. Sarge was a damn good dog and a senior one at that; he deserved the occasional treat. Even the artery clogging ones.

"Please. Sammy'll take him on morning runs. Just wait, he'll be like a kid at Christmas when the thought occurs to him." Dean brought over the plate of cooked bacon, setting it down next to Bobby's elbow. "Problem solved."

The old hunter eyed the kid without comment. He wasn't wrong – Sam would probably trip head over heels at the idea. Dean went back to cooking up enough food to feed an army and Bobby sat, nursing his coffee and partaking leisurely in a lightly syrup-ed pancake (he was approaching seniority himself, after all. However, unlike Sarge, no one would be taking him on runs anytime soon to clear up those arteries. Least, not if he could help it.) He watched their newfound chef as he moved confidently about the kitchen, waiting to flip pancakes, pulling off more bacon, crouching down to check whatever it was he had going in the oven. As the minutes passed and the silence stretched (comfortably, or so Bobby thought), he noticed Dean's shoulders tensing, bit by bit, as he got wrapped back up in his own head.

"So…" Bobby let the word drag out along with the silence after it. Just enough for Dean to freeze. Kid might have forgotten he was there, the old hunter figured. Definitely wrapped up in whatever was going on in that brain of his. "You gonna talk to your brother about it?"

"…About what?" Dean tried for nonchalance and missed by a nautical

mile. Bobby just harrumphed and didn't bother keeping it quiet.

"Whatever's got you cooking at the butt crack of dawn, ya idjit."

"Aw, come on, Bobby," Dean groused, shoulders sagging. He hadn't forgotten Bobby was there, he'd just… been distracted by other things. Cas related things. Which he didn't want to talk about, hence the cooking. The man from the future glanced petulantly over his shoulder, "Can't you leave it alone?"

"Sure can," Bobby replied without missing a beat, his utter confidence like a rock against Dean's flimsy paper airplane of denial. "Can you?"

The kid snapped his mouth shut, teeth clacking, and turned back to the stove, his back to the old man.

Dean wanted to yell. He wanted to stomp his feet and throw a temper tantrum. He wanted to be left alone (only no, he really didn't, because clearly, as Bobby had *just* pointed out, alone time left Dean with his thoughts, which he *didn't want to be having* .)

Worst of all, he didn't want to admit Bobby was right. He was going to need Sam for this. His younger brother had this way of looking at things - taking all that jumbled, agonized, chaos that comprised Dean's thoughts - and explain it in a way that made panicking seem unnecessary. He could lay 'em out and everything would seem much more manageable. Sam made things make sense, where all Dean could see was panic.

Cooking hadn't been a distraction so much as a stall tactic, waiting for Sam to make his way to the kitchen. A tactic that clearly wasn't lasting as long as Dean had hoped it would.

"…Screw it," the hunter muttered, throwing down the spatula and pulling off his apron. He flipped the burners to low and marched right past Bobby on his way out the kitchen. "Sammy should be up by now, anyway. It's, what, six o'clock? What's he doing, sleeping in? Gonna wake his lazy ass up."

Bobby just nodded leisurely as the flurry of (panic? Anxiety? Mid-life crisis?) strolled right on past and out the kitchen door. The old hunter handed Sarge another piece of bacon and selected himself a second pancake.

Chapter Break

"Morning, Sunshine!"

Sam shot upright on his completely-adequate-spring-mattress, hunting knife in hand, before he even registered what had woken him. He turned towards the source of light: a rectangle of brightness the approximate size and shape of a door with someone silhouetted in the middle of it. Sammy stared at that figure through a mop of bedhead and sleep-squinty eyes.

"Dean?"

"That would be me. Up and at 'em, Sammy."

Dean strolled into the room, downright chipper, and kicked the frame of his bed twice. The mattress shuddered beneath him. Sam continued to stare through sleepy slits. He felt like he'd slept for days, which might explain the brain fog, though it did not explain his brother.

(Little did, he'd found from years of experience.)

"What time is it?"

"Time to get up!" Dean clapped his hands a couple times, trying to rouse the younger Winchester. "You know what day it is?"

Sam blinked, then tried to think about the question. He didn't have a clue. What day was it? What day had yesterday been? Yesterday… had been a Djinn. No, that had been the day before yesterday. It was too early for this.

Well, not for Sam. Not usually. He didn't know what time it was, but if Dean was waking him up, then it was pretty late, at least for him. He usually enjoyed his early mornings but Dean did not. Dean didn't *do* mornings, period. Which was adding to the confusion.

Had *he* been the one in a Djinn dream? This certainly felt like an alternate universe.

"…Saturday?" he hazarded when his brain shoved the answer at him out of nowhere.

"That's right," the older Winchester confirmed way too cheerfully.

And way too loudly. Little manically, actually. “And you know what we do on Saturdays?”

Sam, still staring in utter confusion, shrugged his shoulders like he was asking a question. Because no, no he did not. He didn’t have a damn clue what Winchesters who had a homebase did on Saturdays. Just like he didn’t have a clue why his brother was waking him up for it.

Chapter Break

Sam stared in utter bewilderment, befuddlement, and even something approaching awe, as he stumbled into the kitchen several paces after his brother. A hurricane had swept through the kitchen. There was enough food to feed at least six people, bowls and dishes strewn about, a pancake still on the stove, and Dean was pulling even more bacon off of another pan.

"What the..?" Sam turned to Bobby for answers, still confused and not completely certain this wasn’t all a dream. But the old man just shrugged and offered a look that said, quite clearly, *'He's your brother.'*

Sarge licked at his fingers and Sam startled at the sudden wetness. He bent down to give the dog some attention, eyes never leaving the scene that was their kitchen. Dean was turning the oven off before crouching down to pull out something in a glass dish that smelled amazing. He set it down on the island with a set of oven mitts (Sam wasn’t aware they owned oven mitts, though they did look rather fifties-esque) and pushed it towards the younger Winchester.

“There, that’s got all your stupid rabbit food in it."

Sam gav a final pat to Sarge and stood, approaching the island. It was a quiche. Some sort of spinach and bell pepper quiche. The confused psychic could only stare, then look up at his brother, who was scraping the abandoned pancake into the trash. Cautiously, as though it might bite, Sam grabbed a fork and stuck it into the quiche, cautiously taking a bite.

“Wow,” came out of his mouth unbidden as he chewed. “This is actually good!”

Dean, making his way over to the table with the last of the bacon, pulled his head back, affronted. “Hey!”

But Sam was already shaking his head and taking another bite. “No, I mean *good* good. Really good.”

Chef-level kind of good, was what Sam was thinking. He’d have ordered that in a nice brunch restaurant and not balked at the unnecessarily high price tag. At least, he would have back in his Stanford life.

A smile overtook Dean’s face until the man was all but beaming. At least, until he realized what his face was doing and started fighting it. With a light flush, Dean cleared his throat and sat back down at the table.

“Well, good as it can be with all that health crap in it,” he amended Sam’s statement. It was clearly a cover for how quietly pleased he was with himself, but Sam didn’t call him on it. Instead he grabbed a plate, loaded it up with a large slice of quiche, and joined his family at the table.

"You want coffee or OJ?" Dean asked a still baffled Sam after he’d sat down.

"Uh...” Sam seemed surprised they had options. “OJ."

"Then grab it out of the fridge, bitch,” the older Winchester replied with a smirk, expecting a bitchface.

Sam wasn’t ready to play along, though. He was still staring at his breakfast, and then Bobby’s and Dean’s, and the other *two dozen* pancakes still waiting to be eaten between them. Something wasn’t adding up, but Sam didn’t have a clue what that was.

His brother had been in a Djinn dream the other day, Sam supposed. Maybe this was some sort of… therapeutic processing?

"Dean...” Sam shook his head, not even sure where to begin. He settled for the first thing that burst out of his mouth, which was less than helpful but very accurate to how he was feeling. “What the hell?"

"What?” the man in question snapped defensively, digging into a pancake. “A grown man can't want a decent breakfast?

"Sure," Sam nodded. "And the other fifteen grown men?"

Dean shrugged at the dig. Okay, he'd cooked a lot of food, sure. But he'd woken up over an hour ago with time to spare.

"So, we'll have leftovers."

"Leftover pancakes," Sam countered flatly.

Dean sent him a look that warned of a fast approaching line. "Just sit down and eat your breakfast. After this, we're going shopping."

There was something in the way he said it that made it very clear to Sam he didn't mean a grocery store or supply run. He meant *shopping.*

Sam screwed his face up. "We're what?"

His brother didn't even blink, finishing off his mug of coffee with a loud smack of his lips. "It's Saturday, Sammy: garage sale day! We got stuff to find."

The younger Winchester just stared, then glanced between Bobby and his brother, to no avail. All he got was a repeat of the same look as before.

'He's your brother.'

"What stuff?" he tried, again feeling like he'd gone to sleep in one universe and woken up in another. One where his brother was a morning person who liked to cook and shop garage sales.

"Stuff," Dean repeated as he stood up, grabbing his mug off the table. "Don't worry about it."

Well, that wasn't an actual option, not for Sam. However, it didn't sound like Dean was going to be any more forthcoming, so the younger Winchester tucked back into his breakfast. Because, apparently, they were going garage sale shopping.

As Dean poured himself another cup of coffee and then started digging through the fridge for something, Sam turned to Bobby. "Have you ever gone to a garage sale?"

"Sure," the older hunter responded with a nod. "You can find all sorts of things cheap. Tools, car parts. Sometimes the whole car. Plus, the occasional occult item."

Sam straightened up, suddenly a lot more interested in the notion. “Really?”

"If you’re lucky,” Bobby confirmed. “Don’t happen often, but I've found a few."

Dean set a glass of OJ in front of Sam, much to the younger Winchester’s surprise.

“Thanks,” he said even as the other man went back to the fridge, looking for something else. Sam wasn’t sure what. They had everything they could possibly need and then some. Still, he took the opportunity to glance at Bobby once more and quietly ask, “Any idea what Dean’s looking for?”

Bobby snorted, fork in hand. “Not a clue.”

Sam watched as Dean shut the fridge door with a jug of milk in hand, uncapped it, and poured a not insignificant amount into his coffee. Sam just stared, and continued to stare as Dean returned the milk to the fridge, then made a stop at the pantry shelves for sugar.

Dean had only ever taken his coffee black. Sam knew this. Everyone knew this. Did Sam know that Dean secretly loved the crappy, overly sweet, flavored creamers found at gas stations? Yes, yes he did. But Dean would never allow himself to have those, except by ‘accident’. Sam thought it was ridiculous but had bowed out of that battle ages ago.

Now he could only stare as Dean grabbed a spoon from a drawer, added two large spoonfuls to his coffee, and sipped away. Involuntarily, Sam’s eyes roamed over the rest of the kitchen, the results of Hurricane Dean sweeping through at six o’clock in the morning.

Returning to his conversation with Bobby, Sam couldn’t help but suggest, “Maybe what’s left of his marbles?"

Bobby snorted again and, having just taken a bite of pancake, did his best not to choke on it. Dean gave him a concerned look as he settled back in his seat, but the old man waved him off. Instead, Bobby glanced side-long at Sam and, not bothering to be quiet about it, said, “Good luck with that.”

Chapter Break

In this alternate universe, Saturdays were for garage sale shopping. Much to Sam's continued bewilderment – half believing Dean had just been pulling his arm or using it as a cover for something else (like hitting up a bar or finding a case or… god, Sam didn't even know what) – they hit up their first sale at seven fifteen in the morning.

"Gotta go early if you want to get the good stuff before it's snatched up," Dean told him with confidence that seemed entirely foreign to the younger Winchester as they pulled up to the curb outside of a yard full of odds and ends.

Sam just stared at him and wondered if it was possible a shapeshifter or skinwalker could have infiltrated the bunker. Did he have silver on him? As his brother climbed out of the car to go shopping, of all things (willingly. At seven in the morning) the younger Winchester patted himself down, checking for silver, even knowing this was definitely his brother.

His brother who wore aprons, cooked feasts when obviously bothered by something, and went garage sale shopping.

Sam shook his head and climbed out of the car.

There was a smattering of furniture, a rack of men's clothes that the younger Winchester wouldn't fit in but Dean perused, and a whole lot of household junk. Sam was actually surprised to see how much *stuff* a normal household had and didn't need.

Not knowing what they were looking for (and not looking for anything for himself, since Sam still didn't know why they were doing this), he watched his older brother haggle for a couple items, including a couch (which he tested rigorously before agreeing on a price). The older Winchester pulled a wad of cash out of his back pocket and parted with a couple bills before heading back over to Sam.

"We are the proud new owners of a couch, Sammy!" he announced with pride, grin spread wide across his face.

Sam raised an eyebrow and tried not to be too judgmental as he asked, "And we need one of those because…?"

The older Winchester just scoffed. “For the Dean Cave, obviously.”

Any and all attempts to remain judgmental were quickly abandoned.

“It’s going to be awesome,” Dean argued against Sam’s *look* as they walked back to the Impala, his smaller finds tucked under one arm. “Just you wait. We’ll get the couch, a TV, mini fridge for beers, microwave for popcorn. Everything a growing man needs for a proper movie night.”

“And how are we getting this couch back to the bunker?” Sam asked, foregoing any questions about the Deave Cave. He was sure he’d be seeing the answers in person soon enough. “I don’t think it’s going to fit in the Impala.”

His brother waved off the sarcasm as he climbed into the driver’s seat. “We’ll come pick it up with Bobby’s truck later. Owner said anytime before two was fine.”

“Okay…. And how are we going to get it *into* the bunker?” the younger Winchester asked dubiously, thinking about staircases and getting a bad feeling.

“Just like last time.” The man from the future offered his brother a hundred-watt grin as he pulled away from the curb. “Carefully.”

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: Despite, like, six thousand things being discussed in this chapter, Dean waking up, having a panic attack, and reassuring himself with, “Sammy says it’s fine, so it’s fine” is my favorite line in this chapter. It’s so adorably Dean Winchester XD

Dean Loves Cooking: I’ve seen this as a growing trend in the fandom and I am all on board. I didn’t know I needed this headcannon until I stumbled on ***Everyone’s a Critic*** by EnglandWouldFall, the Chef!Dean Destiel AU I never knew I needed. I highly recommend; it is chef’s kiss good (pun intended).

Garage Sales: Sooo I have no idea if the boys ever went garage sale shopping, but my inclination was probably not. I picture John taking them to thrift stores and the like, kind of dragged to stores by him as needed for things. For some reason, I can't see John taking them to yard sales for second hand stuff, though, so I went with Sam having never been to one.

Up Next: Dean uses second hand shopping as an excuse to have a conversation with Sammy!

Posting Schedule: I want to maintain weekly posting (when I remember) but I also need to give everyone the heads up that I haven't been writing much at all (the Muse Fuckering lingers on, but I **will** get through it!) So a return to two-week schedule or a posting delay may be up-n-coming. I'll do my best to avoid it! Cheers, Silence

Chapter 150: Season 3: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes:
Welcome to our next installment: Dean tries to talk to Sam without talking to Sam!

(I'm real tired tonight, so the babbling and chatter is gonna be disturbingly absent Nevertheless, ENJOY!)

Chapter Warnings:
The boys continue to fill Baby up with all the accouchements a Dean Cave requires (minus a foosball table, which just wasn't at any of the garage sales. But never fear. Dean's pretty sure Craigslist's a thing in 2007). Sam's getting suspicious that Dean might want to talk and Dean's trying to figure out whose brilliant idea it was to get Sammy up so they could

talk

, cuz it sure wasn't him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 9

They found an old but decent TV at the next stop. It wasn't a flatscreen, which annoyed Dean to no end, but then, those weren't common enough yet to start showing up in yard sales. It also made loading it into the backseat of the Impala way more work than the last time they'd had to do it. But between the two brothers and some mighty fine curse words, they managed to get the television into the car.

It was on their third stop for the morning that he saw it.

It was a print, framed in black plastic and cheap glass, but that hardly mattered to the older Winchester. What mattered was that it was a painting of a scantily clad warrior lady astride a grizzly bear, wielding a sword in a sunbeam of light as she led the charge of several other bears. It wasn't the same as Andy's van painting, but it was still *perfect.*

Dean picked the framed artwork up, inspecting it closer before looking around for the owner. "How much for this?"

"Seriously?" Sam asked as he came up beside him, eyeing the painting dubiously.

"It reminds me of him," Dean answered with a shrug, but the way his eyes were locked on the painting clued Sam in. He looked over it again, something vaguely familiar about it teasing at his brain. Dean, meanwhile, didn't even bother haggling with the owner, who asked for four dollars. He just handed over the cash and went back to staring at his prize.

It was perfect. A little bit of Andy for the Dean Cave. Kid would have loved it.

When Sam finally realized why it was familiar, he let out a startled laugh. "Is *that* what he was trying to paint on that old van?"

Andy's attempt with several cans of spray paint had left a lot to be desired, but Sam remembered (vaguely) the kid's original van and the painting of a Viking woman riding a polar bear into battle. Of course, Andy's attempt at a recreation had looked more like a stick figure with boobs riding a couple white blobs, but it had made him happy regardless.

"Close enough," was Dean's answer as he tucked the painting under one arm. The Dean Cave from his bunker had never had any artwork, per say (Sam would argue Led Zepplin posters didn't count), but this one would.

(Of course, Sam would probably argue this didn't count as 'art' either.)

Chapter Break

After that find, Sam started looking at the items with a little more interest. Dean had already grabbed several things, proclaiming them 'perfect' for his room. Sam wasn't oblivious to the little nudges. Hints to maybe start looking for odds and ends to decorate his own space in the bunker.

The only problem was, Sam didn't feel the need. Outside of his Stanford Years, he'd never had a home to decorate. Given how that stint had ended, the young psychic wasn't as eager about nesting into their new space as Dean. He understood abstractly how much it meant to his brother to have a home, but the bunker didn't represent that for Sam yet. His room wasn't *his* , it was a place he slept for now, like any motel room along the road.

Maybe, with some time, it could become home. Maybe, Sam thought, if they survived the apocalypse, he could let himself have that again.

Watching Dean dig through things, however, occasionally exclaiming a victorious, *'Huzzah!'* with childlike glee, was decent incentive. It was hard not to join in on the hunt, Sam realized, even if Dean was absolutely ridiculous about his finds. His excitement was… perhaps not contagious, but endearing enough to play along.

So the younger Winchester decided to put in the effort, for Dean if for no other reason. He approached the next sale with a different eye. He found a couple things – a small plant that could use some love (he'd have to get some sort of light for it so it didn't die underground – and several books that looked interesting. When he followed Dean up to pay the owner, the look of approval and spark of pride in his eye made the whole thing fairly worth it.

Throughout their shopping, though, (one microwave, a TV, several DVDs, a popcorn bucket, a few posters, and a new monkey suit later), Sam began to notice fractures in his brother's demeanor. He'd caught Dean staring off into space, shoulders and jaw gradually tensing, until the older Winchester would shake himself out of it and double his enthusiasm until it happened again. Sam knew what his brother looked like when he was wrapped up in his own head. Panicking while pretending he wasn't panicking. It was certainly presenting itself differently than Sam was used to (garage sale shopping had never been on the list of distractions before), but he chalked that up to the ten-year experience gap he had with this Dean.

When they climbed back into the car after their final stop, Sam let Dean pull off the curb and get a couple blocks before he asked, “So what’s this really about?”

Beside him, Dean predictably tensed, fingers curling around the Impala’s wheel, but he didn’t immediately deny it. Casually, he went with, “We need the stuff,” but his heart was barely in the brush off and Sam could hear it.

“Sure, for the Dean Cave” he agreed without a hint of sarcasm. Amusement, maybe, but Sam had already accepted their bunker came with a Dean Cave. “It’s even been kind of fun.”

In a bizarre, *Twilight Zone* sort of way. But Sam knew there was more to this trip. Even if Dean hadn’t been acting like a well-disguised wreck that morning, Sam had been expecting some fallout from the djinn dream. His brother had spent days locked in a world that wasn’t real, thinking it was and killing himself when it turned out not to be. No one walked away from something like that in one piece. Which was why he was pretty sure this trip was an excuse to talk.

Dean just didn’t know how to start. Maybe Sam could offer a hand.

“And this morning?” he prompted with amusement. If he kept it light, his emotionally constipated brother might open up. Or at least play along.

Dean’s face took on the grumpy pout of a five-year-old and, defensively, he grumbled, “I like to cook.”

“You’re good at it too,” Sam replied without hesitation. And he was. Damn good. Sam wondered if that was a natural talent his brother had never had the opportunity to explore, or if he’d gotten good after years of practicing in the bunker kitchen.

The lack of pushback threw Dean for a loop and he glanced at Sam in brief surprise. He looked away just as quickly, the bridge of his nose tinged red. He cleared his throat, feeling like he needed to explain himself. “I like- it keeps… it keeps my hands busy. Requires multi-tasking. You know. It’s a good distraction.”

Sam waited a couple beats to see if Dean would segue on his own into why, exactly, he needed that ‘distraction.’ When he didn’t – remaining quiet but tense in the driver’s seat – Sam decided another prod was needed.

“Is this about the djinn?”

Dean tilted his head back and forth, physically hemming and hawing. It was better than Sam had anticipated, although he’d prepared himself for the worst. After a far shorter wait than expected, Dean confessed in a strained but stern tone, “Maybe.”

Now Sam waited. He’d learned during his teenage years that if he over-prodded, Dean would shut down harder. And it was obvious his brother wanted – probably needed – to talk.

“Cas was pregnant.”

Whatever Sam had been expecting – and several of his speculations had certainly been along the lines of Dean’s relationship with the angel – that particular scenario had *not* been on the list. Realizing his jaw was hanging open, Sam quickly closed his mouth and cleared his throat.

“O-Oh. That’s…. good?”

The look Dean sent his way, accompanied by a deadpan head roll and stare, told the younger Winchester that his strangled attempt at nonchalance had not sounded any more convincing to Dean than it had to him.

Despite Sam’s less than smooth reaction, Dean kept talking, though his eyes went back to the road and stayed there. “It was at the end. Once I’d figured it out and the djinn, or his magic, or whatever-” the hunter dismissed the fuckery that was their lives with a frustrated headshake and cleared his throat. “It knew I was gonna end it and, uh… I guess it was trying to convince me to stay.”

“By making…” Sam was still trying to process the previous piece of information. Not the fact that Castiel had been pregnant: that was fairly simple. But what seeing it, maybe believing it was real, would have done to his brother. How it could be contributing to his mental state now. And exactly where this conversation might be headed so Sam could be prepared. Damn. He needed to start with the basics before he could process any of the rest of it. “So… you two were….?”

Dean grit his teeth. “Yes, Sam. Now can we focus on the part where I *impregnated* my best friend in a friggin’ wish fantasy?”

Sam winced, but pushed on. Full steam ahead, as it were.

“Okay, um, *yes* , we can skip over the part where you were in a relationship with Castiel,” he started, emphasizing that no, he was not going to force Dean to talk about the bit he was clearly not ready to process yet himself. But Sam couldn’t help but point out the hypocrisy of such a request. “And instead focus on the physical result of that relationship. Whatever part of it you wanna talk about, man.”

How, exactly, he was supposed to help Dean emotionally process having a kid with Cas without acknowledging the *with* Cas part…. Sam was good at talking Dean through things, but even he wasn’t *that* good.

“ *Sam* .”

Those were very, very gritted teeth now. The younger Winchester relented, but not without a shrug that his brother would probably classify as a bitchface all its own. “Do you want kids?”

Dean pulled his head back, face scrunching up while simultaneously turning red with indignation and horror. “Wanting kids is not the same as knocking Cas up, Sam! I imagined her- and in a *fantasy* -! That- That is a very different thing! That is- it’s *skeevy* !”

Sam wrinkled his nose, confusion written across his face. “Okay…. Why?”

“She’s not human, Sam,” his brother countered, head whipping between the road and the passenger seat in disbelief. What the younger Winchester didn’t know was that Dean couldn’t understand how he was the only one finding this unacceptable. What the hell was wrong with Cas and his brother that they didn’t think he was the scum of the earth just *imagining* it? Let alone *wanting* -

Dean’s grip turned white-knuckled and he had to force himself to breathe out and release the tension in his fingers. Calmly as he was able (which wasn’t very much at all), he tried to explain. “She wouldn't know what she was getting herself into.”

Sam just huffed, shaking his head minutely. He got the vague sense he was missing something, but he didn’t chase after it. Dean had already brought up enough to last them the rest of the drive.

“I think you’re taking this too literally.”

Dean glanced at him, then the road again, confusion evident in his eyes and the scrunch of his nose. “What?”

“It’s not about you having impregnated Cas – and yes, when you put it that way, it’s disturbing, I see it – but that tactic…. Dean, it wasn’t about the, you know, *act* of making a kid so much as the offer of something you wanted.”

Dean swallowed roughly, fingers curling tight around the wheel once more. “A family.”

It hurt to hear his brother – someone to whom *family* was everything – speak with the dread of someone who knew they’d never get it. Resigned acceptance of something he could never have. But that was a whole separate conversation for another day, so Sam let that one go too.

“I saw the way you looked at Ben in that Baku Dream, Dean,” the younger Winchester said softly, gaze back in a dreamscape and the kid who’d hugged Dean around the waist and smiled up at him. Sam had known, instantly, what he’d been looking at that day. “He may not have been yours biologically, but he was your kid, and you loved that. The djinn was trying to draw you back in by offering a world where you could have that family again.”

And keep it this time.

“Yeah,” Dean grunted, grip on the wheel now punishingly tight. “Just replace that white picket fence with a military grade bunker.”

Sam huffed again, amused. “Hey, you already have the dog.”

“No. No dog,” the older Winchester barked immediately, but he couldn’t hide the quirk of his lips or the hint of humor in the glare he sent Sammy’s way. “My white picket fence does not include furballs or mutts. *My* Barbie Dreamhouse comes with-”

“A fridge filled with endless beer?”

Dean opened his mouth to tell his sarcastic little brother, ‘ *Damn straight* ,’ only for the words to stick in his throat.

Because that wasn’t what had come to mind. Unbidden, the memories of picking Ben up from soccer practice flitted by. Fixing Lisa’s old car so it didn’t sound like death on wheels every time she turned it on. Sitting side by side on the couch, watching a movie while Ben sprawled on the floor, tossing popcorn into his mouth (with more on the floor than made it to his mouth).

His breath hitched and Dean closed his mouth as his traitorous brain tried to put Cas in Lisa's place. The man from the future immediately baulked, trying to dispel the half-formed idea. And yet. Hadn't he and Cas done just that in the dream? Sure, it hadn't been a couch but a library and a pair of chairs that were not nearly comfortable enough to sit in for nine straight hours. But they'd watched movies together all day long, and Dean had loved every minute of it.

Just like he always had when he and Cas shared a movie night in the bunker.

Shit.

Sam stared at his brother, the man convulsively swallowing like his throat had forgotten how to do it, knuckles white on Baby's wheel, eyes locked on the windshield like he was trying to break it in half with his mind. It hurt, seeing his tough older brother so torn up.

"That place really messed you up."

Dean snorted. ' *Tip of the iceberg, Sammy.* '

He tried to push aside all the white noise his brain was busy supplying: images of Cas curled up on a couch, waiting for Dean to join him, of the two of them in the Impala, arguing about mixtapes and which pre-millennial band was better. Ben grinning up at him, arms around his waist, eyes a damn mirror to his own when he'd been that age. Cas, with that soft little baby bump and the promise of another chance.

"I don't want kids," the older Winchester asserted firmly, clearing his throat and banishing those thoughts. All thoughts. "Not if I'm hunting."

Sam closed his eyes – a brief and mournful acknowledgement of the horrors of their own childhoods – before nodding. Of course. How could he not understand that? "Yeah. Yeah, I get that. But… otherwise?"

"Otherwise what, Sammy?" Dean snapped, glancing his way with more incredulity. "I'm never getting out of this life. I tried, and it just followed me. That's… that's why it was a *wish* ."

His voice broke and Sam wished there was something he could do to change it all.

“I’m sorry,” he offered, earnest and heartbroken for his brother. He sank into his seat, thoughts on Jess and the life he he’d thought he’d get to have, only to be pulled back in to the endless hunt. That life had put her in harm’s way; he’d almost gotten her killed just by virtue of who he was. Sam knew too well what it was to want something and know you couldn’t have it. He stared out the window, gaze on a future he didn’t know if either of them would get. “Maybe after. After we stop the apocalypse and-”

“Don’t.” Dean was shaking his head, swallowing back the emotion that threatened to boil over. Sam recognized the boundary. Dean wasn’t ready to talk about the possibility. Wasn’t capable of that kind of hope. “Just don’t, Sam. That’s not gonna- It’s not- it’s not what this is about.”

‘This’ being the reason Sam had been woken up and dragged yard sale shopping, he figured. Whatever this was that Dean needed to talk about. So he waited a beat for his brother to continue and, when he didn’t, the younger Winchester prodded once more, albeit gently. “What is?”

It was like watching the answer get physically pulled from the hunter’s body as he fought every inch of it. Sam could trace it, physically rising from Dean’s gut – the man curling in on himself like a bad cramp – then up through a tight chest and tighter shoulders – rising up right along with his response – before he finally released it breathlessly. Like it had taken everything he’d had to let it out.

“…Cas.”

It was almost painful to witness, which was the only excuse Sam had for the stretch of silence before his brain kicked in and he managed a response to the confession that he’d already known was coming all along.

“Ah.”

This time when Dean repeated the head rolling deadpan glare, Sam had no guilt. He offered a less than apologetic shrug. It’s not like Sam hadn’t been expecting this conversation – at some point – pretty much since Dean had set his eyes on Cas and told him he was carrying his grace. In fact, Sam had stopped counting how many times Dean had told him this conversation would not be happening, and he’d only been around the two of them for a year.

He didn’t know how his other self had lasted ten times that without

saying something. Or locking them in a room together.

“So we can talk about the part where you were in a relationship with your best friend now?”

Sam was pretty sure he could hear Dean’s teeth squeaking against one another, his jaw was so tightly clenched.

“Sam, I swear to god-”

“What about it bothers you?” Sam asked genuinely, stashing some of his mirth. He’d had his fun and didn’t want to tease his brother past what he could handle. Otherwise the older Winchester might retreat right back into his emotional shell and it would be another ten years before he’d be willing to come out again.

Dean struggled to answer. Sam could almost see the physical search across his face. So he offered another option.

“Or is it that it doesn’t bother you?”

The way Dean swallowed, eyes locked on the road like it was a lifeline, like he was coming to that very same conclusion, was all the answer Sam needed.

“Okay. So you like Cas,” Sam said, like it was the simplest of things. He offered an encouraging smile, posture relaxed. “That’s cool.”

Dean’s head whipped around, enough so the Impala swerved with him and the hunter was quick to turn back to the road and correct the car. He tried to switch between the windshield and his brother several times after that.

“That’s- that’s *cool* ? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

Sam shrugged his shoulders and his eyebrows in tandem. He wasn’t sure what Dean wanted from him, but it was clearly something other than casual acceptance. Sam wasn’t sure what else there was to offer other than support.

“Should there be more?”

Dean once again looked at him with incredulity. “Yes!”

“Like what?” he asked innocently enough. Without knowing what Dean wanted from this conversation (was Sam supposed to say it was crazy?) he decided to play along, since Dean apparently wasn’t going

to tell him and Sam wasn't a mind reader, despite being psychic.

"Like- like how he's an angel, for one!"

The first thought he had was, *'Okay… and?'* but Sam knew better than to say it aloud. This might not be a hangup for him, but it clearly was for Dean. He'd have to tread carefully. Even if he was fairly certain Dean was busy overthinking all of this.

"You think she won't be interested because she's an angel?" He weighed the thought, supposing it was possible. Sam hadn't chatted much with Castiel about her home or family. He'd snuck in his own curiosities when he could, of course, but getting time alone with the angel was rare (it had not taken long for Sam to realize all talk of Heaven or 'winged dicks' was not wise around Dean). He was aware, at least, that emotions were a tricky topic for the angel; they weren't approved by upper management, and Cas always had a mildly constipated look anytime she was feeling one. From that, Sam could imagine angels probably didn't do romantic or physical entanglements. "Do they not date?"

By that point Dean had pulled off the interstate and was on the familiar back roads heading for the bunker. "No, they don't *date* , Sam. They're *angels* ."

"Okay," Sam considered, nodding along, "so… you're worried it's unrequited, then?"

Dean looked like he wanted to bash his head into the Impala's wheel as he pulled around the abandoned power plant, heading for the entrance to the garage. "I'm not worried about *anything* , because it's not going to happen."

Which was not necessarily new information to Sam. Everything his brother had ever said about relationships – past and future – indicated either passing fancy, pure fantasy, or failed reality, and all in the painful tone of perpetuity. Written in stone, rock and a hard place, it *couldn't* happen.

"…But you want it to."

Dean put the car into park, but his hands stayed wrapped around the steering wheel, the leather squeaking beneath his grip. His breathing was purposefully even, deep and measured.

Bingo.

Sam took a calm breath of his own, knowing it was a pretty big push but hoping it was the push his brother needed. “Dean, you’re allowed to want it.”

The older Winchester swallowed again, like it was the only thing keeping back a tidal wave of emotion he wasn’t ready to handle. He wrung his hands around the wheel twice. “I can’t, Sammy.”

The strain in his voice was obvious. The way he was just barely holding back the panic. Not unlike the earlier conversation, maybe Dean wasn’t ready to have this one yet, either. So, rather than push past what Dean could handle, Sam took a different gamble.

“Okay,” he said, relaxing back into the passenger seat, hand reaching for the door handle and signaling the potential end of the conversation, if Dean wanted that. The older Winchester was clearly surprised by his sudden shift in demeanor, like he’d been expecting Sam to push. But the psychic only offered a reassuring smile. “Then don’t. It was just a dream, Dean. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

With that, he exited the Impala. It took a moment for his brother to scramble after him, clearly confused. Dean braced an elbow on top of the Impala, keys in hand, staring at him across the metal.

“That’s it?” the man from the future asked, both angry and incredulous. “Just… forget all about it? That’s your solution?”

“Yeah, man. It’s that simple, if you want it to be,” Sam confirmed. He opened the back door and started pulling out some of their purchases from that day. “You can’t? Then you can’t. Now come on, we’ve got a Dean Cave to set up.”

With arms full, Sam headed for the door to the bunker. Stunned – that was not remotely how he’d seen this conversation going – it took Dean several minutes to follow after him, grabbing Andy’s poster on his way.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes:

Sam Winchester, Master of Reverse Psychology!

Comments:
Thank you all for coming out of the woodwork these last couple chapters. I keep getting the email notification ping and I'm smiling before I've even read the comment. So really, bottom of my heart, thank you. It's been a rough year so far, but hearing from you, having this story have fans, is helping carry me along through the worst of it.

New Readers:
Welcome!! We had a surge of new readers over the last two chapters, so I just want to say welcome!! Thank you for checking out mah little beastie of a story and making it through a million words to join us! That's a feat unto itself

UPDATE 08/23/2025: Hey guys! I'm so sorry for the two (three) week radio silence. It has been a hectic couple of weeks, so I wasn't able to get the chapter edited to a satisfactory level. I will do my absolute best to post tomorrow night, if I can (I'm currently out of town for a wedding but if I have time tomorrow night I will!) and next weekend if not.

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 151: Season 3: Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A/N's: Welcome back from a totally unplanned, unintentional month-long break! I am SO sorry, everyone! Something about this chapter kept tripping me up, and once I figured out what it was I had so much trouble writing it. I never do well when I have to add after a chapter is finished. I have a tendency to get carried away (which is just how I write), but then I end up writing in a direction that is different from the whole rest of the chapter. Which ends with me paralyzed, wanting to keep both, and either having to work reeeeeal hard to make them line back up, or start editing my edit (which, as you can probably imagine, becomes a vicious spiral reeeeeeeal quick)

But here we are, I finally figured it all out and am happy with the end result. Hope you all enjoy! (enough that it lessens the sting of a month wait 😉)

Chapter Warnings: The boys have a poster to hang and a Dean Cave to set up, Dean's got some more freaking out- I mean *thinking* to do, Sam's got the patience of a saint, and together they're gonna figure out how to romance an angel. (Alone. Dean's gonna romance an angel *alone*, but Sam's definitely playing wingman.)

Translation Heads Up: For those not reading in English, you will shortly encounter the term *Man'd Up*, which is the past tense version of the phrase 'Man Up' or, basically, 'get over it'. It's followed by a gender-neutral version, *'People'd Up'* which is not a common alternative, so I will not be surprised if translators mess that one up. It's not spoilery enough to make y'all wait till the end notes. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 10

“You know,” Sam started as Dean stepped back from the poster, having just leveled it against the wall, “when it comes to your taste in art… this is not what I imagined.”

Dean chuffed, rolling his eyes but he couldn’t help the grin that followed. “Shaddup.”

Andy’s warrior bear queen hung there in all her high fantasy glory. It was the perfect addition to the Dean Cave.

“Although,” the older Winchester added, glancing at Sam with a cocky grin. He raised cupped hands and outlined a curvy silhouette mid-air. “The artist did a great job exaggerating her, uh, assets.”

It was Sam’s turn to roll his eyes and chuckle. He glanced over at Dean, amusement ebbing. Sam’s thoughts turned to their outing and wondered if his brother had done it once before, with his Sam.

“We do this before?” he asked, gesturing with his chin towards the poster.

Dean didn’t say anything for a moment, licking his lips and staring at the hanging art that had never existed in his Dean Cave. “No. Uh. Never had any art in here before.”

Sam turned towards him with a frown, something in his brother’s tone tipping him off that Dean wasn’t just talking about a poster. As he followed Dean’s gaze back to Andy’s painting, Sam visibly startled. No art of a bear-riding queen, no memory of Andy. It had never occurred to him – he’d never thought about the Andy Gallagher from Dean’s timeline. Or a world where the Jedi might never have joined their team. Joined their family.

Swallowing, Sam asked, “We didn’t…?”

The man from the future shook his head, but didn’t put it into words either. It was still a raw wound; it wasn’t ready to be touched.

With a steady breath, Sam turned back to the wall, trying to imagine a world where they’d never known Andy Gallagher. A world where they’d said goodbye to him the same day they met him, and that had been that.

“Dude,” he breathed out on a huff of air. He looked at Dean, eyes watery but a touch of levity to his words as he said, “That sucks.”

The bark of laughter that escaped Dean wasn't exactly mirthful, but it wasn't harsh either. He hung his head for a moment, another chuckle rolling through his shoulders before he nodded. There was water gathering in his eyes too, but he smiled, sad and commiserating. "Yeah. Yeah, we were a couple of idiots. Didn't know what we were missing."

A brother.

The silence stretched between them, tinged with grief but also the remembrance of life. Dean stared at the poster, eyes a thousand miles away, remembering the past year.

"We do now," he continued, tone somber. There was something heartbroken in it, something that sat heavy in Sam's gut. Dean didn't meet his gaze as he continued, "You ever think… maybe it'd be easier if… you know?"

Dean glanced over at him, but the look was fleeting. When Sam shook his head, unclear what he was getting at, Dean looked almost distressed to have to say it out loud. Sam furled his brow and Dean downright squirmed.

"You know," he insisted, beating that bush like it had personally offended him. Sam could only furl that brow further. There was something he was missing here - something more than just Andy - but he didn't know what. Exasperated, Dean blurted out, "Better to have *loved and lost*, than…?"

His eyes widened with sudden understanding and Sam shook his head before Dean even finished the thought.

"No."

Maybe this was about more than just Andy (and given the precise choice of metaphors there, Sam was pretty sure what it was about) but Dean feeling regret or guilt, even for a moment, for bringing Andy into their lives was not an acceptable train of thought, regardless.

"I wouldn't take it back. Any of it," Sam firmly stated, keeping Dean's gaze when the man from the future finally glanced over. "And Andy wouldn't either."

Dean's eyes widened, taken aback by the confidence in that claim, but Sam didn't back down.

"Andy could have left, but he *didn't*. He chose to stay. He chose *us*. He *died* choosing us!" Sam had to bite back the bitter sting of bile at the thought. It soured his stomach and cramped his insides. Andy had died for *him*. Gave him the Persian sleep coin so he'd be protected and told him to run. He'd died trying to keep Sam alive. Hazel eyes locked on green so fiercely that his older brother froze, eyes wide and suspiciously wet. "So don't tell me he'd have chosen anything but *this* series of events."

His brother couldn't keep his gaze and stared at the floor, instead. Dean couldn't help but think of Andy's death as being on him. He'd brought the kid into their lives. And yeah, the Battle Royale had claimed Andy's life last time as well, but this go around had been so… personal. The kid had suffered a hell of a lot more with them than he ever had on his own. Dean couldn't shake the feeling of responsibility for it.

"I wouldn't take it back for anything," Sam repeated, unwavering.

After a beat, Dean relented.

"Yeah," he agreed, but it was quieter. A somber confirmation, laced with guilt but also the beginnings of acceptance. "Yeah, me neither."

Sam cleared his throat, releasing the tension holding the room, and awkwardly said, "I uh, actually meant did we do all this, before. Together, I mean? Go garage sale-ing and set up a Dean Cave?"

The older Winchester didn't immediately respond, brain taking an extra moment to process the question amidst *feelings*. He pushed them away hastily, happy for the distraction. "Uh, yeah. It was your idea, actually."

"Seriously?" Sam laughed, trying to picture a version of himself that suggested they go knick-knack shopping through normal peoples' leftovers. He shook his head, unable to imagine it. "I can't believe how domestic we become."

"I know, right?" Dean cackled, grabbing the TV cord and bending for the outlet. The TV stand wobbled under his arm and he swore, glancing down at the offending, uneven leg. He'd have to find something to shim it. Dean straightened back up and pointed at his brother. "Alright, you get the dvd player hooked up, I'll fix that."

As Sam got started on untangling the cords, Dean left the Cave to fetch a chunk of wood for the uneven stand (and how annoying was

that? Flatscreens could be wall-mounted but nooo, they had to not only lug down a hulking TV but also the stand for it. And it wasn't even level! The past *sucked*.) As he jogged up the steps to the garage, his mutinous thoughts kept turning back to Sam's stupid points about love and loss.

It was stupid because it was right. He wouldn't take back the grief, the sadness and pain, not even the guilt he was feeling. Not if erasing them meant also erasing Andy from their lives. Dean had meant what he'd said, about him and the Sammy from his timeline; they hadn't known what they were missing. Andy Gallagher belonged with them. Should have been with them all along. Nothing, not even grief, should take that away.

Better to have loved and lost… than never to have loved at all.

Which was really, *really* annoying because – like friggin' everything these days – it led him back to Cas. That damn stupid *L* word. One little confession and suddenly it's *everywhere*.

"Sure," Dean drew the word out mockingly, making a face as he started back towards the Cave, a suitable chunk of scrap wood in hand. "'*Just don't think about it,*' he says. '*It's that simple*,' he says. *Bullshit*, Sammy, that's what *I* say."

All he'd done since Sam told him that load of crap was *think about it*, goddamnit. He'd tried *not* thinking about it, but that was somehow worse. It turned out, telling Dean Winchester not to think about his angel was the quickest way to make him think - *endlessly* - about his angel.

Go figure. It was friggin' *annoying* and unfair.

So. Currently, he was busy *not* thinking about Cas, which meant he was totally not thinking about her lips on his or her soft skin beneath his hand. The blue of her eyes, so clear, locked on him, in awe of him (in *love with him*). Each little breath, each stifled exhale and breathy gasp she'd tried to hold in. Next time he'd tell her not to. After all, making noise was a part of the fun.

Next time. Apparently he was now also *not* thinking about a *next time*.

'It was just a dream,' Sam had said. *'It doesn't have to mean anything.'*

Yeah, well, tell his subconscious that. It was apparently making plans

for *next* time. There wasn't going to *be* a next time.

Probably.

Dean faltered to a stop at the top of the stairs, then shook his head and started down the steps.

Yeah, probably. It wasn't likely to happen. Cas wasn't even the Cas he knew, the one he was in l… the one he knew.

Besides, it wasn't like he *wanted* it to happen… did he?

Dean made it another two steps before he once more came to an abrupt stop.

He'd all but told Chest Cas as much, hadn't he? Dean had said he l- He'd told him that he lov- He'd used the L word and, as they'd already cleared up this morning mid-anxiety attack, there were no take-backs with the L word.

Yeah, but telling a sliver of his best friend – the man who had rescued him from Hell, stood by his side for ten years, knew him inside and out – that Dean L-worded him (that he'd *always* L-worded him) was real different than pursuing a younger version. A still-terrifyingly-innocent angel with less than a year of humanity under her belt. Less than a year of *Dean Winchester* under her belt.

God, that version of Cas almost hadn't trusted him in his timeline, almost hadn't picked him over Heaven. They'd barely known each other. Why the hell would *that* angel want anything resembling a relationship with him right now?

"This is ridiculous," Dean growled out as he started down the stairs, stomping his feet and muttering the entire time.

'It's that simple. If you want it to be.'

Ha! That was the biggest piece of bullshit in Sam's mountainous pile of bullshit advice. Had his walking encyclopedia of a brother somehow missed the part where Dean didn't *know* what the fuck he wanted? That was why he'd needed to talk to Sam in the first place!

He was back at the door to the Dean Cave well before he'd figured a single thing out. In fact, he was pretty sure he was more frustrated (translation: confused) than he had been that morning.

He needed to talk to Sam.

"Goddamnit." Dean hesitated at the threshold, teetering on the edge of going in. He could hear Sam inside fighting the cords and occasionally grumbling about it. The man from the future closed his eyes, took in a deep, steadying breath, and Man'd Up.

(*'People'd Up,'* Charlie corrected him in his head. *'Inclusivity is always sexy, Dean."*)

So, he People'd Up and strolled into the Dean Cave like he hadn't just been having an identity crisis. He marched up to a startled Sam, chin up and jaw squared.

"What if I could?"

The kid's raised eyebrows and slightly widened eyes clearly said he wasn't following.

"Have… it," Dean added stiltedly. When Sam remained a little lost, Dean fought off rolling his eyes. For a second, he thought Sam was just playing dumb, making him say it, but the sasquatch of a man did look genuinely confused. Annoyed he had to spell it out, Dean managed to grind out, "With Cas."

Sam's face took on the most cartoonishly perfect 'Oh' expression and Dean's own smoothed out in a deadpan of death. The younger Winchester quickly schooled his features before Dean could retreat any further into his angry turtle shell.

"A family?" he asked, though there was an edge of caution – of guessing – to his tone.

"*No*," Dean snapped back, only to realize it was a pretty harsh reaction to a relatively innocuous question. Sammy was just trying to help. So Dean cleared his throat, tried to remember he *wanted* that help, he'd *asked* for that help, and reiterated, "No. Not as long as I'm hunting."

Which pretty much meant not as long as he was breathing.

Sam nodded, realizing the misstep, and held out his arms in truce. "Right, yeah, okay. So… what you want with Cas is… a relationship?"

The look Dean sent his way suggested he was gonna start throwing

punches if he had to spell it out. But Sam was being cautious for a reason; this conversation wasn't going to last long if they started with misunderstandings. And Dean was pretty damn good at creating those right off the bat.

Given Sam looked and sounded like he was genuinely figuring things out rather than poking the bear, Dean relented and grumbled, "*Yes*, okay?"

"Okay," his brother answered immediately and easily, a half-smile on his face and support all but oozing from every inch of him.

Dean wanted to make a face, but recognized that might be viewed as childish, so he managed to keep his expression mostly blank. Mostly. Sam, on the other hand, wondered why Dean looked… well, constipated.

"So… are we talking hypothetical here?" Sam started, trying to keep his tone light and helpful. That's all he wanted to do, here. He wanted to help Dean through whatever this was (a romantic identity crisis, for certain. Probably a bit of a midlife crisis, given how long he'd felt this way without acknowledging it, and most likely a sexual identity crisis somewhere down the line), then get him to the other side of it all with as few limbs lost as possible. Of both his and Dean's. "If there were no obstacles, whatsoever, and you and Cas were mutually interested in a romantic relationship."

Sam watched Dean squirm at just the words, a vein in his jaw jumping, his foot bouncing against the floor in a classic case of the jitters, and a quick crack of the neck, probably because his shoulders were creeping up towards his ears and Dean was trying to dispel the tension.

"Yeah. Let's, uh, let's go with that." The older Winchester wasn't quite meeting his eye, though he was trying every couple of seconds. "What… then?"

"Then… you get to have a pretty normal relationship." At Dean's immediate look, Sam bobbed his head side to side, "Okay, not *normal*, but… it's just dating, Dean. You spend time with her, enjoy each others' company, discover stuff you like to do together. Maybe you can teach Cas to cook."

The older Winchester looked utterly unimpressed. "And all while saving the world?"

“We were talking hypothetical,” Sam countered, but ultimately shrugged, tucking his hands into his pockets. “But… yeah, Dean. You can have a relationship and save the world. I know multitasking isn’t your strong suit-”

“Ah shaddup.”

Dean turned away from his grinning kid brother and thought about it. What it would be like, to… date Cas, smack dab in the middle of a possibly (probably) impending apocalypse. Their whole lives had been nothing but one impending crisis after another, so really, he was just picturing trying to date Cas during *life*. Movie nights and hunts, getting the angel caught up on pop culture, properly this time. Teaching him- her- *them* what being human was all about.

What if he could have that?

“You…” he cleared his throat, fiddling with the block of wood he was still holding. “You think that could actually work?”

“I do,” Sam answered, earnest and kind and caring as always. “If it isn’t… I’m not sure what we’re saving the world for.”

Dean huffed, finally turning back to the younger Winchester with another look. Sam chuckled in return, a soft smile stretched across his face, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. They stayed somber.

“I’m serious,” he ended up saying with another small shrug. “We both know that if the apocalypse does happen, there is every chance we don’t see the other side.”

Well. Shit. Now Dean was feeling pretty damn somber too. He looked away with a rough swallow.

“If we don’t live, now, like every day could be our last…” When Sam trailed off, Dean glanced over furtively, but his brother wasn’t looking his way. His eyes were on Andy’s poster. Dean swallowed roughly, his heart squeezing violently. Sam turned back with a small shrug, that soft smile still in place. “What are we even doing?”

Green eyes stayed locked on Sam this time. Damnit, the kid had a point. Dean curled his hands into fists, then let them go again.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Can’t really argue with that.”

The silence that stretched between them was almost peaceful. Dean’s

eyes were drawn to Andy's poster several times, leg resuming its former jiggle as his brain just kept going in circles.

"So…?"

Dean rolled his eyes as Sam ended that perfect and preferred silence and sent a glare his way that bordered on bitchy.

"*So*…" Dean faltered, the biting sarcasm disappearing just as abruptly. The man from the future sighed, letting his head fall back as he realized that yup, he was really about to do this. "Yeah. Okay. So, uh… how would it even work?"

Sam gave the question some thought. "Well, for starters, do you think Cas will be interested?"

In the time it took the older Winchester to blink, he turned bright red and quickly – too quickly – looked away. At a slower, more reasonable pace, Sam blinked as well before a grin started spreading across his face. He had to fight it back, pursing his lips and biting down to keep that amusement tucked away.

"Chest Cas thinks she would," Dean muttered, unaware of Sam's amusement, which quickly turned into shock.

"Sorry," Sam started, breath coming in repeated huffs as he tried to wrap his head around what his brother had just confessed. "Chest Cas?"

Dean looked like he'd be perfectly fine with the ground opening up and swallowing him whole. "I… might have told him… uh… everything."

It still took several more seconds for his brain to fully process that before Sam leaned back, straightened up and opened his mouth, only for nothing to come out. Huh. Well, suddenly the cooking storm that morning made a whole lot more sense.

"So, you, uh… in a dream, you told the sliver of Cas…"

"That I l- That I- uh… everything, yeah. I told him everything," Dean struggled to get out, arms crossed over his chest, hunched in on himself like a scolded child. His heel was tapping out quite the rhythm against the ground, knee jiggling with pure anxiety.

Sam pitied him, then, though he'd never tell his brother as much. To

be so stressed just from realizing you were in love. It was a damn tragedy, and Sam had to bite back his own anger, knowing their father was the root cause.

But that wasn't what this conversation was about. Wasn't what it was for. Or who it was for. So Sam took a calming breath and kept on going.

"Well, if Cas thinks it would work, then…" Sam gave a little shrug, at a loss for any better way to phrase it than, "you ask her out, I guess."

There was a brief flash of pure relief across Dean's face – that Sam hadn't pushed, hadn't poked or prodded or tried to get mushy on him – before he was immediately balking, pulling his head back. Green eyes locked on him with incredulity, stress momentarily forgotten.

"She's an *angel,* Sammy."

The younger Winchester pursed his lips again, unsure what exactly that meant. "Okay, how do you ask out an angel, then?"

The look got worse. "You *don't*."

Sam threw his hands out, expression conveying his exasperation, affectionate as it was. "Kind of a nonstarter, Dean. If you want to ask her out but there isn't an angel-specific way to do that, then ask her out like she's human. You keep talking about showing her what humanity is all about."

The man from the future was already opening his mouth to explain, '*No, Sammy, you don't ask out angels, period,'* when his brother's words actually registered and just clicked in his head. He perked up, brain latching onto the idea; he knew how to date humans. He was actually good at that. Maybe not the whole relationship part – he was pretty sure he was mostly terrible at that – but the wooing. He was a damn Don Juan when it came to landing that date or, in his case, a night of fun.

But one-night stands weren't the only thing he excelled at. He just didn't have the life that allowed for much more. Dean knew how to get the girl, though, and – the few times he'd kept at it – it turned out he was pretty damn romantic.

Still terrible at relationships, because he was also a depressed alcoholic and the last time he'd given it a shot, Sammy had been stuck in Hell with no way for Dean to get him out, but… He'd still made the

magic work, even then. Turned on the charm like nobody's business. We're talking a rose petal trail leading right to the candlelit bubble bath. Oh yeah, Dean could romance the heck out of a woman when he wanted to.

"Yeah," he said with a grin, giving Sammy a confident nod. He felt like his feet were back on solid ground for the first time since he'd woken up from that djinn dream. "Yeah, I can do that."

He tried not to panic too badly when his brain supplied the next hurdle: *'Yeah, but can you romance a man?'*

The thought of it alone had Dean freezing up, a cold shiver running down his spine. Fear plowed into him like a bag of bricks to the stomach and it took a few seconds to fight through it. To quiet the voice of John Winchester's disappointment ringing between his ears.

Castiel may be in a female vessel now, but she would be the first to remind Dean that what he saw was not truly *Cas*. And while that angel would also insist she was neither gender, Dean thought of Cas as a guy. He had history with that dude. Almost a decade of slowly and obviously falling for someone he considered a man. Dean knew he couldn't just ignore that part and consider himself lucky the angel was in a female vessel. If he was going to do this, he couldn't halfass it.

The thought was terrifying.

"Great," Sam interrupted, snapping Dean back to the present. The younger Winchester offered an exasperated smile. "Problem solved."

"Y-yeah," Dean managed to get out, clearing his throat. "Yeah, you're a miracle worker."

He offered his brother a half-hearted glare before he leaned over and jammed his shim under the wobbly corner of the TV stand. When he stood back up, pushing on the top, it held steady.

At least he was still capable of fixing the physical shit in his life without help.

Speaking of.

He turned to Sam with a grin one could only identify as smarmy. "Now help me get the couch."

The younger Winchester instantly groaned, bemoaning aloud how he

should have left for Pamela's last night when he had the chance.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns: Okay, with that one out of the way, *hopefully* the next chapter doesn't take another month to edit. I do have to warn y'all that I'm getting low on chapters, though, so another posting delay is currently imminent unless I kick it into gear real soon. The start of Season 3 is draaaaaggggggggging, man. I'm so close to the good stuff, when my writing should speed up, but at the moment I'm glacial 🥶💨

But hang tight while I get through it, because I will get through it! In the meantime, thanks for everyone's patience!

Up Next: Dean takes a biiiiiiig step and figures some stuff out about himself that he probably always knew but was never able to embrace.

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 152: Season 3: Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Okay, so, I've been writing this story for, like, nine years now? And I've been at my current job for five of those. You'd think, somewhere in those last very consistent five years, I'd have managed to put into words that I am a **busy MF** in the Fall and y'all should expect delays. Somehow, this has not made it into a single author's note yet

Anyhoo. Hey guys? I'm a busy mother fucker in the Fall. Every year I tell myself "I won't do that again." "I won't book every single weekend once a show wraps." And every Fall, I do just that. Starting today I will not be home for a single weekend for five straight weeks. I'm writing this in an airport right now
BUT! My partner has officially moved in, my friends moving to London have wrapped all the packing, Disneyland trips, and matching tattoo appointments we made, and crunch is finally over for Zootopia 2 (did I mention the last two weeks have been crazy!?!), so I should have plenty of availability to write once more during the week Which is good, because my stockpile has just one chapter left after this one

Chapter References: Due to my inconsistency with posting, I highly recommend re-reading at least the previous chapter. Preferably re-reading from, like, chapter 6 onward would be best. But that's a lot of reading to catch up on so, if you're unable, here is a bullet point summary (this is legit how it's listed in my blueprint file atm. I've actually been so inconsistent with writing *I* had to go re-read from Chapter 6)

- *Chapter 6* - Drive home from the Djinn encounter / Talk with Sam 0.5
- *Chapter 7* - Chest Cas Dream / Confession
- *Chapter 8* - Freak Out Breakfast Storm / Garage Sale
- *Chapter 9* - Garage Sale continued / Talk with Sam 1.0
- *Chapter 10* - Dean Cave Setup / Talk with Sam 2.0

And now…

- *Chapter 11 - Dinner / Talk with Sam 3.0*

Translation Notes: I'm not sure if "aka" is well known outside of

the US. In case it isn't, it's an acronym for "also known as"

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 11

After several hours of hard work – carrying furniture down stairs that had no business being that narrow – Dean decided a well-deserved dinner was in order. He whipped up a couple of steaks he found in the fridge (courtesy of Bobby, no doubt, since he'd been off fucking with a Djinn for the last several days) . The bunker didn't come with a grill, but the man from the future had gotten fairly good at cooking 'em in a pan and oven. It helped that he'd learned in a timeline where the whole of the internet was in your pocket and Food Blogs were a Thing©.

As Dean got some sides going – despite being served a Michelin Star worthy steak, Samantha would complain if there weren't *vegetables* – he let his mind focus on the task at hand, all other thoughts (aka: impending panic) drifting away. Cooking would keep his mind off that question he hadn't actually answered. That question he didn't know if he *could* answer.

So having dinner to make was a godsend. Sam came in, freshly showered, just as Dean was plating up. Bobby followed a moment later, Sarge at his side. The old hunter grabbed his plate (throwing the unseasoned steak for Sarge right on top, because apparently Dean wasn't just a sucker, he was a *predictable* sucker) and headed back towards the door, grumbling about a case he was helping with and eating in the library to speed things up.

Which was all well and good – Dean liked seeing Bobby at home in the bunker – until he sat down across from Sam and silence reigned between them. It was probably a perfectly normal, not-awkward-at-all silence. For Sammy.

For Dean, there was no more distraction to be had and the thoughts (aka: panic) were real quick to come back. Sam was reading

something on his phone, device in one hand, fork in the other. Dean tried to focus on his meal, in what was totally a comfortable silence (totally). The food was great – Sam had moaned his enjoyment after just one bite – but it was doing little to distract from the silence. It was just so *loud* and *awkward* and *oppressive*.

Or maybe it was the voices in his head: one cruel and critical, the other defensive and angry.

Dean lasted another two minutes, leg getting increasingly jigglier, until he just couldn't ignore them and their panic any longer. "Would that make me… gay?"

Sam looked up with wide eyes, either surprised by the start of a conversation or the topic. There was a piece of steak on his fork, halfway to his mouth.

"Telling Cas I lo- uh… want to ask him out? Her, I mean." Dean elaborated. Well, tried to.

Sam rested his fork back on the plate, realizing this was going to be longer than a yes-or-no conversation. "Not necessarily."

Dean could only stare (rather intensely), hanging on his younger brother's words with a palpable tension running through him. Sam tried not to let that unnerve him. This wasn't exactly easy stuff they were launching into. Especially for Dean.

"Are you physically attracted to her?" Sam asked, then immediately shook his head, holding up a hand to stop Dean from answering. "Nevermind, your IQ drops ten points anytime she enters the room."

"Bite me." Dean immediately growled but there wasn't much heat to it. He knew Sam had a game-winning argument right there, no point denying it. "We get it, move on."

"Well, I mean… Cas is in a female body right now," Sam began cautiously, uncertain what part Dean was getting hung up on but knowing that if he stepped wrongly, his brother might brush the whole thing off.

"Yeah, but she won't-"

Dean stopped himself from saying she wouldn't always be. He didn't actually know that. Angela seemed like a pretty perfect vessel - for Cas, for the Novak family, for Dean's current identity crisis – but the

man from the future couldn't shake the fact that to him, Cas was *male*. He knew the angel wasn't *actually* male (he could already see Sam rolling his eyes and Cas gearing up for another lecture on gender neutrality and the limits of human understanding), but Dean already knew his own truth; he would always think of Cas as a dude. Even if the angel stayed in Angela's body, Dean would still see Cas as a guy just kinda… *borrowing* a chick's body for the moment. His angel currently occupying Ms. Friggin' Hawaii was not an acceptable excuse for Dean to chicken out about this.

All the way, or not at all, he reminded himself.

Clearing his throat, Dean finished his thought with, "*Cas* isn't a woman."

Sam thought about it for a moment then shrugged both mouth and shoulders. "By that logic, she's not a man, either."

Dean glared at the sasquatch, who was fighting him on this harder than he'd fought himself.

His snot-nosed brother finally gave up the runaround and instead said, "Either way, if you see Castiel as male, then you'd be bi at most." When Dean scrunched up his face, Sam mistook dislike for confusion. "Bisexual. Meaning you like-"

"I know what bi means, Sam," he cut in a little sharper than strictly necessary.

It was Sam's turn to glare. It was a light one – more reprimand than actual anger – and served as an efficient reminder that Dean had started this conversation, Sam was just trying to help.

"You like women, don't you? Sexually, I mean. You're attracted to them?"

The older Winchester eyed his brother. "Do you know me?"

"I do, regrettably. If you also liked Cas in a male body-" Sam paused, thought train jumping the tracks as he realized they might have to go deeper into this subject than he'd initially assumed. Dean probably didn't know the difference between being attracted to someone physically versus romantically. Which could very well be where the hangup was. Sam changed directions and asked, "Do you find men attractive?"

Dean very physically hemmed and hawed, mouth kind of wibbling as he thought it over. Or stalled.

"Sexually?" Sam clarified, and Dean turned bright red. It was oddly adorable, like he was talking to a kid about his first physical crush. Sam fought off the chuckle at the thought of being the one to walk his big brother through a sexual discovery. Any discovery, actually. His whole life, it had usually been the other way around. "If it helps, you have to know I don't care, right? Bi, straight, gay, you're still my jerk of a big brother."

"Bitch," Dean answered without missing a beat but it sounded a lot more like, *'Thanks'* to Sam. The older Winchester gathered himself, trying to get his thoughts in order, and reminded himself that this was something he could tell Sam. Sam felt… safe? Dean wasn't sure how to describe it, but Sam was safe.

"I… find men, um, attractive, I guess."

Safe, apparently, did not mean *easy*.

Dean spread his hands on the table, grounding himself on either side of his still full plate. "Like Dr. Sexy, you know? He's… good lookin'. I mean, I've never thought of having *sex* with him– Well, I guess there was that one time-"

Sam immediately shook his head, cutting him off with a waved hand. "I don't need to know the details."

"Oh thank god," was Dean's immediate, breathless response as he sagged onto the table. Sam resisted laughing at his brother's obvious relief.

"Let me ask you a question," Sam said instead, steering their conversation away from the more awkward edges of the topic. "Can you picture yourself with Cas, physically? Male Cas, I mean."

There was a flash of panic in Dean's eyes before he glanced away, gaze flitting side-to-side, thoughts racing. It was a mental marathon, conducted at breakneck speed, from most embarrassingly mundane to some pretty vivid imagery (that came out of *nowhere* and made his jeans unexpectedly tight.)

(He was still blaming Andy for that. Andy was the OG reason he could even picture *that*. Now the kid was sending him friggin' gay porn from heaven.)

All of which was to say: yeah, he could picture himself with Cas physically. He could perfectly picture himself turning tomato red, swallowing – and therefore choking on – his own tongue, and uselessly stuttering, stumbling, and flailing his way right into a hole in the ground which would – thank fuck – swallow him whole and put him out of his misery.

So… nothing he would be discussing with his kid brother, thank you very much.

From Sam's position across the table, it was clear Dean was struggling (though not as badly as the younger Winchester might have guessed.) He tried again, offering the man from the future another out without letting him out of the conversation itself.

"Can you picture yourself with him romantically?"

Dean blinked, baulked, then thought about it, and settled for staring with that strange intensity once more, nearly vibrating with it. Almost defensively, he asked, "What's the difference?"

Sam huffed, shaking his head with fond amusement. He was completely unsurprised to hear that Dean didn't differentiate between the two. "Do you think two people can be in love without having sex?"

Pulling his head back, Dean went back to baulking. "Yeah, of course. Old married couples do exist, you know."

The younger Winchester almost laughed at that, but refrained. The elderly couple above them in their Stanford apartment would have had something to say about Dean's belief on that one, but he didn't want to traumatize his brother. Their conversation would do that enough on its own.

"Could you and Cas?"

Dean stiffened, caught off guard by even the thought of it. That… had not exactly occurred to him. His first impulse was no way, no way he could be celibate. On the other hand… he could picture him and Cas old, sitting in rockers outside the bunker door (since they didn't have a porch), growing new wrinkles or whatever it was old people did together.

Cas wouldn't actually age and Dean probably wouldn't make it past fifty, but he *could* picture it. Like a fantasy, he supposed.

Hell, even if they didn't make it more than five years – if they didn't make it through the apocalypse this time around – Dean could see him and Cas together for however much time they got. Movie nights, hunts, introducing him to new foods (burgers was top of the list), maybe even teach the angel a little about cooking like Sammy had said.

He'd just spent days in a dream that were pretty much just that, hadn't he? So picturing it was damn easy, especially the more comfortable he got with the idea. In fact, the more thought he gave it, the more Dean had to admit that his wild nights – heck, even his tame nights – of sex with a hot and willing stranger were pretty much behind him. He'd spent the better part of the last decade *not* getting much in the way of one-night stands. There'd been a few here and there, but his heart just hadn't been in it like before. Not after Lisa.

But could he go forever without sex? That… it just didn't sound like him. Didn't feel like him, either. These last couple years he'd just been… waiting for someone who felt right. So probably not a stranger, which was why he'd all but given up on one night stands.

But it was *gonna* happen; he'd find the right one eventually. He'd always operated on that notion. He couldn't just *not* have sex for the rest of his life. He'd wither up and die. Wouldn't he?

Sam was once again watching Dean struggle, so he opted to steer his brother in an easier direction. "You may be interested in Cas romantically, more than sexually. That's not to say a sexual relationship couldn't develop-"

Dean looked so uncomfortable in that moment, talking with his brother about his potential sex life with an angel, that Sam barely contained himself. It was comical, in his opinion, given how often he had to listen to his brother's open honesty – too open and way too honest – about previous sexual escapades. Or, well, used to, at least. Sam hadn't failed to notice that this Dean seemed entirely indifferent to picking up women when they hit up a bar. He had to remind himself, sometimes, that this Dean was approaching forty.

And had spent the last ten years falling in love with his best friend. It was funny how everyone else seemed so much less enticing when the one you actually wanted was next to you.

"But back to your question about being gay," Sam redirected, much to his brother's relief. At least until he realized the new topic and tensed

right back up. “Even if you were sexually attracted to Cas, or other men, it would still make you bisexual at most.”

The expression on Dean’s face could only be described as brooding. Like someone trying to come to terms with a conclusion and finding it wholly unsatisfying. As though he felt identifying as bisexual was somewhat more acceptable than being gay, but somehow it didn’t matter much. Probably because Dean had already decided long ago that whatever he was, it wasn’t acceptable.

Sam abruptly switched tactics. “Would you care if I was gay?”

Dean blinked at the sudden question, eyes wide. Without thinking, blurted out, “Are you?”

“Tell me if you’d be okay with it first.”

The older Winchester looked away, dropping his eyes as he considered the question, only to realize he didn’t need to. The answer was instinctual; he could never shun Sam for anything (except, maybe, drinking demon blood, lying to him about it, and picking a demon skank over his own brother. But outside of one very specific scenario, Dean could forgive Sam for just about anything.)

Meeting his brother’s eyes, Dean firmly (but nonchalantly; gotta keep up appearances) answered, “Of course. You can do the nasty with anyone you want. Well, *almost* anyone,” he corrected with a reminding glare. “Just do it behind closed doors.”

“So, it would be okay if I told you I wanted to pursue something with….”

Sam casted around for a man they both knew. He straightened up with internalized, evil-little-brother-glee when he realized he had the perfect one.

“Asa Fox?”

Dean violently choked and, while it was obvious just from his sputtering that he was *not* okay with Sam crushing on the source of his own fanboy admiration, he got through it and managed a very rough nod. He raised his finger and pointed it very seriously in Sam’s direction. “I think he’s way too old for you, so I don’t approve. But *yes*, it would be, uh… okay. Ish. Does it really have to Asa Fox, man?”

Sam couldn't hold back the laugh this time, sitting across from his poor brother as he struggled through a second, unintentional crisis on top of his first. Dean grumbled, knowing Sam had picked Asa specifically.

Asa Fox isn't even Sam's type, he scoffed internally.

Which, huh, meant he could picture a *type* – of the male variety – for his brother. Imagine that. Which, of course, was what his brain was now doing. What kind of guy would Sam go for, if he was gay? The beanstalk liked women who could hold their own, who were strong but not in a physical way. All the women Dean had ever seen with his brother were badasses, but physically appeared… soft. Sweet.

Jess, Maddison, Sarah… Hell, even *Ruby* had been pretty damn doe-eyed and round-faced for a girl with that much assholery underneath. It had all been an act, but Sam had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

What was the (not evil skank) guy version of that?

Gabriel immediately popped to mind. He was a badass wrapped in a tiny teddy bear. Short, kinda soft looking. Terrifying, evil, definitely a little inner skank with all that mischief and assholery.

Naturally, the thought progressed to picturing the two of them on a date (and *more*, thank you very fucking much, *Andy God Damn Gallagher*), which was the exact moment Dean realized what he was doing and violently shoved that mental image into his brain's garbage disposal. Then took what was left and set it on fire.

God no. Just *no*. That was a friggin' terrifying, *terrible* idea. Dean waved his hand as if he could physically chase the thought away, never, *ever* to return.

"So why isn't it okay if you're gay?"

The man from the future startled at the abrupt return to reality. His brother's question was like a backhand to the face. Sam, worked up in his own right, had seemingly missed Dean's entire mental escapade. The older Winchester was pretty sure he had whiplash. There was a worrying buzz in his ears, only getting louder the more he searched, panicky, for a response. A good one, that wouldn't lead Samantha down the path of a righteous lecture on homophobia.

"Uh… I, uh, I didn't say that."

“Oh,” Sam replied in such a pleasant tone that Dean immediately identified it as fake, fake, *fake*. His shoulders started to inch towards his ears, head lowering to meet them on their way up, collapsing into himself like a turtle. “So you’d be okay with someone assuming you’re gay?”

Tense – and fighting against the same ice in his veins he’d felt earlier – Dean tried several times to successfully draw air into his lungs. That creeping fear was back, which he didn’t understand because he *wasn’t* afraid. He wasn’t. He just couldn’t bring himself to answer his brother, to tell Sammy yeah, of course it’d be okay for someone to assume that.

There was nothing wrong with being gay. He knew that.

“I don’t see how it’s okay for me to be gay,” Sam reasoned slowly and Dean felt the tension tightening around him like a noose, “but you’re not allowed.”

He wasn’t sure what actually caused him to snap, but Dean was suddenly angry and on the defensive. His body language reflected it, not that the older Winchester was aware. He tossed his arms out wide, chest puffing up like an alpha male gorilla. “Why do you keep saying that? I’m *allowed* to do stuff, Sammy. I’m a grown ass man, I don’t need you telling me what I can and can’t do.”

“But you do, Dean,” Sam insisted, anger growing as well, though his wasn’t directed at Dean. “Because Dad told you what you could and couldn’t do your *whole* life. Take care of Sammy. Do as you're told, be the good soldier. Act like a man. Only, ‘real men do this, they don’t do that.” Sam locked eyes with his brother, who couldn’t look away. He was a deer in the headlights of Sam’s angry, sympathetic gaze. “It’s so ingrained in you, but it’s not who you are, Dean.”

As the rising tension abruptly ended in a *moment*, Dean scoffed out of habit alone. His skin crawled with emotions he didn’t want to examine, and those good ole defense mechanisms were kicking in. But Sam was having none of it. He raised a finger, pointing it first at the older Winchester and then ticking off the others one by one.

“You hum songs to yourself when you’re nervous. You would *love* musicals if you’d let yourself watch them. I know because the few that you’ve seen get stuck in your head for weeks, and you pretend not to like it, but you don’t try at all to stop singing them. You flirt with everyone, not just women, and you *like* to. You think cowboys

are hot as hell. Case in point, you have a crush on a TV doctor because he wears cowboy boots."

Sam drew back, the amusement that accompanied his list slowly disappearing, replaced by a furled, unhappy brow. "But Dad told you 'real' men don't do any of those things. So even though they're a part of who you are – the parts I think you like most – you don't let yourself believe any of it's real."

Once again, Dean tried to scoff but it came out weak and unconvincing. More of a '*bah humbug*' in the face of truths he couldn't deny. Panic was setting in, but there was a numbness to it this time. Like it was old hat. And his *chest*. His sternum was heating up like a friggin' seat warmer. Dean wondered if he was having a heart attack or something.

Sam turned puppy eyes back onto him, the pity in his face both infuriating and somehow incredibly comforting.

If he wasn't having a heart attack, he was just plain losing it.

"You made yourself coffee this morning the way you actually like it. With ridiculous amounts of sugar and milk. But Dad drank it black, so you drink it black," Sam sagged on top of his stool, losing steam in a way that Dean felt responsible for. "Do you even like black coffee, Dean?"

The older Winchester could only shrug, unable to form words with a brain that was currently melting and didn't seem capable of lying or brushing things off anymore. Not no. But not yes, either? Dean thought back to that morning. He'd wanted it, wanted that hit of cream and sweetness, so he'd let himself have it during one of his rare highs, realizing he'd confessed to Cas, so he could have whatever the fuck he wanted.

Well, shit. That was Sam's whole point, wasn't it?

"When I say you're allowed to do something, I'm not giving you permission, Dean." Sam spread his arms wide, a gesture that begged his brother to hear him. "I'm reminding you that you don't need *anyone's* permission to just be you."

Dean struggled under the weight of the moment – and it was most definitely a *moment*. Not one between him and Sam, as per the usual (though yes, he was pretty sure that was also happening), but the panic-inducing, organ-crushing, soul-gripping kind of moment that

came with self realization.

Ugh, he'd never been very good with those.

"So…" Dean started slowly, licking his lips nervously as his brain screamed *run* and the rest of him – but mostly his chest, which was on frigign' *fire* – told him to man up. *People* up (and oh, boy, if only Charlie was hearing this conversation. She'd have *words* for him. Supportive words, of course, but also the verbal equivalent to a smack on the head). "What I'm hearing is… it's okay if I'm gay."

Across the table, Sam's head fell back and he closed his eyes. All that effort, all that pent up anger at their father and how he'd raised them… it all drained away. He was left with the same old obnoxious brother, busy poking the bear that was Sam Winchester trying to care (and, maybe, trying to raise the emotional maturity of his family – even just the tiniest bit – while he was at it). With a sigh that was *way* too amused given his own childhood trauma, Sam opened his eyes and shook his head.

"Yup, same old Dean."

The man from the future stuttered for a minute, realizing there was more to that statement than just the usual. His cheeks heated up and Dean ducked his head, more than just a little uncertain about that assessment but also feeling… supported? So incredibly supported it was giving him hives, and he wasn't sure if he even *minded*.

(For real, he was losing it. Heart attack, brain aneurysm, alternate universe. Something.)

"Yes," Sam continued, answering Dean's original poking, "that's the takeaway."

"But I'm probably not," the older Winchester corrected immediately. Sam faltered, for a second thinking they'd just lost all the progress he thought they'd been making. But there was a wobbly little grin on Dean's face (like he was trying it on for size and hadn't quite found it yet). "Because I'm… bi?"

Sam wasn't sure whether to glare – he knew when his brother was trolling him, and Dean wasn't *not* doing that – or open his arms and offer a hug, because he was pretty sure his emotionally constipated big brother had just come out to him. He'd probably just come out for the first time to *anyone*. So Sam settled for an amused smile, the type that said, *'I know what you're doing, but I still won.'*

“You’re whatever you want to be, Dean.”

With a slow nod – since Sam wasn’t giving him an inch in this conversation, no matter how Dean tried to dial it down with a little harmless baiting – the older hunter leaned back in his chair. He kicked his feet up, face still hemming and hawing through it all, and folded his hands over his stomach. As he looked Sam’s way, a real smile started to overtake his face.

“I think… I’m okay with bi.” At Sam’s returning grin – way too happy way too quickly – Dean immediately leveled a warning finger his way. He was so not ready for his snot-nosed little brother to start designing wedding invitations or doodling hearts around his and Cas’ names. “Maybe.”

The younger Winchester chuckled, raising his hands in a placating gesture of *‘take all the time you need.*’ Dean’s glare rolled right off him like oil on water.

As they settled into a much more comfortable silence – Dean belatedly realizing he’d just come out to his brother and not entirely sure how to feel about that (but knowing it didn’t feel… terrible) – the older Winchester finally dug into his meal. It was on the wrong side of lukewarm, but he ate it anyway because he was a damn good cook and it still tasted delicious. Sam eyed him, warm and amused, for a few moments before he dug back into his own meal.

He waited until Dean ate a piece of steak off his fork before he asked, casually, “So what did Chest Cas say when you told him you loved him?”

The man from the future sucked that piece of meat right into the back of his gullet and proceeded to choke, hacking it back up. The amusement in his brother’s eyes when he finally stopped dying indicated that the timing was very much intentional.

“Fuck you,” Dean growled, though it came out thick and wet and definitely took him two tries to fully manage. “I didn’t tell him- He wasn’t- *Nothing.* It was *fine.* It wasn’t even-”

A big deal.

Cas had made sure of it. He’d known what to do. Dean, on the other hand…

His breathing was picking up again. Jesus, how many panic attacks

were necessary for one little discovery about himself, huh?

Across from him, either seeing his genuine distress or taking pity after trolling him right back (far more successfully, Sam would say) the younger Winchester stood from the table. He grabbed two beers out of the fridge, plunking one down in front of Dean on his way back to his seat. The older hunter grabbed onto it like a lifeline.

After he'd chugged a good half of it, relishing the cold taste of liquid courage (like relief on a hot summer day), Dean set the bottle back down and stared at his brother, panic returning like liquid lead in his stomach.

"Why is this so fucking hard?" he blurted out, genuinely frustrated by his own distress.

Without so much as pausing to think about it, Sam replied, "Because you're being vulnerable."

Dean immediately scoffed as Samantha took them right back into chick flick territory. He was not *vulnerable*, or any other weepy, soft bullshit.

Sam, on the other hand, rolled his eyes, annoyed to have instantly lost what felt like progress. "Stop thinking of vulnerability like it's a blushing virgin bride, dude. You're vulnerable right now because what you are sharing is important to you. So important that you don't know what you'll do if I reject it. Or reject *you* for it."

Let alone if Dean rejected it (or himself) on Sam's behalf, which was always a real possibility when it came to his martyring brother. Sam leaned back, hands spread on the table in an effort not to lean across it and physically shake the lesson into the man.

"This means a lot to you, Dean," Sam told him – said it for him when he knew the older hunter wouldn't be able to say it for himself. "But so do I. If I didn't approve, you would have to choose between me and Cas. And you don't know how to do that. Or, maybe you do, but you know it would make you miserable."

Because Dean would choose the younger Winchester over Cas. Sam was sure of it. He didn't support it, didn't think it was the right choice, but it was the one Dean would absolutely make if the ultimatum ever came. Because John Winchester had trained a guard dog instead of raise a son.

Dean didn't speak – didn't so much as breathe – as he stared across the table at Sam. He was locked so intensely on the younger Winchester that he was back to nearly vibrating on the spot.

He hadn't thought about it like that. Hadn't put it into words, that if his family didn't approve, Dean would be stuck with a choice he couldn't possibly make. And now? Now he was locked on the thought – on the *possibility* – like it was reality. He'd just tumbled right past the cliff named 'difficult conversation' and was free falling, ass over teakettle, into an abyss named "panic" with no end in sight.

Realizing what was happening, Sam offered an encouraging, half-cocked smile. "It's okay to be terrified by that."

The words were barely out of his mouth before Dean was collapsing in a rush of air, "Oh god, I am so fucking terrified by that."

Sam huffed something of a laugh, nodding once in comradery. "And that's why this is hard. But I don't. Disapprove, that is. You don't have to worry about that with me. Or Bobby, if I had to guess."

Having just started to relax as his brother's words settled in his stomach, hauling him back onto that cliff's ledge, Dean tensed right back up, so quickly he cramped. Sam, realizing it, immediately held up his hands.

"Not that you have to tell Bobby," Sam spoke in a rush of reassurance that Dean tried to take to heart. "Or anyone else. I just don't think he'd be a problem."

Right. Dean was still figuring this all out; he didn't have to tell anyone else if he didn't want to.

But… he had been okay telling Sam. He'd dreaded it. God, had he dreaded it, but the earth hadn't opened up and swallowed him whole. Dean didn't think he would be strutting about in public holding a guy's hand or hoisting the rainbow flag anytime soon, but maybe he could acknowledge it with Sam, at least. It was a good first step. Even if the thought of future steps left Dean breaking out in a cold sweat.

Because he would have to take them, if he really wanted this.

Shit, Sam was right. This was important to him. His hands trembled where he'd hidden them under the table, pressed flat and hard against his thighs. The realization of just how important – how fucking

world-ending Sam's rejection would have been – had left him shaken.

Now that he wanted it, Dean wasn't sure he could stop wanting it. But he would have had to, if Sam hadn't approved.

Like dad wouldn't have approved.

It suddenly became clear – in a way that Sam had tried to make him see earlier – just how much of what he was struggling with stemmed from John Winchester. He could never have had this conversation with his father. He could never have admitted to his dad that he was in love with an angel, regardless of gender. John would never have been okay with Cas being anything but human.

Dean couldn't imagine approaching John about anyone, actually, human or not. He'd never told dad about Cassie; the only relationship he'd been in that was serious enough to warrant telling his father. But Dean had never planned to. At the time, he'd told himself they were only a couple months in; it was too early to think about stuff like that. But he had thought, long and hard, about telling Cassie the Family Secret. He *had* told her, and never once had he thought, '*Once she knows, I can introduce her to Dad.'*

Not once.

John would have called her a distraction. A liability. He would have said Dean was putting someone else's life at risk. He would have been *disappointed.* The thought stung and it stung deep. His dad, who had loved their mom enough to go through hell avenging her (and drag both his sons with him), would have thought the same for his son was selfish.

Jesus, John really had done a number on him.

Dean finished his beer with a single, long chug. He slammed it down – harder than he meant, but in no way unjustified – just in time for Sam to set a shot glass in front of him and a bottle of tequila between them (one of the decent ones they kept hidden from Bobby, who didn't have taste enough to care or appreciate it). The man from the future raised a questioning eyebrow at his brother, who'd been particularly uptight with him drinking ever since Dad's death.

Sam smiled – a little affectionate, a little sad, and altogether way too understanding – and raised his own shotglass. "Dude, you just came out. That calls for some libation."

The time traveler laughed, then laughed again when he realized the inevitable panic he was expecting from a comment like that was nowhere to be seen.

Holy shit, he'd just come out and he was *okay* with it. Mostly.

Dean shook his head, not quite believing it but more than happy to ride the waves of adrenaline and dopamine flooding his brain. There was still a long way to go – the pit in his stomach wasn't done reminding him of that anytime soon – but right now he was going to enjoy the high.

Sammy really didn't care, was even happy for him, and the man from the future felt lighter than he had in years. Dean picked up the bottle of tequila and poured them both a shot, grin wide on his face.

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Whaaaaat? Wholesome *and* healthy growth!?! I can't even.

Guys. Guys guys guys. We did it. Dean has one foot out of that closet and it only took one million twenty thousand words to get him there

Up Next: Dean thanks Sam without ever thanking Sam (as is his style), Sam nerds out about produce (as is his style), Bobby meets up with an old frenemy (as is his style), and nothing much happens because we've filled up our entire 'happy progress' quota and now life's gotta go back to being tough. Because this is Supernatural. And, for some reason, we all like it that way

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 153: Season 3: Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Oof, this one was a last minute labor of love from my editor, **Lyeundu**. I did not have time for a thorough edit, and only gave this chapter a one-time read through before throwing it at my poor editors. But y'all have waited long enough and deserve a new chapter!

Can you all believe we're already 12 chapters into Season 3? That whole 'let's be less verbose this season, kay?' thing is going reeeeal well, I see

Chapter Warnings: Dean's waking his brother up for the second day in a row cuz they got shit to do, Sam's no less confused but slightly more into today's adventure, and the bunker crew gets an unexpected (and yet actually, totally expected) visitor that's not doing Dean's Djinn PTSD any favors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 12

Sunday morning came and Sam was once more asleep at a completely reasonable time for such an activity, when Dean came barging into his room with no warning. True, it was right around the time Sam usually woke up, but generally he did that on his own, without assistance in the form of a trumpeting older brother he kind of wanted to punch.

"What the hell, Dean."

The man in question cackled and announced, "It's Sunday, Sammy! You know what we do on Sundays?"

Confusion filled Sam's entire face, framed by the tangled mop of hair that was longer than it had any right to be. His eyes were still squinty with sleep. "Uh… we go to church?"

“What?” Dean scrunched his nose, head pulled back. “No. Seriously?”

The younger Winchester shrugged, swinging his legs off the mattress with a yawn. “You’re full of surprises lately.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “No, bitch. Sundays are for Farmers’ Markets.”

Sam’s eyebrows climbed higher than they had for yard sales and there was finally a semblance of sentience in those eyes. Confused sentience, but sentience nonetheless.

Again, green eyes went for a roll as Dean crossed his arms over his chest, leaning into the doorframe. “You love them, trust me. Now, get dressed. Chop, chop, we’re already late.”

Sam relented, raising his hands in surrender rather than question an abundance of things currently off with his brother (how could one be late for a Farmers’ Market? Why were they going to one in the first place? And *what* was Dean doing awake so early for a second morning in a row?) The older Winchester hadn’t been wrong about the yard sales, maybe he was right about another area of domesticity.

So, for the second morning in a row, the Sam climbed out of bed in pajamas and bemusement to follow after his time traveling brother. By then Dean was off, heading down the hall while Sam actually had to get dressed for a farmer’s market of all things. It did sound more his speed than the yard sale, at least.

Chapter Break

Sam walked into the war room, on his way to meet Dean in the garage when the man in question jogged down the steps from the library. Sam gave his older brother a questioning look in the form of a furled brow. He was going the wrong way, so Sam voiced as much.

“Nuh-uh,” Dean shook his head, grabbing the taller man’s arm as he passed, tugging him towards the curved staircase. “We’re walking.”

Sam had made it to the first step, hand on the railing, when he paused, eyes wide and staring up at his brother. “We’re *walking*? Okay, seriously, who are you and what have you done with my

brother?"

Dean scoffed, grumbling that *he exercised, damnit,* as he stomped up the steps.

"When?"

He could hear the grin in his brat brother's voice. So Dean stomped harder until he could no longer hear that grin as it got bigger.

They left the bunker, heading down the gravel road but before they arrived at the main road that led to the abandoned power plant. Dean cut to the left, down towards the river. They were following a clear walking path that wandered away from the road and through the trees before coming back out alongside the river. It was wide and unpaved, but decently maintained. It would probably serve as a good bike path as well. After what Sam guessed was about a half mile, they rounded a bend in the river and a pedestrian bridge came into view.

As they crossed, a couple with fresh flowers and a paper bag full of produce passed them coming the other way. Sam was surprised by the idyllic little scene they were trekking, like something out of the opening shot of a sitcom. If Dean did this every Sunday morning, Sam had seriously mischaracterized this future brother of his.

It was another five minutes from the bridge, the dirt road becoming paved and depositing them onto a suburban street. Two blocks more and they were in a parking lot filled with pop up tents and stalls. Wandering up to the first stand – local honey – Sam was admittedly more curious than he thought he'd be.

At the first produce stall, Sam picked up a peach, planning to eat it on the walk back. Then he spotted a carton of cherries and thought, it had been a minute since he'd had fresh cherries. By the time he got to the vegetables, he'd had to tuck the cherries under his arm just to carry it all. Dean was off to the side, sniggering. They were still on just the first stand.

After paying the owner of that stand and moving onto the next, Sam had a brown bag tucked in his arm stuffed full with fresh produce, looking like a damn kid close to Christmas. Dean was shaking his head, remembering that same smile on another brother years from now.

"You're usually here two hours earlier than this," he commented with mock-huffiness. "Future you would be complaining about how all the

good shit's gone."

Dean watched in real time as Sam went through the realization that there would be better things when the market first opened and that he could go earlier next time. Outwardly, the man from the future judged his brother with deadpan eyes and a slow, predictable shake of his head. But inwardly, Dean's chest was warm and fuzzy and he kind of wanted to rub at it.

"See what happens when you go gallivanting off with Psychic Masters?" the older Winchester teased, moseying on down the row of tents. "You miss the good stuff."

Sam glared, though it was half-hearted at best, as they passed a stall full of handmade soaps. "They do this every Sunday?"

"Every Sunday. Like clockwork." They paused at a table selling more fruit. Sam dug his wallet out once more. "The suburban Utopia, Stepford Wives vibe they've got going on freaked me out at first. Kept waiting for robot heads to start spinning."

Dean gestured at his head exploding and Sam chuckled.

Incredulous (and incredibly doubtful), Sam asked, "So you usually come with me?"

"God no," Dean scoffed immediately, setting the world right again. "*You* do this every Sunday, I sleep till a reasonable hour of the morning. Like a normal person."

Sam chuckled. Dean side-eyed him, but was grinning himself. He nodded at the line of stalls on either side of them.

"You found it on a morning run," Dean said with a scrunched nose, like his brother was a total alien.

Ignoring his brother's opinion on exercise, Sam thought back to the path they'd walked and realized it would make for a great morning run. Glancing at his brother, who was very purposefully surveying the market around them rather than making eye contact – Sam was pretty sure the man from the future had done that on purpose. A thank you that he could never actually vocalize.

Sam started towards the next booth with a smile.

"After that, you ran your Samsquatch butt over here at ass-crack

o'clock every weekend. You'd bring back a bunch of stuff and I'd figure out how to make something edible from it." Dean sniffed, posture rigidly overcompensating for something he was feeling insecure about. "That's how this works."

Sam lit up at the idea and looked down at his purchases so far. It hadn't occurred to him that Dean might make something from the fresh produce, but now that he knew his brother was willing (and since he suspected that insecurity was about Dean's love of a less-than-manly, certainly-not-useful-like-hunting hobby), Sam was eager to get him good ingredients.

Sam tried to judge what Dean might cook from the bag of fruits and a handful of vegetables he'd purchased so far. He wasn't much of a chef, though. "What would you make with this?"

Dean shrugged casually, but Sam could see he'd already been thinking about it. "We could roast the carrots with a honey glaze, for starters. Especially if we went back for some of that local honey. The wildflower one's the best. Maybe make the mushrooms into some kind of sauce or marinade for whatever the main dish is."

"And what's the main dish?"

Dean returned his curious look with an expectant one. "That's your job, not mine."

Momentarily taken aback – before realizing Dean meant he would bring home the ingredients for a *whole* meal – Sam started looking around at the various stalls until he landed on a butcher's tent, set up in front of a refrigerated truck. He started towards it.

"I make a mean peach cobbler," Dean added as he followed leisurely behind, silently pleased with himself. "We'll need a whole lot more peaches, though."

Sam nodded, now on a mission. Entrê first – something that worked well with mushrooms – then peaches and honey. And maybe whatever else looked good along the way.

Chapter Break

They retraced their route along the river, this time with Sam looking at it from the perspective of a runner. It really would make a great running path, and the psychic was excited about getting some regular exercise into their usually nomadic, chaotic routine.

As they entered the bunker, two large bags of produce and food tucked under Sam's arms, the younger Winchester was genuinely excited. The last two days had been fun. Even though Sam was planning on leaving for another psychic soon, he was looking forward to coming back. He was starting to get why Dean had spoken of the bunker with such longing. How this place could easily turn into their home, not just their homebase.

"I'm definitely going earlier next time. I bet the meat selection is way better first thing. And that one farmer said he sometimes has foraged mushrooms!" he proclaimed loudly as they entered the kitchen, an extra pep in his step.

Dean, following behind, muttered, "Nerd."

"He finally show you the Farmer's Market?" Bobby was at the table, munching on a bowl of cereal, and looked up at their entrance. Sarge was laying at his feet, working away at a bone. He didn't look up at all. "Bout damn time. He's only been talking about it for a month."

"It was one time!" the man from the future squawked in defense as Sam set the bags down on the kitchen counter and Dean started unloading them. "I mentioned it *one* time."

Sam met Bobby's gaze, which very clearly said it had been more than just one time.

"Traitor," Dean muttered with a glare, which Bobby returned with a sassy look only he could pull off. His phone pinged on the table and the older hunter picked it up.

"That'll be Pamela," he said as he opened the text message. At the counter, Sam perked up while Dean tried not to visibly deflate. It was fine. Sam needed this and it would be *fine*. "She says come anytime."

Sam beamed and turned towards his brother, who did his very best not to tense up at the sudden attention.

"So… we do anything on Mondays?"

Chapter Break

They spent the rest of the morning discussing what Sam was going to tell Pamela concerning the history of his power. With Missouri, she'd known their father, knew what had happened to their mother. It had seemed like a logical next step to tell her about the demon blood. Sam trusted her with that secret.

He didn't know Pamela. They'd already had one hunter try to take them out because of his abilities. Sam didn't want word of their true source getting around, or they'd find themselves with a lot more than just one hunter after them.

"She won't appreciate us bringing her into our shit," Dean answered honestly when his younger brother had looked his way imploringly. "But she's good people. You can trust her, Sammy."

Bobby had seconded that, vouching for the psychic. "But it's your decision, son. I'm sure Pamela would say so too."

Sam had gone to bed that night – after a day of good meals, a movie with his brother to 'christen the Dean Cave', and an evening spent doing so, so many dishes – still thinking it over. The next morning he went for a run on the path Dean had shown him, sticking with the river well past the point of the pedestrian bridge they'd used, before eventually turning around.

It really was a good running route. Great for clearing his head. By the time he got back to the bunker, he'd settled on keeping the demon blood quiet for now. He wanted to see how Pamela worked with his powers before she knew their origin.

Sam trotted down the main staircase of the bunker, sweaty from his run and looking forward to a shower. He was just pulling his earbuds out when Dean came into the war room from the kitchen, mug in hand, dead guy robe on, clearly having only woken up so many minutes ago and having his first coffee of the morning. He was already shaking his head at Sam's state.

"You freak," Dean said with a large grin on his face. Then he whistled and Sarge came running into the room, tongue out. He circled the older Winchester once before spotting the younger. Or, more accurately, Sam's sweat-slicked legs, covered in tasty salt. "Next time, take the mutt."

“I will,” Sam responded with genuine enthusiasm, bending over to give Sarge’s fur a good ruffling even as the dog obsessively licked his shins clean. When he looked up, Dean was watching the pair of them over the rim of his mug. Sam couldn’t help himself. “You cook up any new buffets while I was out?”

Dean snorted, managing not to take his coffee up the nose as he did, and glared at the kid. “No. Baby can serve himself a bowl of cereal if he’s hungry.”

“Shame,” Sam answered, but his grin was ear to ear. Sarge, contented with his human salt-lick, wandered back into the library, most likely headed to the kitchen. Sam straightened. “I was thinking I’d, uh, hop in the shower and then pack up.”

He could see some of the humor leave his brother’s eyes, but Dean stowed whatever disappointment he was feeling and nodded. “Yeah, sure. Which car you planning on taking?”

Sam’s brow furled at the question. He hadn’t realized there were options. Sure, he’d seen the garage that came with the bunker and its impressive car collection. It just hadn’t occurred to him that he could take one.

“Hadn’t actually thought about it,” he said with a shrug. With the Salvage Yard gone, Sam had figured cars wouldn’t be as easy to come by without added risk. He’d already accepted the limitation when Dean dropped him off at Missouri’s and he’d had to steal a car to get to to the djinn in time.

Transportation was a good idea, though, especially if he was going to join Dean on hunts more regularly. And if Dean was suggesting the bunker resources… it was probably safe to take him up on it.

“I’ll have a look,” Sam finally answered with a smile, excited at the prospect. He wasn’t much of a car guy – nothing like Dean was – but the idea of having his own vehicle was exciting.

“If you want my input,” the man from the future started, but never finished. Sarge suddenly barked from the other room and then came running into the war room moments before a loud banging, reminiscent of an annoyed knock, sounded from the main bunker door.

“What the-” Dean blinked up at the top railing and the door beyond. He looked back at Sam, brow furled. “We expecting anyone?”

Sam shook his head, equally surprised.

“The proximity alarms should have gone off,” Dean muttered as he put his mug down and headed for the main control panel.

“You got them working?” Sam asked, joining him at the console. Dean had bitched to him during his first tour about how hard it was going to be to get them up again.

“What?” Dean’s head snapped towards Sam, his hands pausing on the controls, which were lit but unresponsive. “Yeah, Frank got the place set up weeks ago.”

It was Sam’s turn to frown, but a repeat knock interrupted them, louder this time. So Sam shrugged at his brother and headed for the staircase.

“Wait,” Dean ordered, holding up a single finger. Sam paused on the first step, but Dean had already spun and was heading for the library. He jogged up the steps and disappeared, only to return a moment later with a gun. Sam looked surprised.

“Did you… did you stash a gun in the library?” he asked incredulously. Though, really, he shouldn’t be surprised. It was a smart move. It didn’t inspire much confidence in that whole ‘impenetrable bunker’ thing, however.

“Didn’t have to,” Dean answered as the two started up the staircase. With a gesture from Sam, Sarge stayed below, watching intently. “Men of Letters did it for us.”

There had been a gun holster installed under the table nearest the war room. Dean had discovered it accidentally, after knocking a pile of research papers onto the ground and, grumbling, ending up on all fours to pick the mess up. It had been an antiquated revolver tucked in there, so they switched it for a handgun, both in his time and this one, but the idea had been all MOL. Dean just agreed whole-heartedly with the precaution.

As they approached the door in tandem, the knock sounded for the third time. If a follow-up knock could be bitchy, this one most definitely was. Sam positioned himself in front of the door, ready to turn the wheel, while Dean stood to the side, gun raised. With a nod from his brother, Sam opened the door.

“About damn time,” a man complained from the other side, sounding

entirely put upon. Sam, who couldn't see the individual, watched Dean's face go from stone-cold-hunter to surprised– no, confused– back to surprised– and then he lowered the gun.

"Frank?" Dean asked as Sammy opened the door the rest of the way. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Frank Devereaux stood in the doorway of the bunker, several duffle bags slung over his shoulders and hips. His eyebrows were up near his receding hairline and there was annoyance behind his thick glasses. Sam glanced over at Dean, unfamiliar with the person in front of them but familiar with the name. He'd been mentioned in that same conversation as the proximity alert on their first day in the bunker.

"Uh, you called me, chuckleheads? Unless there's another Bobby Singer living in a different abandoned power plant in Lebanon, Kansas." He didn't sound too pleased about any of that – grumpy as all get out – and pushed past the two brothers without another word. Sam gave a startled look to his brother, who just rolled his eyes and sarcastically gestured for the man to come on in.

By the time they followed him down the stairs, he was dropping his bags on the war room table and having a conversation with the dog, which made about as much logical sense as talking to a dog did in the first place. Sam sent his brother a strained look, glancing between the crazy man standing in the equivalent of their foyer, talking to Sarge, and his brother who'd apparently invited him. But Dean wasn't looking his way. He was staring at Frank with a glazed over look.

"Interesting place you boys have got here," Frank said as he walked the room in a circuit, fiddling with the occasional control board or readout. He turned back to the two Winchesters. "Now, who the hell are you and why am I here?"

"Uh," Sam once again glanced between his brother and the newcomer, but Dean looked wholly out of it, no longer paying attention. "I'm Sam. This is my brother, Dean."

As the younger Winchester awkwardly made introductions, Dean's head spun. Frank had already been here. He'd fixed the bunker up, got them back to almost fully functioning. Sure, he was no Charlie Bradbury, but he'd done enough to get the bunker functioning.

Only no, he hadn't. Because that had been in a dream.

Dean felt unstable, like the ground beneath him wasn't solid and gravity wasn't behaving. He couldn't remember what was real, what had happened and hadn't. By force of will alone, Dean kept it together; he locked his knees and fisted his hands. Frank Devereaux was a paranoid old bastard; if he picked up on anything he didn't like, he wouldn't help them.

Except he already *had* helped them. The work was done; it had been *done*. Why couldn't it just *stay done*?

The man from the future closed his eyes and breathed through it. Breathed through the spinning, the panic rising in his chest as he questioned his own reality. Three sets of memories so overlapped it was getting difficult to remember which was this time, which had happened before, and which had been nothing but a fantasy.

Some of those memories were so real, so believable, that Dean ached for them. But they weren't.

Why couldn't some of it just stay real?

"Dean?"

He opened his eyes and gave Sam a reassuring nod. Yeah, his head was a mess and his heart was beating way faster than it had any right to, but he'd figure it out. He was fine. Just as soon as the floor returned beneath his feet, reality quit being so wibbly wobbly about the edges, and his inner child stopped throwing a temper tantrum about how none of this was fucking fair.

One break. Was *one* break too much to ask?

"We, uh," Dean cleared his throat as he addressed Frank, crossing his arms over his chest, "we need you to patch the place up. This bunker, it's, uh, well, old."

"No shit, Sherlock." Frank looked over his shoulder at the half-century old control panel. He pushed his glasses back up his face. "Why? What's this place do?"

"Monitors supernatural activity," Sam cut in. "But it shut down back in the fifties and hasn't been touched since."

Frank eyed the younger Winchester with narrowed eyes. "How'd you two bozos find it?"

“Watch it,” Dean growled, and Frank raised his hands. “Call it family inheritance.”

An unexpected call out – “Frank, you old bastard!” – interrupted them and all three men turned as Bobby came down the steps from the library. Their guest looked like he couldn’t decide whether to return the greeting or pull a gun. Bobby stuck out his hand and, after a moment of grumbling hesitation, Frank shook it.

“What have you got me into this time, you old hat?”

Bobby took over from there, sweeping Frank off for a tour and working the old Bobby charm. Which was pretty much just gruffly telling someone how it was and what they were going to do. Sam and Dean followed several paces behind.

“You alright?” Sam questioned softly as they trailed behind the two. The brothers were more of a second thought at that point and happy to remain that way while Bobby talked the paranoid security expert into helping them.

“No.” Dean didn’t bother sugarcoating it. He’d spent two days in a world where the bunker had been fully set up, almost back to her 2016 glory, for *weeks*. In reality, they’d only found her a couple weeks ago. Sam had been gone for half that and Dean, before he’d gone off to hunt a djinn, had only just started setting the place up. He knew shit about computers, so he’d focused on upping the warding. Now he had to do it all again. “Fucking djinn.”

His brother offered a sympathetic smile but didn’t ask for more and Dean didn’t volunteer. Instead the older Winchester increased their pace, catching up to Bobby as he led Frank to the bunker’s control room. The ache in Dean’s chest was quickly turning to anger.

“Let’s just get this done.”

Chapter Break

“No can do.”

“What do you mean, ‘*no can do*’?”

“I mean *no*, I *can’t do* it.” Frank enunciated each word sharply, looking at the three of them through those thick black glasses, like they were the idiots.

He’d been there less than an hour. Time in which Sam chose to remain in the bunker, hyper aware of Dean’s current instability (in turn, Dean was hyper aware of Sam’s awareness and it was *annoying*). Now the three of them stood in the bunker's mainframe, staring at Frank who sat in a pile of wires, unscrewed metal panels, and his own tools.

“I mean, look how old this is.” He lifted up a cylindrical glass tube reminiscent of a lightbulb, but not any lightbulb they’d ever seen. “What even is this?”

Dean, who’d gotten tired of Frank’s grumbling half an hour ago, shrugged casually and hazarded a guess, “It’s a… you know… doodad.”

The paranoid security expert looked real unimpressed with him. “I can’t do it. I won’t.”

Bobby shifted, adjusting his ballcap. “You owe me, Frank.”

The man in question stood up with an energy that could only be described as fidgety. He looked taken aback, then frustrated, and settled for indignant. “Guy saves your life *one* time and, what, you owe him the rest of yours?”

“That’s usually how it works,” Dean piped up, leaning against the wall with arms crossed. He raised them in surrender when Frank spun on him with a *look*.

“Frank,” Bobby tried again, eyebrows up and imploring. “This is important.”

Devereaux sighed, actually looking contrite. “Look, even if I wanted to – which I *don’t* – this is the friggin’ stone age of computers here. It would take… weeks, minimum, and I don’t have that kind of availability in my schedule. Hell, I’m not even sure what you’re asking for is even possible.”

“It is,” Dean interrupted cooly.

Frank turned back to him, eyes huge behind his glasses. “Oh, yeah? And you know that how? Mr. I-don’t-even-know-what-a-vacuum-tube-

is?"

Dean pulled his head back, glaring. "You didn't know what it was either."

"Did too," Frank retorted, looking like a petulant toddler as he pointed at the older Winchester, vacuum tube still clutched in hand. "I was testing you."

Sam cleared his throat, catching Dean's eye and giving him the gentlest version of Bitchface #9 (*'You're really bad at this'*). The man from the future took a deep breath, which he knew was all that would keep him from punching Frank in the face if this kept up. When he opened his eyes again, his expression had smoothed out into something more serious. And possibly more dangerous, too. "I've seen it done before."

"Well then get whoever that was to do it," Frank said, head swaying side to side, hands on his hips. "Cuz this ain't happening. Not with me, at least."

Chapter Break

That was that. Frank was gone within the hour. Dean couldn't believe he'd just… turned them down. This was the supernatural technological quest of the century. Who the hell wouldn't want in on that?

As Bobby escorted the paranoid security expert out of the bunker, Dean stewed in the library, nearly boiling over with frustration.

It had never occurred to him that Frank might say *no*. Of course, him having said yes and been successful in a dream version of all this was just salt in the wound at this point. He'd underestimated the work Charlie had done for them; it had taken days – weeks for some of it – but his favorite little redhead and just turned that into time she got to spend with the Winchesters, talking cases and hanging out. Dean lacked the proper perspective to realize just how much work fixing up the bunker's systems had actually been. She'd done it because it had been a Quest: a challenge that combined her expertise and talents with her yearning for adventure and something more. That had been her *jam*, and she'd talked about how cool it was for weeks.

Frank was no Charlie. He was a guy used to getting paid for his services. Even with all the treasures of the newly-acquired bunker – several of which they'd tried to ply him with – they still couldn't afford the bill for a project this big. Dean had been really banking on that nerd quest factor. He just didn't realize it until now.

"Who did it in your timeline?"

Dean looked up at Sam's question. His kid brother was leaning against one of the library tables, ankles and arms crossed. He raised an innocent eyebrow at Dean's stare, and the older Winchester sighed.

"Charlie Bradbury."

Sam waited a beat for more information to follow before raising the other eyebrow. "And Charlie Bradbury would be…"

"Someone we get killed, Sam," Dean snapped, knowing even as he did that it was uncalled for. But he didn't care because, "We're not bringing her in."

It hurt, saying it out loud. Charlie had been one of his best friends. A kid sister. Somebody *good* who honestly cared about him. He was loath to lose that this time around, to never have Charlie Bradbury in his life. Their lives. But his mind was made up.

He could already hear her yelling at him through time, how all she'd wanted was adventure and he damn well better not be taking that away from her in some misguided act of chivalry (*'Men!'*) But he couldn't do it. They couldn't be the reason she died again. His heart couldn't take that twice in one lifetime.

"Okay." Sam already had his hands up in surrender, recognizing Dean's anger as the fear it was. Whoever this Charlie was, she'd been important to him. He looked around the bunker; their problem remained unsolved. "What do we do instead?"

Dean sighed, hanging his head and scrubbing a hand through his hair. He didn't know. Sam had taken a look when they'd first moved in, but there hadn't been much he could do. He got internet access up and going, but that was about his limit in this situation. The old computers had baffled him and the internet hadn't been much of a guide once they realized the ancient machines had been modified supernaturally, in ways neither the Winchesters or Bobby (or anyone on the internet, apparently) had ever seen.

Which left them back at square one. But that wasn't Sammy's problem.

"Nothing," Dean ended up saying, shaking his head as he leaned against the bookshelf across from Sam. "*We* aren't doing anything. *You* are going off for your psychic training."

Sam immediately protested, but Dean had made his mind up on this too. It was something Sammy said he needed, so Dean was gonna make sure he got it.

"Come on, your next Jedi Master is waiting," he said, cutting through Sam's arguments. The fact that it was enough to silence his protests spoke to the younger Winchester's desire to go. It stung, but Dean told himself to grow up. Sam was allowed to have other people in his life, damnit, and he would learn to deal with that. "Bobby and I will figure this out."

"Gee," the old hunter said, trudging up the steps to the library to join the two boys. "Thanks for volunteering me."

"Think the world you're looking for is *'voluntold,'*" Dean supplied helpfully. "Future lingo."

"Boy, they've been using that since the 70's," Bobby harrumphed, looking entirely unimpressed. Dean pulled his head back.

"Seriously? Huh." Dean made a face but shrugged. "Learn something new everyday. But I mean it, Sam. Get outta here."

The younger Winchester gave another token protest, but his heart wasn't in it. He was excited to visit another psychic, to explore more of his powers and himself. But leaving wasn't easy, either. Especially with Dean off-kilter, djinn-dream so easily re-triggered. Reluctantly, Sam nodded, trying to convey his confliction in his eyes as he looked at his brother.

"Call me," he insisted sternly, holding Dean's gaze even as green eyes turned guilty. "I mean it."

It was Dean's turn to hesitantly nod, but he held his brother's gaze. "I will."

Chapter Break

And that, too, was that. Sam grabbed his duffle of meager belongings, exchanged a hug with Dean and Bobby in the garage, gave Sarge a thorough ear scritching, and left.

"Can't believe he picked the *Indie,*" Dean scoffed as Sam drove out of the bunker garage. "Sam. On a *motorcycle*. Who does he think he is, Arnie?"

Beside him, Bobby snorted, watching the younger Winchester disappear beyond the bunker entrance. He turned to eye Dean, gauging how he was handling his brother leaving. Outwardly, he looked fine. Bobby knew otherwise. But the kid was holding it together admirably, and the old hunter trusted him to work through it.

Maybe not healthily, but Dean would see himself through.

"Well, come on," he groused, nudging the older Winchester, who looked at him questioningly. Bobby turned back into the bunker, heading for the room that held the ancient mainframe. "We got work to do."

End Chapter

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: And that wraps our first Season 3 Arc! Now for the good stuff: Season 3 Plot!

Bunker location: My editors flagged that the bunker was further out of town than a walk/run would allow. However, I can't find anything to support either argument. The bunker is next to a river (which does not exist in Lebanon - the closest thing being a creek, which is too far out of town for a walk/run in, but also not nearly big enough to offer the flow a power plant would pull from). It's said in one episode that the Oak Park Retirement Home is 15 min from the bunker, but they don't specify if it's located in Lebanon (there is no retirement home in the real Lebanon, it's a town of 170 people and takes about two minutes to drive from one side of town to the other 😂 The nearest actual retirement home is 30

min away from Lebanon - I suppose the bunker could be 15 min out of town, and the nearest retirement home is 15 min from that…) There is a power plant in Red Cloud, the next town north of Lebanon. It's a slightly bigger town, and that power plant is right on the edge of it. Given the episode where Jack is in town making friends on what seems to be a main drag downtown, the writers are visualizing Lebanon as a bigger town than the real one. Since there's no clear answer and some liberties appear to be taken, I'll hop on that bandwagon 😁 I really like the idea of Sam being able to run along the river and to a farmers market (which I also picture set up on the edge of town, but I've only ever lived in cities where it's setup in a parking lot, alley, or closed down street so) so I'm going to stick with what I have here. But please know that it is at least somewhat suspect and a completely unsupported head canon. Thank you to **Lyeundu** for flagging and **Forestpelt** for seconding as a possible issue! I have good editors 😁

Up Next: Sam's off to meet the fabulous Pamela Barnes and he likes what he sees, Dean's got some bunker visitors who bring good news (and not so good news, too), and Evil Baddies are up to their Evil Baddie ways!

Next Posting: Well, crap, guys. The next chapter isn't actually finished 😅 I have fallen so far behind because RL has been *crazy* for the last two months. I'm on a two week road trip now (which, by the time I get back home, will be the 5th weekend in a row away. My dogs aren't even gonna know me by the time I'm back 😅) However, that two week road trip is largely down time at my parents house, dogsitting for them while they're away. I have all my fingers and my toes crossed (it's kinda painful, actually…) that I'll get some good writing time in!

So, next chapter may be up in two weeks, or we may have a small posting delay. I'm sorry Season 3 has been off to such a rocky start! I believe it'll shape up soon, though. We've slogged through the completely unplanned romantic identity crisis and resulting emotional chatter. That was always going to trip me up; I'm just an action girl at heart. The good news is, Season 3 Plot is up-n-coming! And we've got so much to cover and some really fun things planned. Once the Muse realizes we're through the slow stuff (which SHE caused, thank you very much), she should circle back around and kick it into gear.

For progress updates, check in on Discord, Tumblr, or my profile

on AO3. Thanks for hanging in there, everyone!

Cheers,
Silence

UPDATE - 11/23/2025:
I was really hoping to get a chapter up this weekend, but then I realized that we're entering a new arc, and it's a fast-pased one. So I don't want to post a chapter if I can't post the following one a week later.

I'm back at writing and excited about this arc, so hopefully I'll bang a couple chapters out and then I can post weekly for a while. But I don't want to start posting until I know I can do that. Sorry everyone, but thank you for your patience!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 154: Season 3: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

A/N's: okay, so we are officially getting **complicated** now. Welcome to the start of arcs within arcs

Last Time on the The Road So Far (tta): Sam left the bunker on Dorthy's Indy, on his way to Pamela Barnes for some more psychic training.

Chapter References: There's no direct references in this chapter, but Persephone and the Bind, Lilith and Azazel and the Hellgate in Arizona, and Sam reaching his brother in the djinn dream are all brought up. If any of that causes "??" to flash in your head, then Andy is trying to remind you about ***A Shortcut to the Road So Far (tta)***, newly updated and available if you need a quick refresher. It's linked to this story and should be the next one in the collection.

Chapter Warnings: Now we get into the season 3 plot stuff! Muuuwahahahaha!! Bad Guys are bad-guying, Sam's padawaning, and Pamela is being her best self.

Actual Chapter Warnings: Lilith is topside and needs a vessel. We're going to dive, without much detail, into how that happens. ***TRIGGER WARNING:*** a child is kidnapped and harmed (off screen) in this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 13

"Right this way, little Miss," Azazel said as he guided the young girl through the high-end hotel where Lilith was waiting. The little thing was a good fit. Eight years old, well groomed, dressed to impress, and gullible enough to believe he was some sort of talent scout. According to her non-stop chatter, she was a child beauty pageant contestant. She'd won Little Miss Arizona last year and was very confident about

this year's chances.

"Mama is gonna be so impressed," she said as they exited the elevator on the top floor. Her young voice was a parody of her mother's words, full of pride and dangerous levels of confidence. Lilith was going to love her; she was perfect. "She's always telling me to keep an eye out for talent scouts. That's how you get the big gigs."

"Well, she was quite wise not to teach you about stranger danger," Azazel said blatantly, grinning at this child's poor luck and even poorer self-preservation skills. "How else would you become famous?"

"I know," the child said lightly, tossing her blonde curls over her shoulder. "Winners take chances. Losers play it safe."

"That they do," the yellow-eyed demon said as he opened the penthouse door and held it for the little miss, who strutted right through. Azazel's eyes slipped yellow as he followed behind, closing and locking the hotel door.

Chapter Break

When Sam climbed off the motorcycle two hours later, he had to not-so-subtly adjust himself several times and stretch his poor abductor muscles before he could stand normally. The bike had been fun for the first thirty or so minutes. By the hour mark he'd been sore. By the time he arrived at Pamela Barnes' address, he was filled with regret. He probably could have used a couple of smaller trips first before roadtripping on the bike.

It had been worth it for the expression on Dean's face as he drove out of the garage, though.

There was still a bow-legged wobble in Sam's step as he walked up the front stairs of the psychic's home. Once again, the door opened before he could knock and he was greeted with a head of dark hair, gorgeous eyes twinkling with mischief, and a wide, full smile that lit up her whole face.

"You must be Sam Winchester," Pamela said, smile quickly becoming an ear-to-ear grin. She gave him a once over, taking her time to soak

up the tall drink of water standing on her front porch. "Well, aren't you gorgeous? Bobby told me you would be, but I see he left out some of the finer details."

Sam fought the sudden blush that threatened to turn him into a tomato. He cleared his throat, offering a hand in greeting. "Bobby said, uh, what about me, now?"

"I'm paraphrasing," Pamela laughed, ignoring his hand as she went in for a hug. She had to raise onto tiptoe to reach one arm around his shoulders, even with him bending over to accommodate. Her other arm wrapped around his waist, and she took the opportunity to grab a handful of that fine tush on the way. "Though he wasn't kidding about that ass. Just as firm as it looks."

With a wink and a cackle, The psychic turned on her heel and walked back into the house, gesturing for him to follow. Sam - stuttering through surprise, amusement, and embarrassment - was still trying to figure out the proper response. (*Was* there a proper response in this scenario? Dean would have one. Sheesh, no wonder he'd had his patented, this-is-a-joke-from-the-future-the-other-you-would-get grin on his face when Sam first brought up Pamela Barnes.) Wondering just what he was getting himself into, Sam followed.

"So, Bobby said you've recently discovered some latent psychic ability?" Pamela asked as she led him through the house, glancing over her shoulder as she spoke. They ended up in the kitchen, a small but homey space filled with a lot of personality. "Want something to drink? Beer?"

"Oh, uh, sure."

Sam awkwardly looked around the kitchen, hands in his pockets for lack of anything better to do with them. Pamela opened the fridge and bent over to rifle through it. The younger Winchester's eyes went with her, landing completely unintentionally on her butt. And lingered. There was a calligraphic tattoo just above the waistline of her jeans, in the soft dip of her lower back. A tramp stamp, Sam's mind supplied, unhelpfully.

Jessie Forever.

"Sit," Pamela said, startling Sam out of his… observations. Lucky for him, she was still in the fridge, flapping a hand behind her as she grabbed two beers, the bottlenecks clinking. Slightly mortified and fighting back yet another blush, Sam quickly slid into one of the two

chairs at the small kitchenette table. A moment and two bottlecaps later, an open beer was placed in front of him. At the other end was a wicked grin and knowing eyes.

She'd done it on purpose, Sam realized, cheeks aflame all over again.

Pamela slid into her own seat, eyes twinkling with mischief and amusement. After a pull from her beer, she licked her lips and launched into the real reason they were sitting at her table. "So, tell me about these abilities."

Sam cleared his his throat (and hopefully his head as well). "They, uh, they started two years ago. Dreams only, at first. Death premonitions, usually of people I didn't know, though, uh… they were usually connected to me somehow in the end. Eventually I got them when I was awake, too."

They'd talked about it earlier that day – Sam and Dean and Bobby – how much of the story he should tell her. Sam had been hesitant to share the full truth, but he would if they thought he should. In the end, Dean had been the one to suggest telling her everything but the demon part. No blood and no Yellow Eyes. No need to scare Pamela beyond what she was comfortable getting herself into, and no reason to drag her into that part of it, either. So, Sam had spent the drive spinning a careful story of truth, lying only by omission.

"They were more like attacks, though," he continued. Across from him, Pamela listened raptly. Although her charm and warmth never lessened (Sam had a feeling that was just who she was), it was obvious from the steel in her eyes that he had her full and sober attention. "I could never control when they came or what I saw. Sometimes we were early enough to save them. My brother, Dean, and me. But most of the time…"

He shook his head and Pamela reached over to lay her hand on top of his. She offered a comforting squeezeand, with a smile – that was only a little self-deprecating – Sam pushed those thoughts away and continued, "All that changed a month ago, though. Something happened – something, uh, traumatic – and now it's like…"

"You unlocked something?" Pamela offered with a smile, small but knowing. "Opened a door, and now you can't keep it closed."

"I don't want to," Sam said immediately. "This – what these powers are – they're a part of me. I need to learn how to control-" he paused, remembering Missouri's words and shook his head, rewording it. "I

want to be able to use them… without them using me. If that makes sense."

"Oh, absolutely." Pamela leaned forwards conspiratorially, folding her arms on the table. "Every psychic is different but, in my experience, we all have the same thing in common. We can't ignore that part of us, no matter how hard we try. It's like having a third arm; you'll find yourself using it without conscious thought, like it's natural. Because it is."

Sam wasn't so sure how *natural* his powers were, but he knew what the psychic meant. What he could do, those abilities weren't a weapon meant to be wielded, that could be put away when the battle was over. They were a part of him – they *were* him – now, and he had to learn how to coexist with them and the rest of the world.

(Or maybe just Dean, to start with. His brother was a big enough challange alone.)

"Now," Pamela continued, smile growing, "we gotta bulk that new arm up. Get it used to doing some heavy lifting. You're right that control isn't the way to go about it, but I'm confident we can get you comfortable with your abilities."

"Yeah?" Sam asked, hesitant but hopeful. The psychic nodded with utter confidence.

"Mindset is more than half the battle," she said, leaning back in her chair. "And it sounds like you're on the right track. Now we just gotta loosen you up. Prove to yourself that those powers aren't something to fear."

Sam started as he realized she'd pinned it in one. He *was* afraid of developing these powers. It no longer scared him that they existed, not even how strong they'd gotten, but their potential still did. Sam couldn't let go of the path they might lead him down if he let them.

Or if Azazel forced him.

That fear was very likely holding him back; the moment he thought it, he knew it was true. Sam didn't have a clue how to overcome it, but he wanted this – he wanted the freedom to use his powers without that fear – which meant he had to face it.

Swallowing roughly, the young psychic nodded. It was not going to be an easy road, he figured, but there was a wave of relief already

loosening his muscles. “That sounds good.”

“Great!” Pamela tapped the tabletop with manicured fingernails before standing. “Let’s get started.”

Surprised, Sam straightened up almost immediately. “Right now?”

“No time like the present,” Pamela quoted as she put a kettle on the stove, turning the burner on high. She leaned against the counter, legs crossed at the ankles, smile just a little bit wicked. “Let’s see what you’ve got, Sam Winchester.”

Chapter Break

Hell’s Princess twirled in her new body, pretty pink dress flaring out with each spin. She clicked her shiny black shoes and admired her youthful skin and full curls in the hotel’s penthouse mirror.

“Oh, Azazel, she’s *perfect*,” Lilith said with a wide, toothy grin. This new model was positively delightful. The last girl – the one she’d been sent to Hell wearing – was soooo last millenia. “Wherever did you find her?”

“The mall,” Azazel answered lazily. Finding a child had not been difficult. Lilith would be quite pleased to know that human children these days wandered off with strangers all the time. The stories of old, warning children against the dangers of the world, had been long abandoned in favor of shiny baubles and popularity contests. “We need to discuss the plan, Lilith.”

She hummed in agreement, but continued admiring her new body. The yellow-eyed demon reigned in his impatience.

“I need to check in on things,” he began, loudly and with extra emphasis, not that either fazed Hell’s Princess. “Sam will have to be put back on the blood, he’s gone too long without it. All but the long-term effects will have worn off by now.”

Lilith hummed again, leaning into the mirror and baring her pretty white teeth. She turned side to side, then pulled at her hair and adjusted the bow sitting perfectly atop her head.

“Tom hasn’t reported in, so he’s probably dead,” Azazel continued, now grinding his teeth and trying to keep it out of his tone. “We still need to deal with the Winchester’s angel-” that would have to be Lilith’s priority while he checked in on young Sam- “and you need to meet with Crowley. He confirmed the contract is signed and in his possession. You should insist he hand it over, for safe keeping.”

Lucifer’s first born finally stopped preening in her new form and switched to preening about her foresight. She turned from the mirror with a haughty pout. “And aren’t we lucky for that, Azazel? Your plan backfired spectacularly! If I hadn’t been ready with a backup plan, *Persephone* would have royally screwed us!”

Hell’s top general tried very, *very* hard not to react in any way. Reports of the Battle Royale had been sketchy at best, but their most recent spies had returned with unconfirmed rumors of an intact Righteous soul and a successful Golmagen Bind. What they did know for certain was that Sam had walked away unscathed, Persephone was on the lam and, as far as they could uncover, Dean Winchester’s soul remained untouched.

It was… not ideal.

“Persephone binding with the boy before his death is unfortunate.” Azazel managed to keep his voice level and borrowed body relaxed. While he didn’t agree – he’d had his own backup plans in place should everything go to crap – it would do no good to let Hell’s Princess get to him. He would have to spend the next several hours – possibly days – listening to her gloat. “However, the golmagen’s purpose is not wasted. She’ll protect him. Not even Heaven will be able to touch Lucifer’s true vessel. Not without going through her.”

“Or chucking her back in the ground,” Lilith responded sweetly, but her tone promised awful things for whoever next interfered with their plans.

“Even better.” Azazel’s eyes slipped into their cloudy, yellow form, giving his expression a sick and twisted air. “Sam’s soul will remain tied to his body, with no recourse but to say yes to Lucifer. And if Heaven doesn’t throw her into a hole, she’ll convince Sam to serve as a vessel when the time comes. She’ll have to, if it means saving his life.”

Lilith’s wicked grin matched her general’s.

She did a little hop-skip towards him, brushed floppy curls over one

shoulder, and clasped her hands in front of her sparkly dress. "I want to meet her."

"Fine," the yellow-eyed demon said with a defeated sigh. "*Then*, we kill the angel."

Hell's Princess let out a very unladylike snort. "How? No one knows how to kill an angel."

"Then we capture her and find a way," Azazel rephrased through clenched teeth. "We can't risk sending her back to Heaven. For whatever reason, she's helping the Winchesters but hasn't reported her actions to Heaven, or we would know about it. She's gone rogue."

"A lone angel will be easier to handle than one with friends," Lilith responded, sing-songy.

Azazel knew that, despite her airy tone, Lucifer's First knew better than to take the angel's interference lightly. Lilith would play ball and deal with the angel, once Azazel came up with a plan to capture the winged nuisance.

"Well, now that I'm properly dressed," Lilith changed topics with a twirl, face lit by a childish grin, "I should check in on the troops. And you-" she waggled a finger Azazel's way- "find our wayward vessel and his homewrecking golmagen."

Chapter Break

They sat on the rug-covered floor of Pamela's living room, a well-lit room filled floor to ceiling with plants, crystals and occult craft, dreamcatchers and macramé. As Sam looked around – there was a lot to look at – Pamela handed him one of the two mugs of tea she'd brought from the kitchen. Sam took it obligingly, watching steam curl off the top.

Pamela had already started sipping hers, watching him over the rim with those big hazel eyes, as the hunter took a small whiff. "It's not, uh….?"

The psychic cracked a wide smile and laughed. "Hippie tea? Not so much. Just some herbs good at calming nerves, relaxing the mind and

body alike. It's all natural, psychedelic-free. Scout's honor."

Relieved, Sam nodded and took a sip. It was earthy, a touch bitter, but the young hunter didn't mind. There was a flowery aftertaste he didn't care for, but it wasn't too terrible.

"Now, if you want something stronger…" Pamela trailed off with an impish grin. "There are a couple of less legal options I may have on hand, if you're interested in experimenting-"

"No," Sam declined quickly, already shaking his head. "I'd rather not, um… use anything that affects inhibitions."

Pamela's smile turned softer, her eyes too knowing. "How long have you been sober?"

Sam raised an eyebrow, but he figured the answer must be obvious. He was just glad she hadn't asked his poison of choice. "Not long enough."

The psychic across from him merely nodded and went back to sipping her tea. "We'll avoid any of the experimental stuff. Stick to the tea. Now, drink and tell me about the last vision you had on purpose."

So they drank while Sam talked about seeing his older brother, cruising along in the Impala with a friend. He told her it ended up being a dream, which Sam hadn't realized at the time, but he was sure Dean had heard him, at least a little. Sam was determined to make contact while in a dream, he just didn't know how.

"Yet," Pamela tagged on with a grin, finishing the last of her mug. She rolled her shoulders, cracked her neck, and stretched her arms out in front of her, hands clasped together. "Alright, let's do this. You said meditation helps you enter the dream state. Let's pick someone for you to focus on and get meditating!"

Sam couldn't help but grin along with her enthusiasm. He did feel looser, surely a byproduct of the drink, which he finished and set aside. He crossed his legs, scooting a little closer to Pamela and she did the same. They formed a small, two-person circle on Pamela's woven rug, knees almost touching, a soft current of air running through the room, a peaceful silence broken only by the soft windchime tinkling somewhere outside. It felt right.

Sam felt calm. Confident.

“Dean,” he called his brother’s name softly, already closing his eyes. Why mess with what had already worked once, right? Plus, Dean was easily the person Sam was closest to on the planet, so he was a safe bet and a good place to start.

He probably wouldn’t freak out too badly when he found Sam poking around inside his head. Probably.

“Take your time,” Pamela instructed just as softly, like the calm voice of a guided meditation. “Pay close attention to everything you feel, and not just once a connection is made. Scan your body continuously. Can you spot the moment you slip into an altered state? Look for the smallest of differences.”

Sam nodded, though his eyes remained closed. He was already deepening his breathing, expanding his awareness. He was getting better – more confident and quicker – at this step, opening his mind and body to a world beyond the material.

‘Dean,’ he thought, not quite a mantra but a call. He let go of the last hold he had on brute awareness. It was no longer *Dean* but *brother*. *Protector*. *The one who raised me. Friend, confidant, savior, love and safety*. He stopped searching for a person and started looking for what his brother was to him.

For a moment, Sam thought he’d done it. There was a sensation of traveling away from his body, leaving Pamela’s house, street, city, even the state behind. He was somewhere else, following a call as familiar as breathing. The journey came with no visuals, just the sensation – a knowing in the dark – that led him ever closer to what Sam knew was his brother.

But then there was nothing. Like leaving a sensory world – colors, emotions, life all around him – and entering a black void. An empty bubble in the middle of a country full of people, and his brother’s trail led right into it. Cautious, Sam got as close as he could to the void, raising his hand against the emptiness and finding it solid. It wasn’t a black hole, it was a wall. An invisible barrier. Like a force field, Sam realized, only a supernatural version.

“Warding,” he whispered. The feel of his lips pursing, of sound carried away on a breath, was enough to ground him once more and Sam snapped back to the physical plane, reeling from the abrupt retreat.

“Easy,” Pamela was there, a hand on either one of his knees, soft voice

guiding him back to safety. "You're alright."

"I'm good," Sam confirmed as soon as he was able. The snap back was always disorienting. He needed to learn how to ease out of a vision rather than get his ass kicked out of one plane and back to the other.

Pamela patted his knee twice before pulling back. "You said something about warding?"

Sam opened his eyes and blinked at the darkening room around them. The sun was setting outside and he frowned. "How long was I-"

"Twenty, maybe thirty minutes," Pamela answered easily, standing to grab the two mugs. "I'm going to make more tea. You gather your thoughts. Think about the last moment before the vision ended."

"It never started," Sam said, climbing to his feet as well and following her. He needed to stretch his long legs anyway. Sam braced himself against her kitchen counter, crossing his arms over his chest as she filled the kettle at the sink. "You were right – I can feel when I make a connection, and this wasn't… that."

"Okay," she answered easily enough, setting the water on the stove to boil. "So what was it?"

"I…" Sam blew out a breath, jostling the hair around his face. "I'm not sure. It was like… I found Dean's trail."

"Trail?"

"Yeah, his… I don't know…" He sighed again, frustrated by the lack of words. Well, at least the lack of words that didn't sound stupid.

"There are no wrong statements here, Sam." Pamela leaned against the other side of the stove, observing him with sharp, but caring eyes. "Don't worry about sounding ridiculous. We're talking astral projection and dream walking, here."

The young hunter laughed, body losing some of the tension Sam hadn't realized was there. He dropped his arms back to his side. "Okay. It was… like a trail of *Dean*. Everything he is, everything he means to me. I focused on that and just… followed it."

Pamela hummed, pulling the kettle off as it started to whistle. Steam poured out alongside hot water as she refilled both mugs to the brim.

She handed one to Sam, curling her hands around her own and bringing it to her chest, soaking in the warmth. "And what did you find when you got to the end?"

"That's the thing," Sam grumbled, sipping at his drink and wincing. It was too hot to drink but, more than that, he'd forgotten that it was not an appealing taste. "I never found the end. I found… a wall."

"A wall?" A small frown overtook Pamela's face, perhaps the first expression Sam had seen that wasn't filled with life and joy and impishness.

"Yeah, a black void of… nothingness. I couldn't pass through it."

"But Dean's trail led to it?"

"More like… *into* it." Sam shook his head, trying to recall exactly how he'd felt. Had he done something wrong, something different from last time?

"You mentioned a ward while you were under."

The young hunter perked up. "I did?"

Pamela smiled and pushed off the counter, sweeping out of the kitchen and back towards the living room. Sam followed, tea in hand, sipping slowly as it started to cool down. The flavor didn't improve, but he could already feel the relaxing effects of the herbs.

"Does Dean use personal warding?" The psychic settled back onto the rug and Sam followed suit.

"I mean, yeah, but that didn't stop me last time," Sam thought aloud. He didn't think it was the warding on his brother's ribs, put there by Cas, that he'd encountered. It was… bigger than that. His eyes widened with realization. "The bunker. Where we're staying. It's warded."

Better than any other place in the country, Dean had said. That… that felt right. The size of the void he'd encountered, the solidity of it. Of course he wasn't able to follow, Dean was in the bunker right now!

"That's got to be it," Sam reasoned, confidence growing and excitement alongside it. "There was never a connection, but I was on the right track. I was close; I could feel it."

Pamela smiled, wide and proud. “That’s a great place to start. But, if you’re up for trying again-”

“I am,” Sam replied quickly.

“-then we’ll need to find you a new target,” Pamela finished, already grinning at the man’s eagerness. Sam smiled sheepishly and the psychic genuinely enjoyed his boyish embarrassment. He was quite the cutie pie.

(And not at all hard on the eyes, if she did say so, herself.)

That shy grin shifted into thought as Sam realized she was right; he couldn’t search for Dean or Bobby. Maybe that was why he’d failed to establish a connection to them at Missouri’s. Not until Dean had left the bunker.

Who else could he go looking for?

“Persephone.” The name came to his lips entirely unbidden and, as much as he wanted to be surprised, Sam really wasn’t. She’d crossed his mind more than once (a lot more, if he was honest) since bringing him back from the brink of death.

Pamela raised one manicured eyebrow questioningly, and Sam swallowed. How to explain Persephone? He hadn’t come up with a cover story for her on his ride over.

“She’s, uh, someone I’ve had a vision of before,” he managed at the last second, mouth taking over where his brain drew up short. He knew it sounded stilted – not entirely true – but he didn’t know how else to explain having a connection to the goddess of the dead. “Maybe that will make finding her again easier? And she won’t be in the bunker.”

That was for sure.

“A woman, hmm?” Pamela replied, grin downright pouty. “Well, there go my chances of a fun evening.”

If Sam had been drinking the tea by his side, he would have spit it all over himself at the implication. His cheeks were on *fire*.

“Not like that,” the hunter said quickly. Too quickly, if Pamela’s slowly widening grin said anything. Sam winced, trying to put the shovel down before he dug himself any deeper. “I don’t really know

her."

She'd only reconnected his soul to his body, was all.

"But I've had a vision of her while awake, before." The ziggurat, in Gomorrah, when Azazel first found her. Of course, he was pretty sure Persephone wasn't the one he'd been 'spying' on with that vision. Sam was fairly certain the yellow-eyed demon had been the target his mind sought out, his blood-connection with the bastard enhancing his visions.

But Sam wasn't going looking for Azazel, now or ever. That was one bear he had no interest in poking, no matter how it might expand, explain, or further his powers.

"Well, maybe it's my lucky night after all," Pamela announced in delight, waggling her eyebrows. `` Sam, whose cheeks had since recovered from their cherry red state, immediately relapsed. Pamela *giggled*. Straight up giggled, and it was the most auspicious, terrifying promise of possibilities Sam had ever heard.

"Alright." She waved away the sexual tension between them with nothing more complicated than a change in her posture, straightening out of a seductive lean. With one last wink, Pamela adopted a more businesslike demeanor. Sam wasn't sure if he should be disappointed or relieved. "Let's try reaching out to this female *acquaintance*, shall we?"

Sam, *still* blushing, licked his lips, cleared his throat, and tried to focus. He let his eyes close and slipped into a meditative state, focusing on Persephone.

She was harder to find than Dean. Sam didn't know anything about her. Finding his brother had almost come naturally; Dean felt like brotherhood, childhood nostalgia and a scattering of happy days. A parent, a friend, and a confidant walked into a bar. He was gleaming black metal, snark-covered caring, and rock music (Sam could *hear* his brother humming AC/DC in the back of his mind every time he went looking for him.)

Whenever he thought of Dean, those things popped up around him like a trail of breadcrumbs to follow. Although he'd not successfully found anyone else with his mind, Sam was pretty sure the process would be the same, no matter the target.

So what would Persephone feel like?

The youngest Winchester floundered for a long time and knew it. He tried looking for pomegranates, feeling for death or the dead, chasing after the smell of flowers, all while picturing the wild-haired, green-eyed woman he'd seen in a previous vision. Nothing caught, and Sam remained grounded in Pamela's living room.

He wasn't one to give up easily, though. He kept his eyes closed, continued the rhythmic, meditative breathing, and turned his focus further inward. He'd found her once without even trying – without even knowing he was doing it – and he knew he could find her again.

Sam's head twitched to the side, brain tripping over the thought. How did he know that? That he could find her? Because he did, with complete confidence. Which was odd. It wasn't so much a thought as a feeling; Sam knew he could – and would – find Persephone again. But why? And *how*?

Something shifted in the air around him. No, not the air. The *plane*. He'd shifted planes, he could feel it. Like a change of temperature or maybe air pressure. Sam opened his eyes. The world around him was an out of focus blur of colors, but not so much that he couldn't identify objects. Shelves, a table, a pile of books. And next to them, feet up on the table, book in her lap, was Persephone.

Sam breathed out, body thrumming with accomplishment. He'd done it.

Focus, he redirected himself quickly, calming his heart and letting his mind settle into the space he found himself in. A library, he realized, as it came into focus. His vision remained fuzzy at the edges, soft like a dream, but he could see the area around the goddess more clearly. The library was dark save for a lantern glowing on the study table. The pile of books were all on history – *History of the World (Pt. II), Modern American History, A History of Technology in the Modern Era* – and Sam could see, as he neared, that the one that she was reading covered the Industrial Revolution. The goddess herself – in a pair of black leggings and a band t-shirt advertising *The Aquabats*, whatever that was – had leaned back in the library chair until it only had two legs on the ground, rocking slightly against the table as she scanned the pages in her lap.

She looked… comfortable. Unguarded. Almost at home in the space, Sam would say.

"Are you…" The young Winchester looked around, from the camping

lantern to the goddess, to the library he found himself standing in during the middle of the night. "Are you squatting in a *library*?"

The question, incredulous yet amused, brought him back to Persephone, only to find her eyes – now glowing that fierce green – locked directly on him.

Sam reared back in surprise, straight into Pamela's living room. He opened his eyes to find the ceiling directly above him, the floor beneath his back. He'd been kicked out of the dream and knocked – quite literally – on his ass.

But his grin was ear to ear.

"I did it," he said breathlessly, sitting up with a hand from Pamela. "I saw her."

"What did it feel like?" the psychic asked from his side, still steadying him. "Were you able to tell when you connected?"

"Yeah," Sam affirmed on an exhale, high on his success and breathing heavily. "It was… I don't know, I could tell when I wasn't here anymore."

Pamela nodded like she could relate, and she probably could.

"I wasn't there for long," Sam continued, grin still on his face. He wasn't sure what had kicked him out – maybe his surprise at Persephone knowing he was there – but he felt exhilarated. "I think I can find it again."

"Whoa, there, stud." Pamela patted his chest from where she sat at his side. "Love the enthusiasm, but I think that's a good start for tonight."

Sam blinked, thinking *'Night?'*, even as he realized the living room was now completely dark, save for a handful of pillar candles lit about the room. There was more light from the adjoining kitchen, but outside the windows the world was pitch black.

"How long-"

"Significantly longer," Pamela replied with a huff of laughter. "I'm calling it."

Sam immediately apologized, quickly forfeiting any argument.

Regardless of whether or not he wanted to go again, he knew he shouldn't. His psychic host deserved to get some sleep in her own home at a semi-normal hour. Besides, he could already feel it coming on: the adrenaline crash, the developing headache. If he went again, he'd be pushing up against lines he swore he wouldn't cross.

Best to save that for an emergency.

"No need to apologize, gorgeous. You made great progress." Pamela stood with him, ensuring he was stable before backing off. She'd thought twice about it, though, given the adorable blush dusting his cheeks once more. Pamela didn't usually go for the bashful types, but Sam Winchester was rapidly changing her mind. So, instead, she gave that fine ass a playful tap. "We can jump right back into it tomorrow, bright and early."

The young hunter jumped again, bright red and Pamela cackled. She gathered their empty mugs and headed for the kitchen while Sam followed like a lost, embarrassed puppy who didn't know what to do with his hands. The psychic dropped the cups off in the sink and swept right back out of the kitchen, snagging Sam by the arm as she did.

"Let's get you the tour: abridged version." She led him through the rest of the first floor, back through the front hallway that served as something of a foyer, and up the stairs. Pamela pointed out the bathroom, a linen closet where he could grab towels, before stopping at the first open door. "You can sleep in here."

Sam ducked his head in, taking in the modest guest room that was better than most of the places he'd stayed throughout his life. His duffel bag of clothes was already on the bed, waiting for him.

Pamela's hand settled on his lower back, just low enough to light a fire low in his gut and warm his face again. Sam swallowed thickly.

"I took the liberty while you were practicing," she explained of the bag. When he looked back at her, that hand quite purposefully slid along the waistline of his pants to his hip. She offered a playful wink. "Hope you don't mind."

"N-not at all."

Sam had to clear his throat, voice almost squeaking in a way that was so utterly humiliating. God, it had been a minute, hadn't it? He hadn't flirted – or been flirted with – since Jess. The thought was

sombering and he looked away. Pamela must have sensed the shift; her hand fell to her side. She rallied a softer smile, still somehow impish. It promised a world of trouble that Sam found himself desperately wanting.

"Well, that one's my room." Pamela gestured to the next door down, just a few feet away. "If you need anything – and I do mean *anything* – come on in."

Sam choked as she swayed closer, words whispered like they were sharing a secret (that secret being how much Sam wasn't against this idea, *at all,* if the growing tightness in his jeans had anything to say about it. And she'd know, wouldn't she, considering she'd just *casually* brushed up against said region.)

The woman gleefully turned and sauntered away, already pulling her shirt up and over her head. Sam watched, jaw metaphorically on the floor (he hadn't actually moved in the last thirty seconds; he was frozen in place and had been since he realized what was on the table, here) as Pamela disappeared into her room and left the door wide open behind her.

He really shouldn't. Sam knew he shouldn't. He was here to *learn*. To master his powers and prepare to fight an *apocalypse*. Anything else was a distraction.

But that firebrand of a woman – that open, willing, gorgeous woman – and her open door were calling.

Sam licked his lips, fisted and un-fisted his hands, glanced once more into that empty, cold guest room, then back down the hall. Pamela had turned on a light, filling the doorway with a soft, warm, beckoning light. It had been so long. What could one night hurt? He'd focus on the apocalypse tomorrow.

Telling himself that, Sam followed after Pamela, quietly closing the bedroom door after him.

Chapter Break

Azazel was inordinately pleased to find Sam's mind open and available when he went looking. Whatever he had been using to shield

himself previously – and Yellow Eyes' bet was on a charmed object – the young Winchester had either lost it or foolishly discarded it.

Sam's mind was a calm and pleasant environment as Azazel stepped into it. The darkness was warm with satisfaction, soft around the edges with complacency. Wherever Sam was (and whatever he'd been doing before dozing off) had left him quite pleased with himself. A slow grin overtook Azazel's face as the world around him started to take shape.

"That's my boy," he whispered into the retreating darkness, leaving behind a dimly lit bedroom. Sam was asleep, curled around a depression in the bed that no doubt held a lover in the waking world. Azazel walked right up to his sleeping child, running a possessive hand through bed-ridden hair. "Time to wake up, Sammy."

Hazel eyes opened slowly, cloudy with sleep and a deep sense of comfort. Both quickly dissipated as his gaze focused and realization replaced lazy searching. Sam gasped, scrambling away from the demon's touch and right off the other side of the bed.

"You," he hissed scathingly, breathing hard and staring at Yellow Eyes with wide-eyed shock.

But not panic, the demon noticed. How interesting. Either Sam was getting better at hiding it, or he was genuinely less afraid. As if the human could hear his thoughts, Sam straightened, chin up and shoulders back, physically readying himself to resist.

'Well,' Azazel thought, clicking his tongue disapprovingly, '*That just won't do.'*

The demon ran a hand along the depression in the mattress where Sam had lain. It was still warm with body heat. Slowly, Azazel let the grin stretch across his face, locking eyes with his favorite kiddo, before launching himself unexpectedly forward. Sam staggered back in a mix of shock and fear, raising his fists instincticely. But the yellow-eyed demon had only jumped onto the bed, settling in the depression Sam had left behind like a lazy, well-fed cat. He settled against the headboard, hands in his lap, legs crossed at the ankle. He relocked eyes with the young human, that slow and twisted smile spreading once more across his face.

Sam lowered his arms, fisted hands curling tighter. "What do you want?"

Azazel breathed in deeply as though to answer, only to let his gaze wander down the length of Sam and up the length of the mattress. There was another depression beside him, and he reached out a hand to run the length of it with a pleased hum.

"Hmmm, still warm," he stage whispered, maintaining an unsettling amount of eye contact. "Who's the lucky lady, Sammy? Is it that cute blonde thing? What was her name?" He took a moment to think, dramatically so, before perking back up like he'd found the answer. "Oh, right, *Jessica*."

A vein in Sam's jaw jumped. "You made me a deal, Azazel."

The demon leaned over, pressing close to the sheets and inhaling deeply. "No, this is someone new." He straightened up, delighted. "Is it love? Oh, it would be so convenient if it was love. I could use a new worm on my hook, Sammy."

"It's Sam!"

Rage flashed in the boy's eyes before Azazel found himself flying violently off the bed and tomahawking to the floor. Spitting carpet fibers out of his mouth, the demon picked his head up off the ground, grinning ear to ear.

Now *that* was something! He bounced to his feet with a boisterous laugh and loud clap.

"You've been using your powers!"

Sam startled back another several feet. The hunter was slowly but surely backing himself into a corner and Azazel took advantage of it, rounding the bed and closing the distance between them.

"Good! But you'll need more than that to get rid of me, kiddo. You're bone dry, aren't you?"

Sam stopped. He straightened, resolve settling over him like a cloak. He raised his hand, fingers spread wide, telegraphing his next move. "I don't need it."

This time when Sam pushed, Azazel pushed back. The kid was strong – stronger than ever – but he was practically nothing to a Prince of Hell. Not yet, anyway. It was time to remind the hunter of that. To remind him of his place.

He sent Sam flying back, crashing into the dresser just behind him. Azazel lunged forward, across the bed in the blink of an eye, and grabbed the boy by the throat. He pushed, grip tightening, until Sam was bent backwards over the top of the dresser, gasping for breath, head pressed to the wall. Azazel leaned in, smelling along Sam's neck. The man reeked of fear.

"That's better," he purred into the boy's ear, delighting in the goosebumps that crawled across his flesh. The demon pulled back to look his kid in the eye. There was murder there, a real thirst for blood that left Azazel so proud. "You wanna kill me, Tiger? Good. I'll *let* you. I told you before, let me bulk you up. Let *me* teach you how to use those powers, and I'll stand there and let you kill me with 'em."

His grip was too tight for Sam to speak, but there was still defiance in his eyes. So Azazel dug his fingers in until he could smell blood, could feel it beneath his nails and watch it drip down Sam's neck.

"But not." Azazel gave a little squeeze "Before." And another. "You're *ready*."

With a final, punishing reminder of his strength compared to the human's, he shoved off the boy and stepped back. Sam tried to straighten up, tried to speak, but only managed a wrecked cough. The hunter grabbed at his throat, hacking against his abused windpipe.

"Sam!"

A cry echoed through the air, faint and faraway to Azazel, but Sam's head turned, chasing after it. A shift in light, a source that hadn't been there before, drew both demon and human gazes to the space between them. There was a soft purple glow wrapped around Sam's forearm like a handprint. It started to brighten and pulsate.

Sam's eyes widened just as Azazel realized what was happening. He raised his mental shields as the kid raised his arm, but it was too late. The wave of psychic power hit him like a wrecking ball to the chest.

The Prince of Hell was thrown back into his body and he toppled over with a jolt of shock. Azazel picked himself up off the hotel floor in a hurricane of furious motion. How *dare* one of *his* kids throw him out! The gall, the disrespect, the-

The power.

His rage shifted erratically to pride. Damn if he hadn't bet on the

right racehorse with that one. Sam Winchester was an absolute pain in his ass, but it truly would be a thing of beauty when the demon finally broke him.

Assessing himself with a far calmer demeanor, Azazel dusted off his black shirt and adjusted his band collar, which had become askew.

“Well,” he announced to the empty room around him, smiling with a mouth full of shark’s teeth. “Looks like an in-person visit just got added to the agenda.”

Chapter End

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: Aaaaand we’re back! Hopefully for a decent stretch. My 2026 resolution is to get a structured routine back in place. I haven’t actually had one since covid, and it shows in these long breaks in the story.

Sam and Pamela: I always liked what an open flirt Pamela was. I imagined her to be very sex-positive, not one to be tied down (at least, not after Jesse ;) While this will not be a main paring in the story, it was one I couldn’t see *not* happening once Sam showed up alone. Plus, that boy deserves some happiness and stress relief!

Next Up: I wouldn’t want to spoil anything, but we’re about to have ourselves a very fun, action-packed little arc.

When, Silence? The goal of the most recent break was to ensure that answer would be “Soon!” and “Consistently!” And it will be, with one exception. I am going to try and get the next chapter up next week, but I’m actually going to be at the Supernatural Convention in Las Vegas that weekend. I have no clue if I’ll have time or energy left to post, but I will be aiming to!

If anyone else will be there and wants to do a little get together or something, reach out to me on Tumblr or the Discord server!

Cheers,
Silence

Chapter 155: Season 3: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Oof, getting this one up this weekend was a labor of love. I came down with a cold (alongside being in Vegas, what fun), compounded by truly horrific allergies (I'm apparently allergic to sin). I'm talking wrecked, so a big **thank you** to my editors, who hopped on today to get this chapter proofed.

Chapter Reference - Malachi: This time around, Uriel and Malachi, the Anarchist, teamed up and began recruiting other angels who wanted Lucifer to rise. When Castiel returned to heaven injured, Malachi assisted with a healing trance. See **Chapter 55: Season 2 - Chapter 22** for a refresher.

OG Timeline Reference - Ishim: In episode 12x10 *Lily Sunders Has Some Regrets*, we learn that Castiel used to be part of an Earth-bound unit led by an angel named Ishim. If you haven't seen the episode, Ishim is a class A dick, but the short version is that he "fell in love" (*cough* *became obsessed with* *cough*) with a human named Lily. He later killed an angel in his unit, accusing him of sleeping with Lily and producing a Nephalim. Despite knowing it wasn't true, Ishim used it as a reason to kill Lily's daughter in front of her. I repeat: class A dick. Also, because Ishim will bring it up later, Castiel occupied a female vessel during that time.

Chapter Warnings: We are back on Cliffhanger row for a hot moment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Road So Far (This Time Around)

Season 3: Chapter 14

"Sam!" Pamela yelled for the umpteenth time since her bedmate's very visceral fear had waken her up in the early hours of morning. He was trapped in a nightmare and it had its claws dug in deep. She gave one of his broad, bare shoulders a hardy shake, but 'third time's the

charm' was not the case here. Whatever dream had him ensnared, Pamela was starting to suspect it wasn't natural.

She tightened her grip on his forearm and closed her eyes with deep, measured breaths. If she couldn't wake him, perhaps she could help anchor him to the physical plane, guide him back to the waking world.

Focusing on only that, Pamela concentrated inward, feeling for her power and letting it flare around her. She'd never seen her own aura – one usually couldn't – but a friend once described it as hazy purple, dainty like a sweet pea but intense, just like the flower's powerful fragrance. It was fitting: her grandmother had always called her sweet pea. A psychic herself, she'd taken in an angry, lost teenager and taught her everything she knew.

Pamela harnessed that power now – focused on happy memories of warmth, comfort, food in her belly, a roof over her head, and a house full of love – and pushed it into the man beneath her hands. Pamela called for him, aloud and in her head. She could feel him, locked in a fight she couldn't see, but the moment she connected with him, Pamela could *feel* it. It was faint and far away, but it was *evil*. An evil seeking residence in Sam's heart.

It was… God, whatever it was, it was *strong*. A chill ran down Pamela's spine. It was the strongest evil she'd ever encountered, and all she was getting was castoff from Sam. What the hell was after the man?

Pamela knew the moment Sam sensed her presence. Beyond the confusion – shock, surprise, comfort, heartfelt gratitude – she felt the wave of warning coming off him before he latched onto her power and pulled. It was draining, more so than anything Pamela had ever done on her own before. Whatever Sam was fighting, it was strong and it would take the both of them to fend it off.

More than that, though… the way Sam could pull her power from her, so naturally as though it was his own…

Fine tremors were running through her as he siphoned her energy and Pamela realized just how powerful the man sleeping in her bed was. He looked so gentle, having settled onto his back, pinched brow the only sign of an ongoing battle.

Sam came to with little warning, surging upward with a battle cry. Luckily, Pamela knew better than to hover over someone waking from

a nightmare and left him plenty of space. She released his arm once she was sure he was back. Sweating profusely and gulping for air like he'd run a marathon, sure, but *back*.

"Easy," the psychic whispered softly, rubbing calming circles across his back as the hunter got his breathing under control. When he reached out blindly, she grabbed onto his hand and held on. "It's okay, you're back."

His nose was bleeding, but he didn't seem to notice. At least, not at first. Once he did, Sam swore and tried to stem the blood without getting it on her sheets. Pamela wasn't worried, but she could see embarrassment and insecurity settling over him like a heavy shroud.

"Why don't you take a shower, shake off anything that might be lingering, and I'll put on some coffee." Before climbing off the mattress, she trailed her fingers from his back to his shoulder, offering comfort and a hint of normalcy. Then she slipped out of bed and crossed the room to grab a robe off the bathroom door. She waited until Sam had climbed to his feet, nodding wearily and heading her way, before leaning in for a quick peck on the cheek.. "We can talk about it if you want, or we can drink coffee in silence and brood. Whatever you need, gorgeous."

She snuck another firm squeeze of his posterior and Sam blushed, which helped bring color back to more than just his cheeks, and even laughed as the last of the nightmare sloughed off of him. He looked visibly relieved at what she was doing. With a grateful smile, Sam bent down and gave her something a lot better than a peck.

Pamela giggled after he pulled away. She tried not to grin too much, though. While it wasn't the wrong time – she was offering comfort to someone scared and unsettled – Sam was still openly bleeding and had clearly just gone through his own bout of hell. Pamela supposed *some* decorum was expected. She wasn't exactly known for restraint but for Sam Winchester, she'd do her best.

With one last wink and a smile that Sam soaked up like sunshine, she spun on her heel and headed downstairs to make that coffee.

Chapter Break

The bathroom was cold and grey, the pale blue light of dawn had chased away any warmth in the room. Sam shivered, trying to ignore the cool tile beneath his feet or the porcelain under his hands. His fingers curled over the edge of the sink as he stared into the mirror hanging above it. He looked terrible. His face was drawn and haggard, the circles under his eyes looked more like bruises, and his neck was smeared with his own blood.

Sam hissed as he tilted his head to the side, turning into the mirror to see four sharp crescent cuts dribbling blood down his skin. There was a fifth on the other side and the fact that they were all still bleeding indicated just how hard Azazel had been crushing his throat.

His hands trembled beneath him and his fingers tightened on the porcelain. The fear was palpable: a foul taste on his tongue that left a hollow, swirling pit in his stomach. And with it, a desperate need to be stronger, to feel safer.

'I need it.'

Sam shuddered. Rage quickly replaced fear, and the young psychic slammed his fist down on the sink's edge. "No!"

He didn't need it. He *didn't.*

Sam hung his head between his shoulders and tried to breathe through the want. It ebbed, ever so slightly, and he opened his eyes. There was a fissure running over the curve of the sink, and Sam followed it along the porcelain and back to its source: his fist, still planted in the porcelain. With a quick breath in, Sam lifted his hand to reveal a spiderweb of cracks, several fractured pieces of porcelain now loose.

He cracked the sink. Sam blinked, startled, and looked his hand over. No damage. His hand didn't even hurt.

"I don't need it," Sam whispered, this time assuredly, and curled his hand back into a fist. He pressed that fist to his chest, holding it close. A lifeline for when he felt alone in the dark.

'Demon blood don't add to you.' Azazel's words, not his. *'You're bone dry, kiddo.'*

Those razor thin fissures were all the proof he needed. He'd done that all on his own. No demon blood powering him up, no life-or-death survival situation. He was bone dry, and he'd still done *that.*

“I don’t need it,” he repeated, firmer this time, making it a declaration rather than a realization. Sam met his own eyes in the mirror and told himself, “I don’t need it.”

Chapter Break

Pamela had a fresh pot of coffee brewed and a couple day-old pastries crisping up in the toaster oven when Sam made it downstairs. He’d taken her up on that shower – hair wet and clothes fresh – and she was glad to see that he seemed lighter. The hunter slid into the other seat at her small table and she pushed a mug of coffee his way. True to her word, they sat in silence, sipping from their cups in the early morning stillness.

Eventually, Sam set his mug down and took a measured breath. “So, um… thanks.”

“For waking you up? Or the fantastic sex before all that?”

Sam choked on nothing then broke into a coughing fit that he tried to stifle as quickly as possible. He could *feel* the heat in his cheeks, could see it reflected in the mischievous sparkle in her eye. Sam tried to school his expression, cool off his cheeks and dispel the sense of adolescent embarrassment.

“Uh… so, um. Yeah, last night- last night was great.” His smile was genuine – it had been really good – even if he found himself a bundle of nerves totally unprepared to be having the morning-after conversation. “I, um, I’m not usually the, uh…”

“Wow,” Pamela cut in, shaking her head sympathetically, but she couldn’t stop grinning. “Not much of a one-night-stand guy, are you?”

Sam was once again blushing, but he was getting more comfortable with her provocative candor. Smiling sheepishly, he shook his head. “No, not at all. That would be my brother. I’m more of the, uh…”

“Emotional connection type?” Pamela guessed, leaning her chin onto her fist with a brilliant smile. Sam’s cheeks were the most adorable shade of red and she couldn’t get enough.

“Yeah, that,” he agreed, proud of it but clearly struggling with a

prejudice he'd clearly learned growing up. Still, his shoulders were more relaxed than when he'd first sat down and he was starting to look more like the man that had shown up on her doorstep yesterday. "I am crashing and burning spectacularly, here, but, uh, I guess… I'm asking what your expectations are for this?"

He gestured between them and, taking pity on him, Pamela reached out to wrap her hand over his, stopping him. "I'm not going to run out and get your name tramp-stamped on my body anytime soon, if that's what you're worried about."

She winked just to keep those cheeks dusted and he laughed unexpectedly. Pamela loved that smile on him, loved how he tried to fight it off. As if she wasn't flirting spectacularly with him (successfully, she might add).

Patting his hand twice, she added, "Don't worry, gorgeous, I'm not the ring and joint-filing type."

Sam laughed again, fully relaxing into his seat. Pleased, Pamela pulled back.

"I get it – you're a proper gentleman. Tell you what. My door will always be open the next time you want to spend an evening with a lady who is anything but proper."

"Oh, I remember," Sam replied a conspiratorial grin, lessened only slightly by just how tomato-red his cheeks still were.

"Seriously, the blushing. I can't get over it," Pamela said with a giggle, chin back in her hand. Eyes sparkling with mischief, she said, "Maybe I will keep you."

Sam picked up his mug to take a sip, covering his own quirked lips. "At least till tax season."

Pamela broke into peals of laughter and Sam realized with a start that he had finally stopped thinking about Azazel. The fear had settled to a dull, white noise in the back of his head that he knew he could deal with. He felt good – good about himself – which had seemed impossible twenty minutes ago.

Sam smiled into his cup. He found himself genuinely liking this woman. She was charming, both captivating and oh-so devious. A rare mix of confidence and caring that left Sam warm in a way hadn't been for a long time. It was nice, feeling it again.

That smile faded as reality settled back in like a thick blanket. She deserved to know what was really going on. He needed to tell her.

(He should probably mention the cracked sink, too.)

"So, what should we get up to today?" Pamela set her tea down, back to business without so much as a transition, and yet it wasn't awkward at all. "I was thinking about your Soul Sight-"

"My what?" Sam interrupted, pulled back into the conversation by the phrase he didn't recognize.

"Your other vision, the one where you can see souls? Seemed like as good a name as any." She shrugged the rename off with a flowy hand gesture. "I want to know more about it. You said it was the ability you could tap into the easiest. Let's explore that, see if we can learn something from it that could help navigate your other powers."

"That's, uh…" Sam trailed off into a weak chuckle. "That's a good name for it. And yeah, totally, we should do that. But first, I, um… I want to talk about what happened. In the- in my dream."

She deserved the truth. She'd offered up her own psychic power, letting Sam siphon it off to escape. However unknowingly, she'd exposed herself to a Prince of Hell. That deserved a proper explanation.

"Oh," Pamela leaned back with a surprised blink and a slow smile. Sam knew she wanted to know and he appreciated that she hadn't asked. "Alright, I'm all ears. Talk to me."

"His name's Azazel," Sam started, voice rough. "He's a demon and… he has a plan for me. Me and my brother."

Chapter Break

"This is a clusterfuck!" Zachariah shouted, bringing his meaty fist down on the desk in front of him. He locked his eyes – across all four faces – on the angel standing in his office. "You hear me, Naomi? A fucking clusterfuck."

"Calm down," Naomi said firmly, a hint of disdain shimmering

through her grace like a dark shadow swimming through clear waters. She clasped her hands in front of her, eyeing the report laid out on the other angel's desk. It was not good news.

"Calm down?" Zachariah screeched, his faces blotchy red with anger. "Why in Hell's name should I? Did you read the report?" He gestured wildly at the papers on his desk. "Dean Winchester's *soul* may still be intact! Hell was supposed to make their move weeks ago. What the hell!"

"Yes, their delay is… unfortunate." Naomi pursed her lips, staring unhappily at the Enochian typed neatly across the pages. "My network reports a rise in chatter concerning the End of Times."

Zachariah's lion head roared as his primary face spun towards her. No one was supposed to be *chatting* about the End Times because no one was supposed to know they were coming up! He threw his arms out impatiently. "*And?*"

The other angel offered him an impatient look herself, darkening her grace with more swimming splotches. She let out a disappointed hum. "The majority of the Host anticipates a battle."

"*When*?" Zachariah foamed, his grace red and pudgy with barely contained bluster.

"I told you to calm down. The whispers have only just begun. No one is brave enough to speak about it publicly yet. We have time."

The Dominion swore, a flurry of motion and frustration. "No, it's too *soon.* What are they going to do, stand around in full armor with their thumbs up their butts? What's going to happen when they don't receive any *orders*?"

"I suspect the host will begin to question, but we can't know *when* because no one is talking. Yet," she answered almost flippantly, ignoring the other angel's dramatics. Naomi picked the report up off the desk and flipped through it, scanning words she'd already heard from Zachariah. The disdain across her grace might only be smudges, but there was nothing unclear about it in her voice when she said, "Your very public condemnation of Castiel has not helped."

Zachariah seethed beneath her scolding. They were equals; they both reported to Michael, as per their official titles. Not that either agreed with that statement beyond their shared duties.

“I told you. He generates loyalty in those around him, despite his… flaws.” She spat the word like it was a stain she wished to scrub off. “Uriel, on the other hand, did not. You accused the angel everyone *likes* without any proof. The Host will continue to follow orders for now, but there are whispers that question your version of events.”

The shorter angel’s grace churned with reds – bright and fiery embarrassment muddling with chunky, deep-rooted anger – as he spun on her. “They’ll follow orders and believe what I tell them to believe, or they’ll face *me*.”

Naomi looked at her companion, barely containing her contempt. How cute, thinking he was the power that kept the Host in order. If any angel actually stepped out of line, she would be the one to put them back into their proper place.

Chapter Break

Swift footsteps echoed off stone and faded into the inky void of stars, galaxies, and nebulae that orbited Heaven in a timeless cycle. Beneath that sky, an angel made his way quickly down a rarely used garden path. Heaven had many gardens – too many to count – which is what made them particularly good places to meet in secret.

Malachi leveled unimpressed eyes on the last angel to enter the quiet grotto, long forgotten beneath curtains of ivy unlike any found on the earth below. The angel dipped his head in contrition and tucked himself among the others that stood about the round space. Malachi made his way to the center of the room, stepping atop a small platform of stone. He drew their attention as one, silencing all conversation.

“Brothers,” Malachi began, arms folded in front of him, voice and grace as monotone and blank as ever. “The death of Uriel was a tragedy to us all.”

A murmur of agreement – the expected expressions of grief or outrage – moved through the angels.

“However,” the anarchist continued, raising his voice. The whispers fell silent. He turned slowly, taking in each of his brothers in turn with a piercing gaze. “It has also presented an opportunity. One that

should not be squandered."

There were nods, sounds of approval, a general shifting of grace among the crowd.

"The angel, Castiel, our brother's murderer," Malachi called out, his very tone denouncing the missing angel. There was a flare of anger throughout the room, calls for vengeance and grace swirling with outrage. Malachi sneered in agreement. "Reports say he has taken shelter with humans. Uriel believed these humans to be the True Vessels."

A hush swept through the enraged crowd, washing over the cavernous space like a physical presence. The gathered angels exchanged looks, whispered words of the prophesized End.

"My contact on Earth has looked into the matter and believes the Michael Sword has failed to make a Righteous Deal," he continued once the crowd had settled. He looked at the angels surrounding him, some recruited by Uriel, others by himself. They had both had the same desire – no matter Malachi's personal opinion of the brute, may his grace rest in peace – the return and rise of Lucifer. If Dean Winchester did not make a deal, would not spill blood in Hell and break the First Seal, then that desire would never come to fruition. The anarchist angel let his eagerness – his malevolent *glee* – shine through his grace in the form of a wicked grin. "Perhaps, he could use some… *encouragement*."

A wave of approval swept through the other angels and Malachi's grin only grew.

"It is time," he announced, "for Heaven – for *us* – to join this battle. It is time for each of us," here he paused, catching and holding the gaze of each of his brothers, "to choose a side."

"For the Morning Star!" someone yelled, the others immediately taking up the call.

"For Lucifer," Malachi agreed, though any such devotion was non-existent. He didn't care whether Lucifer won the battle for Heaven or fell to Michael's blade, just so long as it meant chaos. However, his brethren were simply easier to cajole when given a rallying cry. So Malachi obliged, raising his fist in a salute. "For our brother."

Stepping off the raised stone to cheers, Malachi turned to the angel closest to him, one who he actually trusted. "Get the word to Ishim.

Kill Sam Winchester and make sure his brother is there to witness it."

Chapter Break

"Wow." Pamela took a moment, blinking slowly as she processed, before she shook her head. "Yeah, that's- wow, Sam. That's a real shitshow you waltzed right through my front door, mister."

The younger Winchester couldn't help but deflate, even though he knew it was the normal response, the *sane* response. Still. It bothered him more than he was expecting, being called *Sam* once more and not *gorgeous.*

Worse, he was a *mister*, now.

Sam offered an apologetic grimace. "I know, and I'm so sorry. We didn't think anything would follow me here, or I never would have come."

"We?"

Sam paused at the unexpected interruption. Pamela was staring at him, eyebrows up, less angry than he'd been anticipating. "Uh… yeah, Dean and me. We talked about it before I headed out. He didn't think you'd be in danger or I never would have come."

"He the expert?" Pamela was downright calm, voice back to that teasing tone she fell into so easily.

Sam huffed, shoulders twitching with a restrained chuckle. "Something like that. Look, Pamela, I'm sorry-"

"Yeah, I got it, you didn't mean to bring the shitstorm down on my house." Her words were harsh, but her tone was that of a realist tackling a new problem. She didn't have time for the things they couldn't change. "What's the likelihood this demon follows through?"

The young psychic took a moment to think it through – weighing this woman's life against the chances – before he shook his head. "Low. Unless something's changed, Azazel doesn't know how to find me. Even if he does come after us, we have time before he shows up."

"Right," Pamela interrupted, "because an *angel* carved sigils onto your

ribs."

"But I can be packed and out of here in twenty minutes," Sam continued without acknowledging the interruption, finally getting to the point he'd been trying to make ever since he'd finished telling her about Hell's plan to end the world. "The risk isn't worth your life."

"A repeat performance of last night might be, though," Pamela said off-the-cuff, expression clearly weighing the risk on her life against the possibility of an encore. Sam choked mid-swallow, coughing to clear the unexpected blockage of embarrassment and his immediate response of, '*well, not **no**.*' Pamela watched him closely, her expression once again serious as she searched his eyes for something. "And after you leave? Will he come after me, here?"

The younger Winchester didn't answer right away; this was Pamela's life they were discussing, it wasn't something Sam would be reckless with. Ultimately, though, he shook his head again. "No. He was just trying to scare me, get in my head."

Azazel wasn't going to waste his time on a one-time dalliance; he'd go after Sam himself, first. So long as Sam was long gone from Pamela's by the time Yellow Eyes found him, Pamela should stay off his radar.

"And did he?"

Deep in his thoughts, Sam startled at the question. Pamela was regarding him sharply once more and, again, the hunter took the time to ensure his response wasn't just a gut feeling. He was confident it wasn't; he knew Azazel too well at this point. Shaking his head firmly, Sam confidently replied, "No. That dream was… unsettling, but I'm not going to let him get under my skin."

Pamela's expression was slow to change, but as it did, a wide smile overtook her face. She sat back in her chair with an approving nod. "Well, alright then. Sounds like an encore might be on the menu after all."

Sam choked, having to beat back a second coughing fit caused by the audacious woman.

"But…" Pamela continued, grinning wickedly. She spread her hands out on the table, ready to get down to business. "Work before play, gorgeous. Let's talk Soul Sight."

Chapter Break

That night, Sam lay in bed, contentedly staring at the ceiling with a feeling of peace that he hadn't had in a long time. Pamela was curled up beside him, the curve of her back pressed to the length of his side, head pillowed on his arm. The rhythmic rise and fall of her body was a metronome of calmness, soothing frayed nerves.

It had been too long, Sam thought, since he'd felt this. He'd missed it. The hunter was under no illusion of longevity; tonight would be his last with Pamela (at least for now, he thought with an undercurrent of distant, pleased anticipation). She'd made it clear that she wasn't looking for commitment and Sam wasn't ready for a new relationship. But it was nice, holding someone again, feeling the warmth of another, the rise and fall of life within them. It was a certain sort of companionship he'd lacked these last two years.

He'd been okay without it; really, he had. Sam didn't see sex as the therapeutic outlet his brother did. It wasn't a necessity for him, either, unlike Dean. At least not with strangers. One-nighters had never done much for him, lacking the emotional component that came with a relationship.

God, he missed Jess. He missed that connection – sharing his life with someone – in more than just body.

Sam sighed, afterglow wilting under the new train of thought. He tried to push aside that particular negativity and focus on the soft body in his arms, the happiness that was this moment. Sam rolled onto his side, curling around Pamela and pulling tighter against his chest. She hummed her approval before sinking further into sleep.

He'd leave in the morning, Sam decided then and there. He didn't think Pamela was in danger, not yet, at least. Not if he left before Azazel came looking. That would take time, Sam knew, but holding her now, he didn't want to risk it. Risk her. d

Sam slid his arm from Pamela's waist to the five crescent-shaped scabs spread across his neck. Cas had told him, once, that if the demon wanted to hurt him in his dream, he could. Azazel couldn't get him hooked on demon blood, but he could still hurt him. Or others. Sam wrapped his arm back around Pamela, thumb rubbing circles on her soft skin.

He'd leave in the morning.

His thoughts, lingering on the cuts, drifted in a different direction. Sam had half expected them to be gone by now. The last time he'd been injured, it had healed overnight. During that fight with the djinn, he had definitely fractured his wrist, no matter what he'd told himself the next morning. It had been broken, to whatever extent, and he'd woken up to a fully healed arm, zero pain, zero break.

At the time, Sam had thought it could be his new powers, previously dormant. He hadn't met a special kid with the ability to heal, but it didn't seem farfetched, given the other extreme abilities he'd witnessed. Now, though, he wasn't so sure. A broken bone was a lot bigger than a couple of nail marks on skin. If he was capable of advanced healing, they would have been gone by now. Instead, they were progressing like any normal cut.

Which meant it hadn't been him doing the healing. Ergo, something *else* had healed him.

'I find you, and I heal you.'

"Persephone," he mumbled in the darkness. That's what the goddess had said when Sam agreed to the Bind between them.

Maybe…

Sam closed his eyes and deepened his breathing, heading towards a meditative state. He focused on the Greek deity. He'd found her once, already. Surely he could do it again.

Chapter Break

Persephone was waiting. She had positioned herself at the table beside hers (or, at least, the one she'd claimed as hers every night), ready to wait there for as long as it took. The golmagen had spent six thousand years trapped in a grave; she'd mastered infinite patience long ago.

She knew the moment he found her. Persephone couldn't see her charge, but she could sense his presence in the library when a moment ago she had been completely alone. Although he lacked a visible

manifestation, there was a displacement in the space where she was sure he stood. Like a heat wave shimmering in the indistinct shape of a man.

"You're back," she said aloud, regarding the area that should vaguely be his face.

The shimmer shifted, flickering stronger for a moment before fading back to its indistinguishable blob of a human form. There was a burst of something on the air, warbled and faint and very far away. Persephone turned her head slightly, trying to catch whatever it was.

"Your connection is once again weak." She shook her head with a loud huff. "Stop half-assing this, Sam. You are keeping one foot in each location. If you are going to be here, then *be here*."

It took several moments, the shimmer of Sam's presence flickering into something more solid, only to dissolve once more. Eventually, he managed it. Sam stepped out of the veil of invisibility and into the library as a manifested, physical presence.

Persephone locked eyes with him, pride on her lips. "There you are."

"You can see me?"

She gave a single nod, pushing off the table to join him next to her things. "Now I can. Before you were like a hiding mouse. Timid. And squeaky." She made a face over it and her charge laughed. He looked around the library with new eyes. Persephone immediately spotted the cuts on his neck, focusing in on it like a shark on blood. "You're hurt."

Sam turned back to her, hand coming up to his throat. He rubbed at the crescent-shaped wounds before lowering his arm. With an expression that could only be described as challenging, he asked, "Are you going to heal me?"

Persephone gave him a look that vocalized her thoughts far better than words could. "I cannot do that through a dream, Sam."

"But you have before, haven't you?" He took a step forward, like he was searching for the answer physically as well as verbally. "In person, I mean?"

Her eyes dropped to his wrist unintentionally and he had his answer.

“We ward the motels we sleep in.” Sam spoke softly, like a secret he wasn’t sure he should be sharing but couldn’t stop himself. “Against pretty much everything. Demons, angels… and pagans.”

Ah. So that was what he was getting at. Persephone shrugged.

“There is very little warding that can keep me from fulfilling the Bind,” she replied easily enough, wondering if he would push the matter. Persephone would rather he didn’t, at least for now. “Besides, most warding is designed to keep out evil or those that would do harm. I am neither.”

“What are you?” he asked, tentative and cautious, even as he took another step closer.

Sam was very tall for a human – they had grown so much as a species – but the height difference was not intimidating. Persephone regarded him for a long time, weighing her answer. She could not lie to him, but she was not required to tell him the truth.

She had already admitted her identity to Dean, but he clearly had not told Sam. Which was entirely unexpected. It was hardly her business – Dean was not her charge and Persephone had little interest in what he did or didn’t do – but she was admittedly curious about this particular choice. Probably because it didn’t make much sense to her. Not that she was one to close an open door.

“A guardian,” she finally answered, wondering if he would accept such a broad answer.

Sam’s hazel eyes shifted a little more green. He didn’t know what to do with that answer, but it hadn’t been the one he wanted. He was so very easy to read. The golmagen knew he would be safer if he learned to hide his emotions, but seeing as it was currently making her job much easier, it was low on her list of priorities.

Persephone prepared herself for the next question, the one she didn’t want to answer but would ultimately have to. Sam would need to know, eventually, that Hell’s plan might have been sabotaged but she was still very much a part of it. Persephone had just been hoping to find out what exactly that plan was before having to tell Sam her role in it.

The question never came. Instead, Sam straightened unexpectedly, body going rigid as his gaze roved elsewhere. His appearance flickered; one foot reaching back to the physical plane. For a moment,

Persephone wondered as to the change. What had made her charge feel the need to flee?

But then she felt it. A wave of dread washed over her seconds after it had obviously hit the hunter. Unlike him, though, Persephone immediately recognized it for what it was: a warning. Sam was still looking around, searching for the threat his psychic abilities were trying to show him, but Persephone knew it wasn't in the library. The threat to Sam wasn't in her head.

"Your physical form is in danger."

Sam turned back around, knowing she was right – knowing his body was the thing under threat – but struggling to conceptualize it. He flickered in and out again. The connection was weakening as his mind fought to return to its body.

Not fast enough, Persephone decided. She stepped into his space, planted her hands on his chest, and *shoved*. "Time to wake up."

Chapter Break

Sam woke violently. He'd been asleep on his side when Persephone shoved him, pushed backwards out of the dream and right off the mattress. He scrambled back up, legs tangled in a sheet, and locked eyes with Pamela. She was sitting bolt-upright, eyes wide, a look of fear on her face.

"Company," she whispered and Sam nodded.

"Yep," he agreed hurriedly, gripping the mattress and pulling himself to his feet, shoving the rest of the linen off with his one free foot. Sam grabbed his pants from the floor, hopping into them frantically.

"Stay here," he said in a rush, making it to the door about the same time he got his jeans buttoned. "Do you know any wards?"

Pamela nodded a little frantically herself, but she was already searching through the nightstand for something to write with.

"Put them up," Sam instructed before opening the bedroom door and darting into the hallway, speed over stealth. Whatever was on its way

was bad – bad like a weight draped over his whole being – but it wasn't here yet.

The younger Winchester darted into his bedroom, digging through his duffle bag, withdrawing a knife and gun and tucking them into his waistline. He didn't know how Azazel had found them so fast – it shouldn't be possible – but he had to keep Pamela safe. Sam went back to the bag, rooting through clothes and beginning to get desperate when he finally found the small, cloth pouch.

"There you are," he said, fisting his hand protectively around the bag, sprinting back to Pamela's room. She was drawing wards on all four walls with a tube of lipstick. Sam hurried over to her, dumping the contents of the pouch into his hand.

"Anti-possession charms," he said quickly, keeping his voice as even as he could. Panic wasn't going to help in this situation. He watched as her eyes dilated, realizing who – or more accurately, *what* – was about to pay them a visit. But she kept a brave face, filled with the determination to survive. Sam pressed the charm into her hand, squeezing as she closed her fist around it. "It's going to be okay. Just hide."

"Sam-"

But the hunter was already shaking his head. "He's not here for you, Pamela, I'm the one he wants. I'll keep his attention on me. Stay hidden."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but he could also see how desperately she wanted to take the easy out and stay safe. Sam leaned in, kissing her cheek chastely and whispering in her ear, "Proper gentleman, remember? Now go."

He grabbed the bedroom door on his way out, starting to close it behind him. He caught sight of Pamela shaking herself out of her indecision and searching for a hiding spot. Sam closed the door, sending a silent prayer to a God his brother swore wasn't listening, and hit the stairs at a run.

If he could reach the kitchen, maybe he could salt himself in at the base of the stairs. Sam knew he wouldn't make it, but he had to try. The weight dragged over him now, clouding his senses with the strength of the warning. Whoever it was, it was bad and it was coming *now*. There was no way he would make it.

Sam was rounding the kitchen door when he heard wingbeats.

Chapter End

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Remember that part where I mentioned things were getting complicated? Bad guy plans are now OVERLAPPING. I'm going to take a serious stab at being just a little less verbose before 20-page chapters become the new norm. 😶

Another heartfelt thank you to my editors for helping me get this one edited!

Soul Sight: Credit for the name of Sam's new vision ability goes to **Lyeundu**!

See you all next week (assuming I survive the Head Cold from Hell 😵)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!